# Rewriting Democracy from the Margins: Hybrid Political Orders, Gendered Exclusion, and the Limits of the Liberal Template in Post-Conflict Africa[1]

Antonetta Lovejoy Hamandishe[2]

**Abstract:**

A renewed debate questions whether the liberal democratic template fits the conditions in which it now operates. Recent commentary attributes the strain on democracy to rigidity and to the neglect of local language, memory, and political culture. This article argues that the diagnosis is necessary but incomplete. Drawing on hybrid political orders scholarship, feminist institutionalism, and applied experience from electoral cycles in Liberia, Somalia, Somaliland, and Zimbabwe, it argues that the template's fragility lies less in its inflexibility than in its political ontology, an assumption of the consolidated liberal state that does not describe most post-conflict African polities. The article also contests the populist-conservative variant of the local turn, which can rehabilitate patriarchal and clientelist orders under the language of authenticity. Building on the concept of patriarchal hybridity (Hamandishe & Ewusi, 2025), and on prior work on state fragility in the Sahel (Ziso & Hamandishe, 2024), it proposes a reorientation of democracy assistance from template export toward the co-production of context-grounded democratic practice, with gendered political settlements as a central axis of analysis.

**Keywords:**

Hybrid Political Orders; Feminist Institutionalism; Democratic Backsliding; Post-Conflict Elections; Africa; Democracy Assistance; Decolonial Knowledge Production.

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[2] Researcher, University for Peace, Midlands State University, Africa University and Oxford Brookes University; ORCID: 0000-0003-4312-9878; antonetthamzie@gmail.com.

## 1. Introduction

The argument that liberal democracy promotion has failed not because its ideals are wrong but because its implementation has been too rigid and too detached from the political culture of recipient societies has moved from heterodox commentary into mainstream policy debate (Carothers, 2002). The diagnosis identifies something real. After three decades in which constitutional engineering, election cycles, and donor-driven institutional design have served as the dominant grammar of democracy promotion, the gap between liberal templates and the political life of recipient societies has become difficult to ignore. Sub-Saharan Africa is one terrain on which this gap has been particularly visible, and in many respects the most demanding one on which the argument plays out.

The article contributes to this debate but pushes it in two specific directions. It accepts the diagnosis that liberal templates have travelled badly, but argues that the mainstream rewrite-the-playbook argument is incomplete in two respects. First, it locates the deficiency in implementation rather than in theory. The implicit reference of liberal democracy promotion remains the consolidated Weberian state in which elections, parties, and constitutional norms operate on a stabilised institutional terrain. Across most post-conflict polities, that polity does not exist. Second, the cultural turn it proposes leaves underexplored which 'local' is to be honoured, on whose authority, and at what cost. From the vantage point of post-conflict African contexts, this question is decisive. The same arguments that dignify cultural specificity have, in the recent history of the continent, been used to defer gender equality, to legitimate patrimonial bargains, and to consolidate the very orders that conflict transitions were meant to displace (Hamandishe & Ewusi, 2025; Tripp, 2015).

The argument advanced here proceeds along three lines. First, the strain on liberal templates reflects a mistaken political ontology, not merely rigid implementation. Second, the analytic apparatus developed within hybrid political orders scholarship and feminist institutionalism offers a more honest reading of the polities in which democracy assistance now operates than the standard transitions paradigm. Third, a credible reorientation of democracy support requires gendered political settlements at the centre of analysis and Global South knowledge production as constitutive rather than illustrative (Ake, 1996; Mkandawire, 2015).

The article extends two strands of the author's prior research. The first is the analysis of state fragility, ungoverned spaces, and the exploitation of governance vacuums by armed actors in the central Sahel (Ziso & Hamandishe, 2024). The second is the empirical analysis of patriarchal hybridity in post-conflict Somalia, in which formal and informal political institutions merge to sustain women's exclusion despite progressive constitutional commitments (Hamandishe & Ewusi, 2025). The present article works at a higher level of abstraction, asking what these case-grounded findings imply for the way the international community theorises and supports democratic practice in fragile and post-conflict polities. It contributes to the scholarly project of treating African

political experience as constitutive of democratic theory rather than as case material for theories produced elsewhere (Mkandawire, 2015).

The article is structured as follows. Section 2 sets out the methodological approach. Section 3 develops the theoretical framework, drawing together hybrid political orders scholarship, feminist institutionalism, and decolonial perspectives on knowledge production. Section 4 addresses the diagnostic problem, contrasting the rigidity argument with the ontology argument. Section 5 presents three empirical illustrations from Somalia, Liberia, and Zimbabwe. Section 6 examines the gender problem in the cultural turn. Section 7 discusses the analytical and policy implications. Section 8 concludes.

## *2. Materials and Methods*

This article is a conceptual and analytical contribution rather than an empirical study based on new primary data. It applies a qualitative descriptive approach (Sandelowski, 2000) that integrates three sources: theoretical scholarship in comparative politics, hybrid political orders, and feminist institutionalism; the author's prior published empirical work on Somalia (Hamandishe & Ewusi, 2025) and on the Sahel (Ziso & Hamandishe, 2024); and observations drawn from the author's professional engagement with electoral cycles and democracy assistance in Liberia, Somalia, Somaliland, and Zimbabwe between 2010 and 2026.

