

‘Point of order, Mr Speaker’: African women claiming their space in parliament¹

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At the close of the millennium, there is a wave of invigorating air sweeping across the African continent. The refreshing breeze can be felt in the form of women smashing the gendered ‘glass ceiling’ in a bid to overcome the cultural and structural barriers that impede their political careers. In this short article, I examine the relationship of African women² to parliament. In the first section, I look at women’s involvement in politics in pre-colonial Africa, and then examine the barriers to women’s political activity thrown up by colonialism. This history explains much about women’s absence from contemporary African national assemblies. I then focus on one state – Uganda – looking closely at the policy of affirmative action there, and the reality of male bias, prejudice, and sexual harassment that women MPs confront when they manage to enter parliament.

African women are currently giving men a run for their money in the highest political offices of their land. They include Eileen Sirleaf-Johnson of Liberia, Rose Rugendo of Tanzania, Charity Ngilu of Kenya, Inonge Mbikusita-Lewanika of Zambia, and Margaret Dongo of Zimbabwe. Specioza Wandira-Kazibwe, from my own country, Uganda, is the first woman to ascend to the second highest political position in the land: a true rarity in Africa, and across the world. But African women remain grossly under-represented in the institutions that make decisions for their nations. By the close of the last millennium, in only 17 African countries did women account for ten per cent or more of parliamentarians.

Clearly, we have a problem here. African women were active participants in the struggle for political independence all over the continent. More recently, they have also played active roles in liberation movements, in countries including Uganda (Byanyima 1992). But in spite of these contributions, women in Africa still

represent a very small minority of state national legislators. South Africa has the highest number of women representatives among national legislatures in Africa, and was the first African country to achieve the 1995 UN target of 30 per cent for the representation of women in parliament (United Nations 1996, para 182). Seychelles stands second at 27.3 per cent, followed by Mozambique, Namibia, Eritrea, and Uganda. At the other end of the spectrum are countries such as Djibouti and the Comoros, where the assemblies are exclusively composed of men. Have African women always been absent from the decision-making process in their communities?

This article is based on research I conducted between 1995 and 1998. The information on Ugandan women parliamentarians comes from notes I made from observations in the National Assembly, and interviews with legislators – 40 women, and 15 men.³

Understanding women's absence: history revisited

Pre-colonial Africa

Male-authored, male-biased history texts have failed to acknowledge women's past contributions to the political life of most African societies. Recently, a growing literature has aimed to correct the record, by highlighting the important roles of African women as political actors in the pre-colonial period (for example, Staudt 1989; Agorsah 1990). This scholarship seeks to document certain structural features of pre-colonial African political economy that provided specific roles for women.

The status of African women was not equal to that of men (Hafkin and Bay 1976; Amadiume 1987); patriarchal societies predominated on much of the continent. However, African women played extremely important and diverse social roles, and wielded substantial economic and political power all over the continent. While a sexual division of labour preceded the colonial period in many African societies (Schmidt 1991), this was not divided along productive and reproductive lines. During pre-colonial times, most African women were fully engaged in both reproductive and productive activities (Okeyo 1980).

Women's participation in trade was so vigorous that in many African contexts they formed women's market networks, which gave them a high degree of economic power. Women in Ghana, for example, had total control of the proceeds from their trade sales – a factor that gave them relative autonomy from men (Agorsah 1990). In addition, the well-organised market networks often formed a strong basis for women's political activities. For example, in 1929, when the Igbo and Ibibio women of Nigeria rose against the British colonial authority in the famous 'Women's War', communication and co-ordination throughout the war was accomplished through marketing networks known as *mikiri* (Mba 1982).

In her work, Kamene Okonjo contrasts the 'dual-sex' political structures of West African traditional societies with the 'single-sex' system existing in much of the North. She shows that despite the patriarchal structure of much of pre-colonial Africa, women were not totally subordinate. In a single-sex system, 'political status-bearing roles are predominantly the preserve of men ... [and] women can achieve distinction and recognition only by taking on the roles of men in public life and performing them well' (Okonjo 1976, 45). Okonjo describes in detail how authority structures in Africa were distinctly sex-separate. She demonstrates how the dual-sex system worked among the Igbo of Nigeria, where the functions of the *Obi* (male monarch) were parallel to, and complementary with, those of the *Omu* (female monarch). Okonjo argues that 'within this system, each sex manages its own affairs, and women's interests are represented at all levels' (ibid.). Sex-separate institutions were also found in East Africa. For example, among the Kikuyu of Kenya, women performed economic, social and judicial functions through an age-segmented institution called *ndundu* (Stamp 1975).

