



African Women Chief Justices



A Digital Archive Series
(Vol. 1: 1993-2007)



Table of Contents

Women Chief Justices.....	i
Elisabeth Pognon President, Constitutional Court, 1993-1998.....	01
Frances Johnson Morris Allison Chief Justice, 1996-1997.....	02
Gloria Musu-Scott Chief Justice, 1997-2003.....	03
Domitille Barancira President, Constitutional Court, 1998-2006.....	04
Marie Madeleine Mborantsuo President, Constitutional Court, 1998-2001 and 2005-.....	05
Conceptia Denis Ouinsou President, Constitutional Court, 1998-2008.....	06
Mireille Ndiaye President, Constitutional Council, 2004-2010.....	07
Aloysie Cyanzayire Chief Justice, 2004-2014.....	08
Georgina Theodora Wood Chief Justice, 2007-2017.....	09
Salifou Fatimata Bazeye President, Constitutional Court, 2007-2009.....	10

WOMEN CHIEF JUSTICES

The ‘African Women Chief Justices’ is a digital archive initiative created to draw attention to a group of phenomenal women, some of whom were the first women in their countries to be elevated to the position of Chief Justice. These volumes are organized in chronological order, from some of the first women appointed to the role to more recent additions.

Details of their profiles can be found in the
Pioneer Women in Law Project:

<https://www.africanwomeninlaw.com/pioneers>



Elisabeth Pognon (Benin)

President, Constitutional Court, 1993-1998.

Elisabeth Pognon was born in 1937 in the South of Togo. As a child, she attended secondary school in Senegal. From there, Pognon was educated at the University of Poitiers in France and Paris University. Within her university, she studied the Faculty of Law and Economic Sciences.

Immediately following her graduation from college, Pognon became a jurist. With her experience as a jurist, she leveraged her knowledge to rise from the court of first instance of Cotonou to a counselor at the appeals court to the Supreme Court and finally the Constitutional Court. She was Benin's first woman judge.

In the interim of these positions, she also taught as a lecturer at 'Centre des Formations Admistrative et Professionnelle'. Pognon was originally nominated by the National Assembly for a position at the Constitutional Court. Amongst a candidate pool of four, Pognon, was elected as President for the Constitutional Court by her fellow members of the court. She served as President from 1993-1998 as the first female lead of a national Constitutional Court both in Africa and worldwide.

The Constitutional Court has more power than the Supreme Court, which in Benin is the highest court for administrative matters. The Constitutional Court is considered to have the greatest powers for a high court in a country surpassing the powers granted to France and Germany's high courts. In this position, Pognon functioned as a mediator during the tumultuous political environment. The Constitutional Court was originally created in a democratic transition of power in Benin in 1990. Thus, Pognon utilized her position to uphold democratic government from her position of neutrality within the court system.

During her tenure as President, Elisabeth Pognon was gifted the Africa Award of the Africa Foundation of the German Parliament. Upon her leave from the Constitutional Court, Pognon was appointed as a distinguished African citizen for the inaugural 'Panel of the Wise' created by the African Union. She filled this position until 2014 upon her retirement.



Frances Johnson Morris Allison (Liberia)

Chief Justice, 1996-1997

Frances Johnson-Allison, formerly known as Frances Johnson-Morris, was Chief Justice of Liberia's Supreme Court from 1996-1997. She was educated at the University of Liberia, Monrovia, where she received her bachelor's degree in English. Following her undergrad, Johnson-Allison attended Louis Arthur Grimes School of Law, Monrovia to obtain her degree in law.

Utilizing her skills, she became a circuit judge from 1989 to 1997. She was appointed during wartime as the first female Chief Justice in Liberia. Johnson-Allison also served the Attorney General of Liberia from 1998. She was the director for Catholic Justice and Peace Commission in Liberia from 2004-2005 before she was appointed the Chairwoman of the National Election Commission (NEC) for the 2005 Liberian general elections. She then became the Minister of Justice in 2006.