The reasoning strategy is interpretive synthesis (Sandelowski, 2000). The article identifies a debate within mainstream commentary on democratic fragility, locates a theoretical gap in the dominant framing, and works through that gap by reading the debate against three bodies of scholarship and against context-specific empirical material. Where empirical claims about Somalia, Liberia, or Zimbabwe are advanced, they are anchored in published scholarly sources, in the author's prior peer-reviewed work, or in observations from professional practice that are appropriately disclosed. No new interview, survey, or archival data are presented in this article. Readers seeking primary empirical evidence on the Somalia case are directed to Hamandishe and Ewusi (2025), which reports on twenty-five semi-structured interviews with female parliamentarians, civil society actors, and clan elders, and on policy archaeology of the 2012 Provisional Constitution and the 2016 National Gender Policy.

The three empirical illustrations were selected on three criteria. First, each has undergone a formal transition from a preceding period of violent conflict, authoritarian rule, or contested constitutional order, and each holds regular multi-party elections. Somalia's federal state emerged from the Djibouti and Mbagathi peace processes and the 2012 Provisional Constitution; Liberia's Second Republic emerged from the 2003 Accra Comprehensive Peace Agreement; Zimbabwe's post-2013 constitutional order emerged from the 2008 Global Political Agreement and was reshaped by the 2017 political transition. While Zimbabwe is not post-conflict in the narrow interstate sense, its constitutional trajectory tracks the same analytic questions this article examines. Second, each has adopted formal gender-inclusion architecture whose implementation

gap makes visible the analytic point about the interaction between formal and informal institutions: the Somali 30 per cent constitutional quota, the Liberian voluntary Memorandum of Understanding for the 2023 cycle, and the Zimbabwean reserved-seat system. Third, each is a context in which the author has worked professionally, which supports the observation-informed dimension of the analysis without substituting for the peer-reviewed empirical sources on which specific claims rest. Somaliland is not analysed as a case in this article; the earlier reference to the author's professional engagement with Somaliland indicates only the geographic scope of practice from which broader observations are drawn.

Three analytical dimensions structure the reading of each case. The first is the interaction between formal electoral architecture and informal institutions of authority: clan, party, customary, and religious. The second is the gap between descriptive women's representation, measured through seat counts, and substantive women's political authority, measured through influence over agenda-setting, committee assignment, party leadership, and constitutional review. The third is the mechanism by which cultural-authenticity discourse legitimates gendered exclusion despite formal constitutional commitments to inclusion. Each empirical illustration in Section 5 illustrates a different configuration of these three dimensions.

## *3. Theoretical Framework*

Three bodies of scholarship inform the analysis. They are read together rather than separately because their combined analytic yield is the description that the standard democracy promotion playbook cannot accommodate without revision. The standard playbook, as used throughout this article, refers to the operational model of democracy promotion that emerged in the third wave of democratisation and now dominates donor practice: constitutional engineering, electoral cycles, party system development, and civil society support, calibrated to a consolidated liberal state of the kind described by Carothers (2002) as the transitions paradigm.

The first is the literature on hybrid political orders, developed in part as a corrective to the 'fragile states' frame that dominated international policy discourse in the early 2000s. Boege, Brown, Clements, and Nolan (2009) argued that what international actors classify as state fragility is, in many cases, the empirical condition of polities in which customary, religious, and statutory authorities coexist, compete, and produce political order through their interaction. Hagmann and Péclard (2010) extended this insight by reconceptualising African statehood as an ongoing process of negotiation among heterogeneous actors, rather than as an outcome to be approximated against the Weberian ideal. These authors do not romanticise customary authority. They argue, more modestly, that the analytic move of treating non-state authority as residual, transitional, or merely cultural produces poor description and poorer policy. Menkhaus's (2007) work on Somalia, in which governance without government emerged through clan structures, business networks, and Islamic institutions during the long period of central state collapse, illustrates the empirical claim. The Sahel literature

on state fragility further demonstrates how hybrid political orders coexist with, and are sometimes deepened by, the rise of armed non-state actors and the erosion of state authority through coups (Ziso & Hamandishe, 2024).

The second body of work is feminist institutionalism. Mackay, Kenny, and Chappell (2010) synthesised the field's foundational claim that institutions are gendered through and through, and that any account of institutional change which does not specify how gender is produced and reproduced within rules, norms, and practices will misread the politics it studies. Krook (2009, 2016) demonstrated that formal architecture, including constitutionalised quotas and reserved seats, interacts with informal institutions in ways that can either entrench or unsettle patriarchal political settlements depending on configuration. Goetz and Hassim (2003), writing on African contexts specifically, mapped the sectoral differentiation of women's political access and showed how representation in the legislature does not automatically translate into substantive influence over budgeting, security, or constitutional politics. Htun and Weldon (2012) further established that mobilisation by autonomous feminist movements, rather than the simple presence of women in office, is the most consistent predictor of policy change on violence against women, providing additional empirical foundation for the substantive-versus-descriptive representation distinction. The combined contribution is methodological. It insists that the political cannot be specified without specifying its gender architecture.

This account converges with the analytical frame of the Women, Peace and Security agenda, established by United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) and developed through the subsequent resolutions that constitute the WPS architecture. The participation pillar of the agenda identifies meaningful women's participation in peace and security decision-making as a foundational commitment, not as a quantitative benchmark. The gap between the participation commitment and its implementation across post-conflict polities has been widely documented through national action plans and donor programming, and it provides an operational reference point for the descriptive-versus-substantive representation distinction elaborated above (Goetz & Hassim, 2003; United Nations Security Council, 2000).

The third body of work concerns knowledge production. Ake's (1996) argument that democracy in Africa cannot be analysed through frameworks treating African polities as deviant cases of an external norm remains foundational. Mkandawire (2015) extended the methodological critique by reassessing the concept of neopatrimonialism, showing that it had been deployed in ways that erased African economic agency and political reasoning. What unites these contributions is not a rejection of comparative theory but a refusal of the asymmetry whereby concepts travel from the Global North into African settings while African scholarship is treated as ethnographic detail rather than as theory. These three literatures, read together, generate a description of post-conflict African polities as hybrid, gendered, and theoretically autonomous. That description is the foundation of the argument that follows.

