Women’s political leadership in East Africa with specific reference to Uganda*

Introduction

Over the past ten years, a number of countries in East Africa and the Great Lakes region have undergone a process of political transition following a period of conflict. In countries such as Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), there has been a significant improvement in women’s participation in decision making following the period of conflict.

However, a number of challenges exist that need to be addressed. These include: translation of the political gains into changes in women’s status at all levels of society; the issue of quantitative versus qualitative representation that clearly addresses the needs of women; legislative and policy reforms that support and promote women’s advancement; maintaining the gains; the role and position of women in multi-party politics; establishing effective links between female politicians and the women’s movement; and the contribution of women’s political participation to peacebuilding processes in the region.

This brief explores the notion of women’s political leadership in East Africa with specific reference to Uganda.

Key factors in women’s political participation

In any discussion on women’s leadership it is imperative to first divulge in the factors that actually dictate their level of participation in any given society. Theorists have pointed out social, economic, political and cultural factors that significantly influence women’s political participation.

Yoon proposes four social, economic and cultural aspects that guide women’s access to political leadership. The first is access to education. Education instils interest in political matters and educated women would be more adept to seek elective office. The United Nations Development Report of 2000 reports Sub-Saharan Africa’s female educational enrolment rates to be the lowest globally.

Norris and Inglehart reiterate the power of social structure: women find it challenging to enter elective offices because they also have to deal with issues like poor childcare, low literacy levels, inadequate health care and poverty.

The second factor that influences female political participation is their non-participation in the labour force. Women who find themselves in the formal wage labour force are more likely to enjoy more chances of political leadership. They have greater financial independence as well as higher levels of self-esteem. Women in Sub-Saharan Africa are frequently employed in the informal sector or involved in subsistence agricultural activities. Active women in the formal labour force are in the minority. A focus on socio-economic development does not fully explain the obstacles to female political leadership, as a comparison between countries such as Canada (where more than 20 per cent of parliamentarians are women), the United States (13 per cent) and South Africa (30 per cent) clearly illustrates. In Sub-Saharan Africa, one of the world’s poorest regions, 13 out of 39 states’ parliamentary seats are filled with at least 15 per cent women. In other words, some ‘poor’ countries currently have more women representatives in government than some ‘rich’ countries do.

The economic condition of a country is nevertheless an important factor in women’s access to the political sphere. Due to the fact that women are often solely responsible for the management of households, any adverse economic fluctuations impact them directly. Preoccupation with fighting for survival reduces women’s interest in competing for elective office.

A final yet significant factor to consider is culture. Patriarchal thought in particular limits opportunities for women, especially in the political sphere where patriarchy deems women subordinate and unsuitable for positions of leadership. An egalitarian culture fosters women’s involvement in electoral politics, but hierarchical culture impedes it. How favourably or unfavourably the society views women’s involvement in politics depends on where its culture lies in the egalitarian-hierarchical cultural spectrum.

Political or institutional variables are perhaps the most important to consider when exploring female political leadership. Yoon argues for the importance of contemplating the role of party system fragmentation,

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Multi-member, proportional representation electoral systems have proven to be the most encouraging towards allowing women governmental positions. The likelihood of women to be nominated is higher in a party system with a small number of large parliamentary parties as large parties are likely to have safe seats in which they can place female candidates. African politics, however, is characterised by fragmented and ineffective opposition parties, which makes the likelihood of women begetting official seats even more unlikely. Norris and Inglehart add a country’s level of democratisation as one of the most important institutional factors to consider when explaining women’s political leadership. In general, the transition and consolidation of democratic societies can be expected to promote widespread political and civil liberties, including the right of women to vote and stand for elected office.

Finally, analysts view gender quotas as the most certain way to further women’s political leadership. Sub-Saharan Africa uses two different types of quotas: the system of reserved seats established national legislation (as used in Sudan, Uganda and Tanzania) and quotas voluntarily established by political parties (as seen in Botswana, Cote d’Ivoire, Equatorial Guinea, Mali, Mozambique, Namibia, Senegal and South Africa). Some consider gender quotas as ‘discrimination and a violation of the principle of fairness’, but others view them as ‘compensation for structural barriers that prevent fair competition’.

The case of Uganda

The opportunities available for women to effectively participate in political leadership

A 2001 United Nations report recommends institutional changes to establish gender equality in basic rights as the cornerstone of greater equality in political participation and voice. Similarly, policies and programmes that promote equality in education and access to information, including legal literacy, can strengthen women’s urgency and their capacity to participate in the political arena.

