

## Book Review

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# African women, ICT and neoliberal politics, by Assata Zerai: A review by Elisabeth Dubois

**African Women, ICT and Neoliberal Politics.** Assata Zerai (2019) Oxford and New York: Routledge.

Social scientists and practitioners across the world attempt to tackle the challenge of gendered digital divides, especially in achievement of e-government or people-centered governance. “African Women, ICT, And Neoliberal Politics” by Assata Zerai is the culmination of these efforts by drawing on the history of gender and digital divides in Africa. The book highlights the challenges to address the question of “how can we promote people-centered governance in Africa.” Past researchers highlight the importance of ICT and digital equity in neoliberal understanding of democratic governance (Asongu & Nwachukwu, 2016). In recognizing the discrepancies among women’s rights and the cultural stigmatization in Africa in relation to technology, Zerai presents a strong case for the importance of gender equity in achieving purposeful people-centered government. This book delights academic and practical readers actively working in feminist, government, or ICT areas.

Assata Zerai writes from an African feminist academic-activist perspective, bridging the gaps between academic and practical. As a Professor of Sociology at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, her research includes women’s rights, gender equity and inclusion, and ICT, much of which focuses on Africa and the African Diaspora. Beyond simply discussing the gender divides and practical impacts of addressing e-government challenges, Zerai emphasizes women’s voices in a multitude of ways: (1) she inspects how women’s access to ICT makes a difference to the success of people-centered government; and (2) she demonstrates how culture and scholarship of African women, must be understood, and implemented in the processes and goals of democratic governance. In doing so, she makes a case for woman-centered methodology. In this, Zerai formulates a database of female and gender-conscious scholars, activists, and practitioners in particular African countries to determine local values on gender equity and good governance. From this, she builds a conceptual model to analyze the impact of ICT on these values.

This book is insightful in that it goes beyond simply viewing the challenges of e-government at the foundational level but works to discuss the cultural and social distinctions that affect the success of people-centered government in Africa. Zerai begins by discussing the mobile ecosystem and internet access in Africa and its relation to the gender digital divide. From there, she utilizes a variety of case studies on ICT, women’s status and rights, and governance in a variety of African countries. The most critical finding and explanation in the book, is the alliance between ICT, the diffusion of knowledge to women, gender-inclusive governance, and the resulting impact on women’s lives in select African countries.

The consequences of the digital divide in the book are: (1) missed opportunities for prenatal care surveillance; (2) missed opportunities for primary health care and social support; (3) lack of access and difficulties in receiving remittances and (4) lack of access to call helplines and technology for women who experience gender-based abuse. Yet, I believe that the book misses out on a critical consequence of the digital divide, especially for women in the developing world – education. Many scholars' state that lack of access to education or educational resources is a consequence of the divide which emphasizes gender stereotypes, attribution patterns, and stereotype threats (Cooper, 2006; Gorski, 2005). ICT access and use empower individuals to partake in educational opportunities, especially for those in full-time unpaid positions or living in rural areas. Yet, the digital divide hampers these opportunities to receive an education or improve one's quality of life, especially in developing countries (Antonio & Tuffley, 2014) and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Throughout the book, Zerai challenges the current literature that praises the contribution of cell phones in the diffusion of knowledge resulting in better governance in Africa. In doing so, she cites that due to the missed opportunities and data on women, who are over half the population, making such claims misses important societal factors. Although a variety of scholars discuss bridging the gender digital divide in similar ways to Zerai, few seek to not only overcome the gender digital divide through ICT and empowerment but improve a nation's governance (Huyer & Sikoska, 2003). In discussing and populating recommendations, Zerai does so by including women scholars' voices to depict women-centered measures of good governance, resulting in equitable governance policies.

The compilation of the case studies uses the WGI governance factors to determine whether better governance means better lives for women. Although true, it is important to note this a slippery road – as one cannot have one without the other. Other researchers note the importance of gender equity in having good governance, like low rates of violence against women, women's political participation, education gender parity, equal pay, access to women's health and health care (Bandiaky-Badji & Bandiaky-Badji, 2011; Jaquette & Summerfield, 2006; McEwan, 2003). Similarly, good governance can lead to gender equity. This book is timely, as gender divides continue to expand, as fully developed countries like the US have more women in politics than ever before, while other countries, especially those still developing, like many African countries lag far behind. In promoting education, access to health care, equal pay, and creating gender parity in government Zerai argues that scholars and practitioners alike can aid African women and society as a whole.

Although research addresses e-government challenges by establishing the power of ICT, the findings in this book provide social science insights as they build from the work of African feminists. A variety of empirical and theory-driven studies across sectors on addressing ICT, strong governance, and socially vulnerable populations like women in underexplored regions of the work exist. The book provides impactful developments for effective ICT-related policies, accounting for social conditions and gendered divides. In concluding her work, Zerai retraces recommendations for improving women's access to and involvement in government, by providing gender-sensitive recommendations that span political, economic, and institutional governance. Through compiling prior research, she shows that presenting options are not enough. Instead, realizing gender equity requires education on implicit biases and institutional transformation. Through this, cultural shifts and a reduction in stigmatization can be seen, which are key to good governance and achieving equity. This book is a valuable resource that not only presents vital information about tackling e-government challenges through addressing gendered digital divides, but it challenges the status quo by providing insights into future perspectives on the contributions of ICT on strong African governance.

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