## 4. The Diagnostic Problem: Rigidity or Ontology?

Mainstream critiques of democracy promotion locate the difficulty of the field in design and sequencing. Templates are said to fail because they are imposed too quickly, with insufficient attention to local political culture, or with inadequate calibration to context (Carothers, 2002). The implicit referent in this critique remains the consolidated liberal state, with elections, parties, and constitutional norms operating on a stabilised institutional terrain. Refinement, on this account, would mean better adaptation of broadly correct instruments to broadly stable political environments.

African post-conflict experience has long unsettled the assumption embedded in this account. Bratton and van de Walle (1997), writing in the immediate aftermath of the third wave of African democratisation, demonstrated that African transitions inherited neopatrimonial structures which elections alone could not dissolve. Carothers (2002) argued that the transitions paradigm took as definitional what was in fact contingent: that polities undergoing political change were on a coherent path toward consolidated liberal democracy, and that the principal task of analysis was to track their progress along that path. When polities did not consolidate, scholarship and practice tended to read the failure as a deficiency of the polity rather than as a problem with the framework. Mamdani's (1996) analysis pushed deeper, showing that the bifurcated colonial state produced a citizen-subject divide that postcolonial constitutionalism reproduces rather than resolves. His point was not that constitutions are useless. It was that constitutional reform alone could not undo a political ontology built into the architecture of the state itself.

If these scholars are taken seriously, the diagnostic problem is not that liberal templates are insufficiently flexible. It is that they presuppose a polity which does not exist in most of the contexts to which they are exported. The template's difficulty is that the polity it addresses in its default implementation, with elections, parties, and a unified citizenry mediated through a Weberian state, differs from the polity it typically encounters. Hybrid political orders scholarship has documented this gap for some time, but the gap has been slow to reshape the operational assumptions of democracy promotion. What the template encounters instead is an arrangement in which clan, lineage, faith community, customary authority, and party machine coexist with formal state institutions and produce political order through their interaction. The Boege group's core claim, that hybridity is the political reality of much of the world rather than a residual to be cleared, is the claim that the standard playbook cannot absorb without revising its theoretical foundations (Boege et al., 2009; Hagmann & Péclard, 2010).

The recent wave of military coups across West Africa and the Sahel reinforces the analytic point. Ziso and Hamandishe (2024) show that the conditions enabling the rise of juntas in Niger, Burkina Faso, and Mali cannot be reduced to a failure of formal democratic institutions. They emerge from a longer-running interaction between weak state authority, ungoverned territory, climatic and economic stressors, and the persistence of armed non-state actors who operate within and against hybrid political orders. The transitions paradigm reads such cases as backsliding from democracy. The

hybrid orders frame reads them as the predictable consequence of treating fragile polities as if they were consolidated ones.

The distinction between rigidity and ontology is not academic. It carries direct policy implications. A diagnosis of rigidity prescribes more cultural sensitivity, better local consultation, longer timelines, and more responsive sequencing. These adjustments are useful but do not address the deeper problem. A diagnosis of mistaken ontology prescribes a different kind of analysis altogether: one that maps the actual loci of authority in a given polity, identifies how those loci interact, and asks what democratic practice within hybrid orders looks like before it asks what reforms should be funded. The remainder of the article works through the implications of this second diagnosis.

## *5. Empirical Illustrations: Somalia, Liberia, and Zimbabwe*

Three brief illustrations from post-conflict and politically constrained African settings ground the theoretical claims advanced above. They are presented not as case studies in the technical sense but as analytic vignettes drawing on prior published work and on the author's professional engagement with electoral cycles and democracy assistance. Each illustrates a different dimension of the analytic gap between the standard playbook and the polities it claims to address.

### *5.1. Somalia: Patriarchal Hybridity in the Indirect Electoral Process*

The Somali indirect electoral process must be read against a longer history of clan-based political ordering in the absence of central state authority. Menkhaus (2007) documented how, during the long period following the 1991 state collapse, governance in southern Somalia was produced through the interaction of clan structures, Islamic courts, business networks, and diaspora remittance flows, generating a functional political order without a functional central state. The federal architecture established through the 2004 Transitional Federal Government and the 2012 Provisional Constitution was layered onto this pre-existing hybrid order rather than displacing it. The 2021 to 2022 electoral process therefore combined federal-level electoral competition with clan-level negotiation over representation, and both operated within a broader settlement in which women's political participation was formally guaranteed by constitutional quota but substantively mediated by clan authority and by the four-point-five formula that structures the distribution of political access across Somalia's major clan families.

Somalia's 2021 to 2022 indirect electoral process illustrates the descriptive failure of templates that read electoral politics as a process unfolding within a unified state. The contest was simultaneously a competition for federal seats, a negotiation over clan equilibria across the four-point-five formula and the federal member states, and a struggle over the constitutional 30 per cent quota for women's representation. International support oriented to electoral mechanics treated the second and third dimensions as background noise. They were, in fact, the substance. The federal seats

whose contest international support sought to support were allocated through a process that depended on clan negotiation for legitimacy, on Federal Member State approval for delivery, and on the Provisional Constitution for legal authority. Each of these tracks operated through different rules-in-use, and the women's quota functioned across all three simultaneously, producing variable outcomes by Member State (Hamandishe & Ewusi, 2025).