Internationally, the legal framework of the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), to which Uganda is a member through Article 7 (a) and (b), and strategic objectives of the Beijing Platform for Action are all geared towards the effective participation of women. In Uganda, Articles 32(1), 33(2), 22(3), 33(4), 33(5), 78 (1) (b) of the 1995 constitution all encompass affirmative action seats for women. Furthermore, National Objectives XV and VI also encompass affirmative action that led to the establishment of the equal opportunities commission. The Local Government Act 1997 has the potential to strengthen women’s participation in local government decision making. The Electoral Commission Act 1997 mandates the commission to organise elections and cater for women’s quotas, while the Political Parties and Organisation’s Act 2005, the Press and Journalists Act, and the Electronic Media Act prohibit...
negative reporting on women that stand for political posts. These laws help to enhance women’s active involvement in political leadership. Women’s organisations like UWONET, in a bid to enhance women’s participation, drafted the 2006 women’s manifesto while some other organisations, for instance FIDA, supported women financially to participate as candidates (UWONET report, 2007).

**Securing female parliamentary representation in Uganda**

Female representation in Uganda’s parliament is to a large extent secured through separate women’s elections. In the current ninth parliament, most of the women are elected through separate women’s elections. The Ugandan way of including women, by introducing reserved seats, is very much an ‘add-on’ procedure as women are elected in addition to the constituency MPs who are elected on a ‘first-past-the-post’ basis. Each of the districts in Uganda elects one district woman representative to parliament. Each district consists of an average of three to four counties.

Statistics since 1986, when the NRM government came to power, indicate a steady rise in female political participation. In 1991, the National Resistance Council (NRC) was formed, and the first parliament was elected under the NRM government. During the sixth parliament (1996–2001), women made up 17 per cent of the NRC with 41 seats (Tripp, 2000: 39, 71). During the sixth parliament (1996–2001) there were 39 districts in Uganda and, accordingly, 39 women were elected as female district MPs. When the seventh parliament (2001–06) was elected, Uganda had introduced 17 new districts, securing at least 56 seats in parliament for women.

The eighth parliament of Uganda comprised of 217 constituency representatives, ten Uganda People’s Defence Forces (UPDF) representatives, five representatives of the youth, five representatives of persons with disabilities, five representatives of workers and 13 ex-officio members. Out of the total number of members of parliament, 99 were women – 79 of these were district women representatives, 14 directly elected women parliamentarians and six special interest representatives. This constituted 31 per cent of female representation in the eighth parliament.

Uganda’s ninth parliament comprises 375 members with 129 (34.4 per cent) women MPs – an increase from the 31 per cent in the eighth parliament, but still lower than the parity target set by the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance. However, the numbers of women MPs who competed with men fell from 16 in 2006 to 11 in 2011; and of the 129 women MPs, 112 represent districts as a result of affirmative action. This shows that women have not yet broken through the barriers of competing with men for a political position. While many women had hoped that this seat would be a training ground for more women to enter parliament, those that gain the seat find it safer to keep it than to compete with a man even after two or three terms.

A few other women have joined parliament as representatives of special interest groups such as persons with disabilities (25 per cent), the army (20 per cent) and youth (25 per cent).

Women’s strong numerical presence in parliament has had some positive effects in Uganda. First, it has led to one of the most gender sensitive constitutions in the world in the sense that it contains articles directly affecting women in particular. Second, together with civil society, women in parliament have been important in passing legislation important for women.

**Women’s caucus and a gender sensitive constitution**

After 1986, with the introduction of the ‘movement’ political system, for the first time in modern history women in Uganda have been well represented in decision-making bodies and they have been able to stand together on issues important for women, leading to articles in the constitution that specifically take women’s rights into account. These articles act as a strong foundation for fighting for legislation important for women.

In 1994, the Constituent Assembly (CA) was elected to draft a new constitution. In the CA, the women elected formed a women’s caucus to better enhance the interests of women. Out of 286 delegates, 52 (18 per cent) were women – and most of them participated in the women’s caucus. The women’s caucus turned out to be effective and the women were able to talk with one voice and raise common objectives, turning the women’s caucus into the most coherent body (Tripp, 2000: 77; Women’s Landmarks: 15). The women’s caucus did not take a stand on the debate on the country’s political system since it was non-partisan. It did not establish a relationship with the multi-party caucus called the National Caucus for Democracy (Goetz, 2002: 560).

The support the CA delegates got from the women’s movement was important, if not decisive, in the process of fighting for the provisions in the constitution concerning the status and participation of women in Uganda (Oloka-Onyango, 2000: 11; Tamale, 1999: 117). During the CA, a gender information centre was organised by the National Association of Women’s Organisations in Uganda. The information centre soon turned out to be an important meeting place for the electorate and delegates as well as NGOs focusing on women (Women’s Landmarks, 19). The caucus, in co-operation with the women’s movement, was effective in implementing Article 31 (on the family), Article 32 (on affirmative action) and Article 33 (on the rights of women) of the constitution. In contrast to the two previous constitutions, the 1962 independence constitution and the 1967 constitution, the 1995 constitution has articles which specifically take women’s rights into account. Despite the fact that the Ugandan constitution acts as a fundamental basis for discussing issues important for women, it needs to be backed
up by laws in order to secure women’s rights in everyday life. The tactic that has been used by the women’s caucus, right from the CA to the present, is to lobby and get the support from gender-sensitive male members of parliament. In controversial issues, the caucus persuades some of the male members to argue their cases, and as a result alliances are made with ‘gender friendly’ male colleagues.