She was concurrently working professionally as the Attorney General and the Minister of Justice before she took office as the Minister of Commerce and Industry in 2007. Following this post, Frances Johnson-Allison became the Head of the Anti-Corruption Commission, appointed by President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf and confirmed by the Liberian Senate until 2013.

Following her long career in public service and the judicial sector, she has entered private practice and become counsel for clients in litigation before court.



Gloria Musu-Scott (Liberia)

Chief Justice, 1997-2003

Gloria Musu-Scott was born in Monrovia, Liberia. She became Liberia's second female Chief Justice following Cllr. Frances Johnson- Allison. She was educated at the University in Liberia where she received a bachelor's degree in economics with a minor in Management in 1975. Upon her graduation, she served as a full-time employee in the Ministry of Public Works as an Administrative Assistant. She then entered Louis Arthur Grimes School of Law to obtain a bachelor's degree in law in 1986.

She worked as a Prosecutor at the Ministry of Justice, and in 1991, she was appointed as an Assistant Minister of Justice. She was appointed as the Judge for the Monthly and Probate Court in Montserrado County by the President of the Interim Government. She became a Counsellor at law of the Supreme Court Bar in 1992 and started acting as a lecturer at Louis Arthur Grimes School of Law. Due to her personal passion for legal equality for women and children deriving from the poor treatment of widows, she organized the Association of Female Lawyers and became the first President of the organization in 1994.

In 1996, Cllr. Musu-Scott was appointed Minister of Justice and served as the Chairman for the Ad Hoc Elections Commission amid the ongoing civil war. Musu-Scott became a member for the Independent Elections Commission, which conducted the 1997 elections in Liberia. Following the 1997 elections and the restoration of the Constitution, Cllr. Musu-Scott was then appointed Chief Justice for the Supreme Court of the Republic of Liberia, from 1997 until 2003.

In 2005, Cllr. Musu-Scott became Senator for Maryland County in the General Elections. During her tenure as a Senator, she started the Women Legislative Caucus of Liberia, until the end of her term in 2012. In 2012, President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf appointed her Chairperson of the Constitution Review Committee due to her previous experience in legal action. Since 2012, Cllr. Musu-Scott has become adjunct faculty at the Louis Arthur Grimes School of Law.



Domitille Barancira (Burundi)

President, Constitutional Court, 1998-2006

Domitille Barancira received her law degree from the University of Burundi. From there, she started her career as a judge on the Burundi Court during the years of 1983 to 1996.

In addition to serving on the Burundi Court, she simultaneously held the position of Deputy Chair of the Supreme Court in 1992-1996. Following this role, Honorable Domitille Barancira served as the Chair of the Bujumbura Appeals Court for two years. After leaving this position, Barancira became the Chair of the Constitutional Court in Burundi. The Constitutional Court is the ultimate authority for Burundi's constitutional law. It is Burundi's second highest court.

In addition to being the President of the court, Barancira also worked as the Chairwoman of the Commission of Reform and Modernization of the Burundian Justice System. She was appointed to be the Chair of the Constitutional Court for the years 1998 until 2006. Domitille Barancira was the Ambassador of Burundi to Germany following her career within the judicial sector and public service.

Following her appointment to the ambassador position for Burundi in 2007, she has since engaged in discussions revolving around climate change and African nationalism. This Ambassadorship ended in 2010 and the former ambassador and President of the Court has since retired.



Marie Madeleine Mborantsuo (Gabon)

President, Constitutional Court, 1998-2001 and 2005-

Marie Madeleine Mborantsuo holds a doctorate in Law and currently serves as the President of the Constitutional Court in Gabon. She was educated for her primary schooling at the Catholic School St-Hilaire, and received her secondary schooling at College Notre-Dame de la Salette. She obtained her baccalaureate degree at the State High School of Franceville in 1975. Her academic degrees include a master's degree in law from the National University of Gabon in 1979, and a Masters in Public Finance, Taxation, and Constitutional Law from the University of Paris II. Mborantsuo worked as an auditor for the Chamber of Accounts at the Supreme Court of Gabon. She was able to leverage this position to a long-term internship at the French Court of Auditors and the Institute of Public Administration in Paris, France. After gaining legal experience in France, Mborantsuo returned to Gabon to serve in the Chambre des Comptes and as an advisor to the Minister of Planning whilst also working as a Professor at Omar Bongo University.