Hamandishe and Ewusi (2025) document this dynamic through the concept of patriarchal hybridity, in which formal constitutional commitments and clan-based informal institutions merge to sustain women's political exclusion despite progressive legal architecture. Women's representation in the Federal Parliament moved from approximately 14 per cent in 2012, to 24 per cent in 2016, and back to 20 per cent in 2021–2022. This trajectory does not describe a polity in which formal architecture is gradually enabling substantive representation. It describes a polity in which gains achieved through international pressure are reversed once that pressure recedes, and in which clan elders exercise effective veto over candidate selection by reclassifying reserved seats and negotiating women's presence in exchange for political concessions. The 2020 Electoral Law, which had been expected to institutionalise the quota, was negotiated in ways that removed the binding language during closed-door consultations with elders (Hamandishe & Ewusi, 2025).

A democracy assistance architecture designed for an electorate-state model could fund the ballot but could not analyse the political settlement within which the ballot was nested. The result was an electoral outcome that satisfied formal procedural minima while leaving the underlying gender settlement substantially unchanged. The Somalia case is therefore not an illustration of an unusual or aberrant polity. It is a precise empirical instance of what hybrid political orders look like when liberal electoral templates are applied to them without analytic adjustment.

## *5.2. Liberia: Procedural Stability and Upstream Exclusion*

Liberia's 2023 electoral cycle offers a different illustration. Two decades after the formal end of civil war, the country has institutionalised competitive multiparty politics, alternation in power, and a stable electoral commission. By the metrics the standard playbook tracks, Liberia performs well. Yet the cycle exposed how thinly distributed the gains of formal democratisation can be when informal institutions of campaign finance, candidate selection, and political party loyalty remain stratified by gender, ethnicity, and county. The leadership pipeline for women aspirants, which sustained donor investment had developed over the preceding decade, intersected with party financing structures that systematically advantaged incumbents and male candidates with access to informal networks (Tripp, 2015). Civic education programming and election observation registered the procedural conduct of the elections accurately. They could not, by design, document the upstream selection processes that determined which candidates entered the formal arena in the first place. This is precisely the kind of analytic

gap a feminist institutionalist reading is built to address (Mackay et al., 2010; Krook, 2009).

Liberia's case also illustrates a longer-term concern. The post-conflict moment of the early 2000s opened a window in which women's political participation increased measurably, in part because patriarchal settlements were temporarily destabilised by transition (Tripp, 2015). The narrowing of that window in subsequent cycles indicates that without sustained contestation of informal institutions, formal architecture by itself does not protect early gains. The trajectory is striking when traced numerically. Women constituted approximately 24 per cent of candidates in 2005, the year of the country's first post-war election held under the Comprehensive Peace Agreement. By 2017, women candidates for the House of Representatives had fallen to 15.8 per cent, and by 2023 to roughly 15 per cent of the candidate pool, with the proportion of women elected to the Legislature descending in parallel from 16 per cent in 2006 to 8 per cent in 2023 (Bauer, 2009; Tripp, 2015). This is not the gradual incremental progress that liberal democratic theory predicts. It is a sustained reversal under conditions of formal institutional stability, and it is precisely the kind of trajectory that purely procedural metrics cannot diagnose.

What lies beneath the descent is a layered system of gatekeeping that operates upstream of the ballot itself. Three mechanisms warrant particular attention. First, traditional authority structures, especially in counties such as Lofa where decisions on representative candidatures are taken in the *traditional men's house* from which women are excluded by custom, deny women candidates entry into the deliberative space in which the political opportunity structure is set. Second, godfather politics structure access to party slates and campaign resources through patron–client relationships that, even when individually facilitative for particular women candidates, reproduce a male-dominated grooming pipeline epitomised by the University of Liberia's Student Unification Party and its political mentorship circuits. Third, the strategic logic of party nomination treats women candidates as instruments for satisfying voluntary quota commitments in unwinnable districts while preserving competitive seats for male incumbents, a calculation that surfaced sharply in the 2023 cycle when the National Elections Commission's 30 per cent Memorandum of Understanding produced only fifteen per cent women on candidate lists. The 2023 pre-electoral coalition negotiated among the Unity Party, Liberty Party, and Movement for Democracy and Reconstruction extended the same logic, with women candidates withdrawn to accommodate male nominees from coalition partners. The cumulative effect is what Beresford (2015) describes as the use of authority to control access to political opportunity, and what feminist institutionalist analysis identifies as informal institutions reproducing themselves beneath formally egalitarian rules (Krook, 2016; Mackay et al., 2010). The Liberia case is therefore not a story about a polity failing to progress along the standard transition path. It is a precise instance of how hybrid political orders absorb formal democratic architecture without surrendering the gendered settlements that organise authority in practice.

The county-level texture of these dynamics, examined through the author's fieldwork in Montserrado, Lofa, and Nimba, demonstrates that gatekeeping is not a uniform phenomenon to be addressed through a single instrument. Each of the three counties is governed by a distinct institutional configuration, and each configuration produces a different relationship between formal architecture and women's actual political access. In Montserrado, the urban network organised around the University of Liberia's Student Unification Party functions as a long-running training pipeline for political aspirants whose membership is approximately 90 per cent male and whose evening sessions are scheduled at hours that effectively exclude women bound by gendered domestic roles. The exclusion is enacted not through any written rule but through the social composition of the space and the timing of access, which is the precise mechanism feminist institutionalism instructs us to identify and analyse (Mackay et al., 2010). In Lofa, the configuration shifts toward customary authority, with pre-selection of candidates for House of Representatives seats negotiated in spaces that customary norms close to women, with the consequence that the consequential decision is taken before the formal nomination process begins. In Nimba, the configuration shifts again, toward what local political vocabulary identifies as the kingmaker dynamic, in which endorsement by a senior political patron determines viability; the Movement for Democracy and Reconstruction fielded no female candidates for House of Representatives seats in the 2023 cycle, an outcome that any analysis confined to formal procedures cannot explain (Albaugh, 2022; Kayuni & Chikadza, 2016). The three counties, read together, demonstrate that the same national architecture produces different patterns of women's political access depending on the informal institutions operating beneath it. The implication for democracy assistance is that interventions calibrated at the national level will systematically miss the level at which gatekeeping is actually exercised.