**Women in cabinet**

Uganda has a fair share of female representation at cabinet level. There is an increase in the number of women in the cabinet, from 16 (25 per cent) in the last cabinet to 23 (28 per cent), although it is still below the parity standard set by the African Union. Of the 30 senior ministers, only ten are women. It must be noted that women have been appointed to head key ministries, namely: the Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development; Education; Health; Energy and Mineral Development; Trade, Industry and Cooperatives; and Water and Environment. Of the 32 junior ministers, 13 are women.

**Women in political parties**

The issue of the inclusion and active participation of women in the different political parties, however, remains problematic because there are very few women holding positions in party executive decision-making organs and structures at all levels. Political party leadership in Uganda is male dominated. Although the major political parties commit to specific indices of women at each level in the structure – NRM 30 per cent and FDC 40 per cent – the reality is different. The NRM for example has only five women out of a total of 20 members at the national executive committee (NEC), the highest organ of the party. Looking at one district of Mityana, the NRM structure has only two women out of ten executive members and this is because only one position is actually reserved for women and the rest have to be competed for with men. Many women do not have the confidence to compete with men for such positions. The situation can therefore only change if there are more equitable quotas such as the ones the constitution provides for parliament and local councils, because political parties are the first glass ceiling that women have to break through to get into political positions.

**Challenges to women’s participation in leadership in Uganda**

**The negative cultural attitudes and beliefs**

Women are perceived as possessions and known as wifes, mothers and caretakers. Uganda being a patriarchal society, men are dominant in decision making. Women who strive to take part in leadership are ridiculed as wanting to be ‘men’ – money minded, ambitious, immoral and unruly; as a result, women become shy, lack confidence and have low self-esteem. Men do not allow their wives to attend meetings as they fear that women are being lured into relationships with other (male) leaders.

**Women’s workload at home**

The other aspect that affects women’s political empowerment is the triple workload which women carry and, in particular, unpaid care services. The workload can have some negative impact on women’s horizontal mobility if it impacts the time they have to invest on political activism or even to relax.

**Low levels of education**

The literacy level of aspiring women political leaders affects their capacity to comprehend and engage in technical processes that the government engages in. Despite good government policies to promote education for all UPE and USE, a large number of women are unable to access careers in leadership due to a low level of education.

**Inadequate resources**

Women do not have ownership of productive resources such as land and property. In a bid to meet household responsibilities, women are engaged in food supply with agricultural labour and informal employment, both of which are characterised by a high workload and unpaid labour. This leaves them with no funds or time for politics or the development of leadership skills. Most women leaders in Uganda lack negotiation and lobbying skills. This undermines their capacity to compete favourably with their male counterparts as well as their confidence.

**Women’s biological roles and responsibilities**

Some men feel that women may not serve well when they are pregnant or caring for young children. As a result of their domestic roles, female leaders may find it hard to keep time or meet deadlines at work, resulting in poor participation in the decision-making process. Girls are not often elected to leadership positions since they are likely to move to another community upon becoming married.

**Low levels of political influence**

While women in parliament have used their numbers to lobby and get gender sensitive legislation passed, they have
not used their numbers to influence resource allocation to critical areas such as maternal health, and sectors like agriculture where the majority and poorest of the population who are largely women eke a living.

**Conclusion**

Uganda has made tremendous progress towards gender equality over the last 20 years. The country has one of the most gender-sensitive constitutions in the world, and has many laws and policies in place to address gender imbalances and women’s empowerment. The challenge remains at the implementation level. Because many government bureaucrats do not really appreciate gender issues, planners do not adequately provide for interventions that specifically address women’s needs in sector policies, sector plans and budgets. The result is that the well-meaning laws and policies largely remain on paper. Government priorities for post-conflict areas continue to focus on physical infrastructure even as the dignity and bodily integrity of women continue to be violated. As such, the government continues to focus on physical infrastructure such as the building of schools while the school dropout rate for girls continues to rise in post-conflict areas. Uganda has also made great strides in ensuring women’s participation in leadership and decision making. The provision of a woman MP for each district and for 30 per cent women’s representation in local councils has brought many women into positions of leadership; the hitherto invisible have become very visible, and as a result society is gradually accepting the inevitable: that women make as good leaders as men.

**References**


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