In 1983, she was promoted to the position of President in the Audit Chamber of the Supreme Court. Then, in 1990, she assisted in writing Gabon's new constitution to rethink the institutions of democratic law, as a multiparty system was reinstated politically. The new constitution established the Constitutional Court of which Mborantsuo was named one of the first members in March 1991 before becoming the first elected President by her peers in October of 1991. After another constitutional amendment, in 1998, Mborantsuo was appointed President of the Constitutional Court, the same position she had held previously, by the President of the Republic rather than elected amongst her peers on the Constitutional Court. Despite the elevation to President of the Constitutional Court, Mborantsuo continued to serve as a professor of law at University of Omar Bongo. To supplement her career in higher education, she acquired her Doctorate in Constitutional Law at the University of Aix-en-Provence in 2005. While she was writing her doctoral thesis, Mborantsuo stopped working on the Constitutional Court in 2001 until she was reappointed by the President of Gabon in 2005. She continues to simultaneously serve in the role of President of the Constitutional Court and work as a professor of law today.



Conceptia Denis Ouinsou (Benin)

President, Constitutional Court, 1998-2008.

Dr. Conceptia Denis Ouinsou was born in Grande Saline, Haiti in 1942. For her primary schooling, she attended the Soeurs de la Ste Trinite and College St. Pierre in the capital of Haiti. Following this preliminary education, Dr. Ouinsou received her baccalaureate degree and subsequently went to the Universite d'Etat d'Haiti to receive a license of Social Studies and Administration. She eventually attended and graduated with a degree in Legal Studies in law school in Haiti merely three years later.

As the valedictorian of her law school class, Dr. Ouinsou was enabled to earn a scholarship to seek a diploma in criminal sciences at the University of Paris II. Following this degree, Dr. Ouinsou acquired a doctorate in private law in also at the University of Paris II. She then immigrated to Benin in 1977, following her marriage with a Beninese man.

Upon arrival, she taught at the assistant professor level at the National University of Benin. In order to become a professor, she sought her aggregation in private law, a competitive examination for civil service required for a candidate to become an agrégé able to teach at a professor level. In 1985, with this certification in hand, she rose through the ranks of the University of Abomey-Calavi, becoming the Chair of the School of Law, Director of Academic Affairs, and finally Minister of Higher Education and Social Research. It was from this position that she was nominated to be the Counsel of Constitutional Court before becoming the President of the Court in 1998. Her fellow court members elected her to the President position.

She served in this role until 2008 upon which she had accumulated several honors from the governments of Germany, Haiti, and Benin. She continued to teach at University of Abomey-Calavi until her death in 2011.



Mireille Ndiaye (Senegal)

President, Constitutional Council, 2004-2010

Mireille Ndiaye was the first woman to reach the Presidency position on the Constitutional Council in Senegal. She was born in 1939 in French Togoland. Following her birth and primary schooling, she attained her law degree from the University of Paris and upon graduation worked in several different roles within the French judiciary.

She became the Deputy Judge at the Dakar Court of First Instance, Advocate General at the Dakar Court of Appeals, Advocate General for the Supreme Court, and finally, simultaneously, the President of the Criminal Chamber of the Court of Cassation and Inspector General of Courts, both of which she held until 2001. She then became Attorney General at the Court of Cassation in 2001 and served for a year before reaching the Supreme Court of Cassation.

Following that role, she became a justice on the Constitutional Council in Senegal in 2002. Eventually, she would become the first woman President of the Constitutional Council in 2004 and serve until 2010. Following her retirement from the Constitutional Council, she passed away on March 22, 2015.