The financial architecture of the 2023 cycle merits separate analytical treatment because it operates as a screening device that precedes the gatekeeping moves discussed above. Candidate financial returns indicate average direct campaign expenditure of approximately 9,281 United States dollars for a House of Representatives race, a figure that excludes nomination filing fees, asset declarations at the Liberian Revenue Authority, insurance bonds, document notarisation, party membership dues, and the transactional costs of voter mobilisation. For aspirants without family wealth or established patronage networks, both of which are gendered in their distribution, the monetary threshold pre-empts entry to the formal candidate selection process altogether. Beresford's (2015) account of southern African patronage politics as a system in which authority is exercised through control of access to opportunity reads as a descriptively accurate analysis of the Liberian electoral economy. The voluntary 30 per cent gender quota produced women as 15 per cent of the candidate pool, a shortfall parties rationalised through reference to candidate viability, which functions in practice as a coded reference to fundraising capacity. Where female candidates were retained on lists, the empirical pattern indicates strategic placement in less competitive districts,

allowing parties to claim quota compliance while preserving electoral viability where seats were genuinely contested. Gatekeeping in Liberia is therefore not lodged in a single institution but distributed across financial, party-organisational, and inter-party levels in ways that mutually reinforce one another. Any intervention designed against one level alone will not displace the configuration. This is the diagnostic point that the rigidity-versus-ontology distinction developed in Section 4 is built to register, and that procedural-stability metrics of post-conflict democratisation systematically miss.

A further dimension of the gatekeeping configuration deserves notice because it bears on how women navigate exclusion when formal party channels fail them. Where party gatekeepers withhold endorsement, financing, or slate placement, the available alternative is to contest as an independent candidate (Conway, 2001). The Liberian record indicates that this option produces consistently weaker electoral results, not because independent women candidates lack political competence, but because the structural disadvantage operates at the level of resource access. Independent candidates carry the full financial burden of the campaign without the institutional infrastructure of a party machine, and they confront an electorate accustomed to evaluating viability through party affiliation. Afrobarometer Round 8 survey data indicate that 85.7 per cent of Liberian respondents accord traditional leaders some level of influence over how voters in their communities vote, with 30 per cent describing this influence as substantial (Afrobarometer, 2021). For an independent female candidate, the absence of party endorsement compounds the structural disadvantage of operating against this baseline of customary authority. The pattern is consistent with what the comparative literature describes as anti-competitive gatekeeping, in which the practice operates not by selecting against women in formal nomination contests but by withholding the resources that make contestation viable in the first place (Albaugh, 2022; Conway, 2001).

The Liberian record also clarifies what kinds of institutional arrangements have historically produced gains for women's political participation, and the answer is relevant for the broader argument of this article. The 24 per cent female candidate share recorded in 2005 was achieved under the Comprehensive Peace Agreement, which incorporated affirmative-action provisions enforced through an externally monitored transition framework (Bauer, 2009; Sims, 2012). Subsequent voluntary mechanisms, including the 30 per cent Memorandum of Understanding negotiated by the National Elections Commission for the 2023 cycle, have failed because the authority to enforce them was retained by the same actors whose preferences the mechanism was designed to constrain. A proposed legislative amendment to introduce a binding 30 per cent quota in advance of the 2023 elections was vetoed by the executive, leaving the voluntary arrangement as the only remaining instrument. This sequence is analytically instructive. It illustrates a generalisable point about democracy assistance in hybrid political orders: voluntary mechanisms placed in the hands of incumbent gatekeepers reproduce the configuration they were intended to displace, while binding mechanisms with external enforcement architecture can generate temporary openings during transitional moments. The implication for the rewrite-the-playbook argument is direct.

The question is not whether to demand stronger formal architecture, but whether the architecture proposed contains enforcement provisions that the political settlement it confronts cannot quietly neutralise (Hamandishe & Ewusi, 2025).

### *5.3. Zimbabwe: Constitutional Architecture and Cultural Authenticity*

Zimbabwe occupies a third position. It is not a post-conflict state in the conventional sense, but it shares with post-conflict polities the central analytic feature of consequence here: a gap between formal democratic architecture and the political settlement which operates beneath it. The country has held regular elections under a relatively detailed constitutional framework since 2013. It has also produced a sustained pattern of contestation over electoral integrity, candidate access, civic space, and the gendered distribution of political opportunity. The 2018 cycle, in which women's representation on party lists fell despite the constitutional commitment to gender equality, illustrated how rapidly gains made through formal architecture can be reversed when informal institutions of party financing, intra-party violence, and ruling-coalition discipline remain unaddressed (Tripp et al., 2009).

The Zimbabwean experience also illustrates the danger of the cultural-turn argument. Arguments invoking cultural authenticity, traditional values, and national rooting have been deployed by the ruling party with sufficient frequency to make the rhetorical move familiar. When deployed without internal critique, these arguments do not democratise the polity. They consolidate the bargain that already governs it. The current global vogue for nationally rooted, conservative carriers of democratic renewal will resonate uncomfortably for analysts familiar with how that argument has functioned in Zimbabwean political discourse over the past two decades.

The constitutional architecture itself rewards careful reading. The 2013 Constitution of Zimbabwe introduced two provisions that on paper should have produced a transformative shift in women's representation. Section 17 commits the state to gender balance in all institutions and agencies of government at every level. Section 124(1)(b) reserves sixty seats in the National Assembly for women, distributed among the ten provinces under a proportional-representation formula derived from the votes cast for political parties in the constituency elections. The combined effect was to lift women's parliamentary presence at one stroke. What the architecture left untouched, however, was the constituency contest itself. Of the 210 directly elected seats, women won 26 in 2013 and 25 in 2018, representing approximately 12 per cent in each cycle (United States Department of State, 2019; Zigomo, 2022). Removed from the reserved-seats column, the substantive participation of women in the competitive electoral arena did not move. The reserved-seats provision, intended as a transitional measure, was extended in 2021 for a further ten years through Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment (No. 2) Act, an extension that quietly acknowledged the failure of the formal architecture to produce the substantive change the original drafters anticipated. This is the precise pattern that feminist institutionalism identifies (Krook, 2009; Mackay et al., 2010): a formal

innovation that satisfies descriptive representation while leaving the rules-in-use of constituency contests, party financing, and intra-party violence untouched.

The 2018 cycle exposed the underlying logic with unusual clarity. Despite the expectation that the post-Mugabe transition would open democratic space, women constituted approximately 14 per cent of National Assembly candidates, a figure that fell further to 11 per cent in 2023 (Zigomo, 2022; Al Jazeera, 2023). Of the eighty-one women who contested parliamentary seats in Harare in 2018, only five were elected (Zigomo, 2022). The mechanisms producing this outcome are well documented and operate beneath the visible procedural surface of the election. Zigomo's (2022) ethnographic work with eleven female candidates in the 2018 Harare contest identifies a configuration of intersecting barriers in which gender, age, marital status, class, and party identification operate together to constrain women's electoral viability. To these intersectional pressures must be added the structural ones documented across the comparative literature on the region: intra-party primaries in which women aspirants confront violence and intimidation calibrated to deter contestation, party financing structures that systematically advantage incumbents, and the prohibitive nomination fees that escalated sharply by 2023 (Bauer, 2012; Tripp et al., 2009). The ruling party's persistent invocation of cultural authenticity, *pungwe* imagery from the liberation war, and the figure of the disciplined revolutionary cadre operates as what Mamdani (1996) would identify as a discursive consolidation of the very settlement that constitutional reform was meant to displace. The Zimbabwean case is therefore not an outlier. It is a particularly transparent illustration of how a polity can produce a constitutional architecture that meets international benchmarks, perform the procedural rituals of competitive elections, and yet preserve a gendered political settlement in which the meaningful contest for power remains structured along long-established patriarchal lines. Any rewrite of the democratic playbook that does not engage with this pattern, and with the cultural-authenticity argument that legitimates it, will reproduce its analytic shortcomings.

The Zimbabwean trajectory is also legible through the regional comparative literature on women's political participation in the Southern African Development Community context. Mlambo and Kapingura (2019) identify a recurring pattern across the region in which constitutional and policy frameworks formally aligned with the 2008 SADC Protocol on Gender and Development coexist with the persistent under-representation of women in elected office, and in which the gap between formal commitment and substantive outcome is most pronounced where parties retain control over candidate selection without internal democratisation. The 2023 cycle in Zimbabwe extended this pattern with particular sharpness. Nomination fees for presidential candidates rose from approximately 1,000 United States dollars in 2018 to 20,000 dollars in 2023, a twenty-fold escalation that materially closes the political space to candidates outside the resourced political class, with disproportionate consequences for women whose access to capital is structurally constrained. Linda Masarira of the Labour Economists and African Democrats was disqualified for late payment of the fee, and Elisabeth Valerio of

the United Zimbabwe Alliance was admitted only after court intervention. The fee escalation operates as a class-gendered deterrent that pre-empts the substantive electoral contest, and it is a mechanism that no element of the formal electoral architecture is designed to address. Read alongside the documented use of intra-party violence and gendered intimidation as deterrence devices during nomination contests, the cumulative effect is a polity in which the financial and physical costs of female political contestation have been escalated to thresholds higher than those facing male aspirants of comparable political standing (Bauer, 2012; Mlambo & Kapingura, 2019).

A second dimension of the Zimbabwean case clarifies the limits of descriptive representation as a policy goal. Even when the reserved-seat quota lifts the headline figure of women's parliamentary presence to approximately 31 per cent, the substantive distribution of political authority remains heavily skewed. Women remain under-represented in cabinet, in the chairs of consequential parliamentary committees, in the leadership structures of major political parties, and in the electoral commission and constitutional review bodies whose decisions shape the rules-in-use of the political contest. The distinction between descriptive and substantive representation, developed in the African context by Goetz and Hassim (2003) and extended through cross-national analysis by Htun and Weldon (2012), is not a technical refinement of representational theory. It identifies the political work that numerical presence cannot perform on its own. The reserved-seat architecture in Zimbabwe has produced what feminist institutional scholarship characterises as performative compliance: the formal commitment to gender balance is satisfied at the level of headline numbers, while the substantive contest for political authority remains structured along the settlement that constitutional reform was nominally designed to transform. The cultural-authenticity discourse mobilised across electoral cycles, centred on motherhood, marital respectability, and the gendered iconography of the liberation struggle, is the discursive layer through which the settlement defends itself against feminist critique (Zigomo, 2022). The implication for the rewrite-the-playbook argument is direct. Any approval of cultural rooting that does not incorporate an internal critique of how the local is gendered will, in the Zimbabwean case, endorse the discursive architecture used to discipline female political contestants for the past two decades.