Aloysie Cyanzayire (Rwanda)

Chief Justice, 2004-2014

Aloysie Cyanzayire served as the first woman Chief Justice of Rwanda from 2004 to 2014. Cyanzayire was born in the Southern Province of Rwanda. She then obtained a scientific background by attending one of the first science schools created solely for girls. She used that knowledge and drive to then reach a bachelors in law degree at the National University of Rwanda.

During the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, Cyanzayire served as a judge of Butare. Following the genocide, she became the Secretary General for the Ministry of Justice and concurrently operated as an advisor for the Office Rwandais d'Information. She was elected as the head for the local-level system for the post-genocide reconciliation courts by the Parliament. Cyanzayire then served as one of six vice presidents of the Supreme Court. She became the deputy Chief Justice of the Supreme Court as her next position. Cyanzayire was elected the President of the Supreme Court of Rwanda by the Senate in 2003. Since her election, the title of the position has been altered to be Chief Justice, as Rwanda has updated their legal system.

In 2011, she reached the eight-year limit for the Supreme Court and left the court in favor of becoming the Chief Ombudsperson for Rwanda. The Chief Ombudsperson is responsible for investigate complaints against public authorities in the Rwandan government.

Read more: <https://www.africanwomeninlaw.com/african-women-in-law/Aloysie-Cyanzayire>



Georgina Theodora Wood (Ghana)

Chief Justice, 2007-2017

Georgina Wood was the first woman Chief Justice of Ghana, appointed in 2007. Georgina Wood was born in 1947 in Ghana. She received her undergraduate degree from the University of Ghana, Legon in 1970, before going to law school at Ghana School of Law and graduating in 1972.

For her first professional role, Georgina Wood served as a Public Prosecutor and Deputy Superintendent in the Police Service for three years after she had trained with the Ghana Police Service in a post-graduate officers training course. Following this position, she was appointed as a Magistrate of the District Court in 1974. This role initiated her ascent in the judicial sector until she eventually reached the Supreme Court in Ghana. She was nominated as a candidate for Chief Justice in Ghana by the President in 2002 but declined the nomination for unknown reasons. By 2003, she was appointed as a justice of the Supreme Court of The Gambia.

For additional training, Georgina Wood became an advocate of Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR), received training in the US, and attended a learning program in the World Bank. Additionally, she assisted in the design of a court-connected Ghanaian ADR program and served as the Chairperson for the committee to draft manuals for the trials of ADR in the Commercial Court of Ghana.

In 2007, Lady Justice Wood received the Order of the Star of Ghana, Ghana's highest National Award, for her public service in addition to receiving an honorary degree (LLD) from the University of Ghana in 2008. She left the Supreme Court of The Gambia in 2007 once she was appointed Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Ghana, and served in that position until her retirement in 2017.

Read more: <https://www.africanwomeninlaw.com/african-women-in-law/Georgina-Theodora-Wood>



Salifou Fatimata Bazeye (Niger)

President, Constitutional Court, 2007-2009

Salifou Fatimata Bazeye is a Nigerien jurist who was the President of the Supreme Court of Niger from 2007 to 2009. She was born in 1951 in Dosso, Niger. She was educated at Ecole Nationale de la Magistrature de Paris in France in 1979. Once she received her degree, she returned to Niger to work as a Magistrate. She worked as a Magistrate until 2005, serving on the different local courts, before moving to the Court of Appeals.

In 2005, she became a member of the Supreme Court. Following her work on the Supreme Court, she was nominated to the Constitutional Court in 2007 and elected President of the Constitutional Court by the members. She served her term from 2007 until 2009, when the President of Niger, Mamadou Tandja, chose to retire the Constitution and dismiss the Constitutional Court. This was done because the court prevented him from serving a third term.

Once Mamadou Tandja was overthrown in a military coup in 2010, Bazeye was named as head of the Constitutional Council, a High Court made for the transition of Niger. On the Constitutional Council, she steered Niger for a democratic transition until she left the court in 2013. Bazeye was chosen as the African of the year in 2011 for her incorruptibility.



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