A comparative reading of the 2013, 2018, and 2023 electoral cycles in Zimbabwe sharpens the analytical point about constitutional architecture and informal containment. The 60 reserved seats introduced under the 2013 Constitution were intended as a transitional measure to address historical under-representation while political parties reformed their internal candidate selection processes. The empirical record indicates that the major political parties, including ZANU-PF and the MDC formations, treated the reserved seats as a substitute for inclusion in direct contests rather than as a complement to it. The Zimbabwe Election Support Network documented a systematic exclusion of women from direct candidate selection across political parties in 2013, with the explanation offered that women would be represented through the sixty seats reserved for them (ZESN, 2013). Scholarship on Zimbabwean gender politics has

characterised this as the zero-sum framing of the quota: the reserved seats absorb the political demand for women's representation while preserving the open contest as a male-dominated terrain (Hamandishe, 2018). The structural consequence is that the proportion of women directly elected to the National Assembly has remained at approximately 12 per cent across the three cycles, despite headline parliamentary figures of 31 to 34 per cent achieved through the quota. The architecture has produced descriptive representation; it has not produced substantive change in the gendered distribution of electoral opportunity (Hamandishe, 2018).

The local government tier provides an additional empirical window into the same dynamic. The Zimbabwean reserved-seat quota applies at the national parliamentary level only. At the local council tier, where a first-past-the-post system operates without quota provisions, women's representation has declined steadily from approximately 18 per cent in 2008, to 16 per cent in 2013, and to 14 per cent in 2018 (Hamandishe, 2018). The trajectory is significant for two reasons. First, it falsifies the assumption that parliamentary quotas generate pipeline effects for local-level gender inclusion, an assumption that has informed several donor strategies for women's political participation across the region. Second, it reveals what happens beneath the protective architecture of the reserved seats: the gendered settlement of electoral competition reasserts itself with each cycle, contracting rather than expanding women's political access at the tier of governance closest to citizens. The 2022 statutory amendment, which raised candidate registration fees to twenty thousand United States dollars for presidential candidates and one thousand dollars for National Assembly candidates, accelerated this contraction by introducing a class-gendered financial threshold that pre-empts entry. The cumulative pattern, traced across three electoral cycles and across both the parliamentary and local tiers, indicates that the constitutional architecture has not displaced the underlying political settlement. It has instead produced a stratified arrangement in which women's substantive political authority remains constrained at every level not protected by binding external requirements (Mlambo & Kapingura, 2019).

Three different polities, three different relationships to conflict and constitutional reform, three illustrations of the same analytic point. Templates calibrated to the consolidated liberal state miss the substance of political competition in hybrid orders. Generic cultural-turn arguments, which propose to remedy this by rooting democracy in local memory and identity, cannot adjudicate among competing claimants to 'the local,' and in practice frequently empower the loudest of them. The next section examines this problem in greater depth through the gender lens.

## *6. Whose Local? The Gender Problem in the Cultural Turn*

The current case for rewriting the playbook welcomes nationally rooted, conservative figures as authentic carriers of democratic renewal. The rewrite argument treats vernacular fluency as a virtue, and some of its recent articulations use conservative political figures who have positioned themselves as nationally rooted carriers of

democratic renewal as illustrations. The point about vernacular is well taken. Democracy that does not articulate itself in the languages, idioms, and registers of the people it claims to serve will fail. The difficulty is what happens next, when the question shifts from whether to root democratic practice locally to which local voices are accorded democratic warrant.

In African contexts, the answer to this second question has historically been narrow. Tripp's (2015) comparative analysis of post-conflict trajectories in Liberia, Rwanda, Uganda, and Burundi documented how transitional moments destabilised patriarchal settlements and created openings for women's political participation that pre-conflict politics had foreclosed. Where the post-transitional period treated local rooting as a sufficient democratic warrant, those gains were among the first revisited. Goetz and Hassim's (2003) earlier work showed that the architecture of women's representation requires sustained contestation across legislative, executive, and party institutions to translate numerical presence into substantive influence. Numerical gains in legislatures, where they have occurred, have not generally been mirrored in cabinets, party leadership structures, electoral commissions, or constitutional review bodies.

The Somalia case develops this argument empirically. Hamandishe and Ewusi (2025) document how the formal architecture of gender quotas in post-2012 Somalia has functioned as what they describe as performative compliance: the formal commitment is satisfied at the level of seat counts, while the substantive distribution of authority remains unchanged. Female parliamentarians describe being systematically blocked from committee assignments, with seats reclassified to male candidates after quota allocation has formally been agreed. International donor pressure produces episodic increases in numerical representation, followed by reversals once attention moves elsewhere. The pattern is not anomalous. It is the predictable outcome of a political settlement in which liberal electoral architecture is layered over a clan-based decision system, with neither track able to discipline the other.

The risk in the current rewrite-the-playbook argument is therefore not that it values local political reality. The risk is that it treats the local as undifferentiated and accords democratic legitimacy to whoever speaks the local language with the loudest voice. In post-conflict Africa, that voice has rarely been a woman's, a youth's, or a minority's. A democratic theory which cannot adjudicate among competing claims to the local cedes its critical edge.

Feminist institutionalism offers the analytic apparatus to make this adjudication. Its key methodological move is to insist that the rules-in-use are themselves the object of analysis: not the formal institutional architecture alone, but the actual practices through which authority is exercised, contested, and reproduced (Mackay et al., 2010). Krook's (2009, 2016) comparative analysis of quota implementation showed that the same formal design produces different outcomes depending on the informal institutions which surround it. Mackay and colleagues' (2010) broader argument is that change is most likely where formal innovation, informal contestation, and discursive shift align. When this analytic apparatus is applied to the cultural-turn argument, the prescription which

emerges is more demanding than the original commentary suggests. It requires not only listening to local voices but specifying which voices, on what authority, and through what institutional configurations they are allowed to shape democratic practice. The cultural turn, in other words, must be a feminist institutional turn if it is to do the analytic work its proponents claim for it.

## *7. Discussion: Toward Co-Produced Democratic Practice*

The argument advanced in the foregoing sections converges on a set of analytic and policy implications that diverge substantively from the dominant frame in democracy promotion. Three implications merit particular attention.

First, democracy assistance should fund analysis before it funds activity. Hybrid political orders demand a settlement-level reading of who actually governs in a given polity, on what authority, and through which informal institutions, before electoral cycles, civic education curricula, or institutional capacity-building programmes are funded as if they were the main game (Boege et al., 2009; Mkandawire, 2015). The standard programme cycle, in which a country assessment of three to six months precedes a multi-year intervention designed around standard pillars, builds the assumptions of the standard playbook into the architecture of assistance itself. A reoriented architecture would invest more in analytic capacity at the front end and treat programming as derivative of analysis rather than the reverse. The Sahel experience, in which a sustained pattern of military coups since 2020 has unfolded against the backdrop of long-running international democracy and security assistance, provides a sharp illustration of the cost of analytic shortcuts (Akinola & Makombe, 2024; Ziso & Hamandishe, 2024).

Second, gender analysis should be constitutive of political analysis, not appended to it. Feminist institutionalism provides the analytic tools to make this shift (Krook, 2009; Mackay et al., 2010). In professional practice, this means that observer methodologies, civic education curricula, candidate training programmes, and dispute-resolution frameworks should be designed as instruments through which the gendered political settlement of a polity becomes visible and contestable. The Somalia and Liberia experience suggests this is feasible. The campaign manuals, conflict-prevention frameworks, and methodological tools developed for those contexts produced more durable outcomes when gender was treated as a feature of political competition rather than as a sectoral concern. The institutional location of gender within democracy assistance organisations is part of the difficulty: where gender sits in a separate unit, it is a separate concern; where it is constitutive of political analysis, it shapes the design of programming itself (Goetz & Hassim, 2003; Htun & Weldon, 2012).

Third, knowledge production must shift. African scholars, women's movements, electoral commissions, and civil society organisations have generated a substantial body of context-grounded analysis on the questions raised here, much of which sits outside the canonical literature on democracy promotion. The continued treatment of African scholarship as ethnographic supplement to comparative theory developed in the Global

North is not merely an aesthetic complaint. It produces poor analysis. Mkandawire's (2015) reconstruction of neopatrimonialism, Ake's (1996) challenge to externally derived democratic theorising, and the long arc of African feminist political thought are not regional contributions to be integrated into a metropolitan core. They are the analytic frame through which the politics of African polities can be read accurately. Treating Global South knowledge as co-constitutive, rather than as case material, is a precondition for any honest rewrite of the democracy playbook.

These implications also connect to the journal's wider remit on analytical concerns shared between African and Central and Eastern European contexts. The analytic apparatus developed here, treating hybridity, gendered institutional configuration, and the politics of authenticity as constitutive rather than residual, transfers usefully to Central and Eastern European polities where hybrid political orders and contested constitutional settlements coexist with formal democratic architecture. What such comparison requires is analysis on each polity's own terms, rather than the flattening of distinct political ontologies into a generic democratic-backsliding narrative.

## *8. Conclusion*

The case for rewriting the democracy playbook is well made. The case for rewriting it carefully is stronger still. Templates fail when they misread the political ontology of the societies they enter, and they fail again when 'the local' is invoked without internal critique. Rigidity is part of the problem, but only part. The deeper difficulty is that the standard playbook presupposes a polity which most of its target contexts do not exhibit, and the cultural-turn argument that seeks to repair the resulting damage cannot, on its own, distinguish a democratic local from an authoritarian one.

A more durable democratic practice begins where most post-conflict polities already are: in the negotiated, gendered, hybrid orders which liberal theory has long preferred to treat as residual. The path forward requires three commitments. The first is to political analysis grounded in the actual configuration of authority in a given polity. The second is to feminist analytic frames that take seriously the rules-in-use through which gendered political settlements are produced and contested. The third is to a knowledge architecture that treats Global South scholarship and practitioner knowledge as constitutive of theory rather than as evidence in support of theories produced elsewhere. None of these commitments is novel. The question is whether the architecture of democracy assistance is willing, at last, to take them seriously.

Future research should test these claims through case-grounded empirical work in additional post-conflict and politically constrained African settings, and should examine the analogous patterns in Central and Eastern European contexts where hybrid political orders also operate beneath formal democratic architecture. The agenda is large. It starts from the recognition that the polities to which democratic theory has long been applied have been theorising themselves all along.

## Conflict of Interest

The authors hereby declare that they have no financial interest in this manuscript.

## Notes on Contributor

Dr. Antonetta Lovejoy Hamandishe is a Zimbabwean elections and governance expert, feminist researcher, and Senior Policy Consultant. She holds a PhD in Peace, Governance and Development from the University for Peace (UPEACE), an MA in International Relations from Oxford Brookes University (2019), an MSc in Human Rights, Peace and Development from Africa University (2017), and a BA (Hons) in History and Development Studies from Midlands State University (2008). Current research interests: women's political participation, electoral gender quotas, post-conflict governance, hybrid political systems, election observation methodology, Women Peace & Security (UNSCR 1325), AI & democracy governance, natural resources and political inclusion, and blue economy governance.

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