The colonial period

However, the colonial intrusion into African societies 'added new dimensions to the differentiation between the sexes' (Chazan et al. 1988, 87). When Europeans colonised Africa, they transplanted their ideas of male-dominated politics, and ignored African women's political and economic activities. This created the conditions for denying adulthood to women, defining them as wards of men (Staudt 1989). By eroding most of the power and autonomy that African women had previously enjoyed, colonialism pushed them to the limits of subordination.

For example, when the British colonialists took over power in Nigeria, they only recognised the male *Obi* (to

whom they offered a monthly salary); they completely ignored the female *Omu*. Kamene Okonjo concludes that 'the absence of women from meaningful political representation in independent Nigeria can be viewed as showing the strength of the legacy of single-sex politics that the British colonial masters left behind' (Okonjo 1976, 58).

A systematic and deliberate colonial policy ensured that African women were excluded from politics. Women were distanced from decision-making in agricultural production and other forms of production, due to Western views about the '... "proper" place of men and women in societies' (Staudt 1981, 5). It has also been argued that shifting decision-making from community level to the colonial capital cities lessened women's opportunities to influence political decision-making, because women had relied on influencing their male kin informally (Strobel 1982).

Several scholars cite missionary education as the single most important policy that adversely affected African women in relation to men (for example, Weis 1980). In order to participate in competitive party politics and parliamentary democracy, one needs some basic education in subjects such as English, civics, the law, and political science, fields that at the time were the exclusive preserve of men. The education given to girls in the colonial era certainly did not provide women with the intellectual skills needed to participate in Western-style politics imposed on the colonies at independence. Education for women was primarily geared towards providing the educated men with good wives and home-makers, and focused on domestic skills, nutrition, and home economics. As in Victorian Europe, not only were educational opportunities disproportionately provided to males, but men's education was also accorded higher priority than that of women (Staudt 1981).⁴ Moreover, the educated African housewife was viewed by the colonisers as a potential

consumer who could motivate her husband's productivity.

She must be educated to want a better home, better furnishings, better food, better water supplies, etc. and if she wants them she will want them for her children. In short, the sustained effort from the male will only come when the woman is educated to the stage when her wants are never satisfied (Roddan 1958, quoted in Staudt 1989, 78).

Independence and beyond

At the time of formal independence from colonial rule, most African countries accorded full political rights to women. Not only did they have full suffrage rights, but they were also free to stand for any political office.⁵ Susan Geiger suggests that it was in the best interest of African nationalist leaders to present themselves as 'enlightened proponents of Western democracy and equality' (Geiger 1990, 227).

However, at independence, Africa inherited political ideologies and structures designed to consolidate male privilege and power, and women's subordination. Male authority in post-independent African states was so ubiquitous that for a very long time it was taken for granted. Recently, feminist theorists have begun to question the concept of 'the state', and challenge the patriarchal power encoded in it. They have shown that the division between the 'public' and 'private' spheres is artificial, and has had a huge negative impact on women (MacKinnon 1989).

There was no political ideology at independence – or, to put it another way, no strong women's movement – to challenge men's domination (Strobel 1982, 126). Where women's organisations existed, these were often closely connected to the male elite who were to rule after independence. For example, at the time of independence in 1963, Kenya had a nominally autonomous national women's organisation called *Maendeleo ya Wanawake* (Women's Progress) which held the

mandate for promoting the advancement of African women. Although it started by criticising the Kenyan government, its leaders were soon co-opted as wives and kin of male national leaders. Audrey Wipper asks the rhetorical question: 'With husbands, brothers and fathers occupying some of the most powerful positions in the country, do they have too much at stake to query certain practices, let alone take action to oppose the power structure?' (Wipper 1975, 116). African women's continued absence in the political sphere is due in large part to this failure to challenge the deep social inequalities that result in female poverty and subordination.

In Tanzania, the national women's organisation, *Umoja Wa Wanawake Wa Tanzania* (UWT – United Women's Organisation of Tanzania), officially a part of the ruling party in Tanzania, was also charged with the task of improving the lives of poor rural women. Despite all UWT's efforts, women's status in Tanzania did not show any significant improvement. Susan Rogers identifies the problem not to be co-optation, as in the case of *Maendeleo*, but rather the uncritical 'acceptance of the sexual division of labour and accompanying gender relations as essentially unalterable conditions of human existence, even as Tanzanian women themselves identify these relations as central to their oppression...' (Rogers 1983, 38).

Analyses of why African women remain largely absent from political life today must also explore the larger structures within which African politics are played out. The prospects of political systems integrating women in Africa are dim indeed, in light of the fact that national structures are themselves shaped and influenced by regional or international contexts. In the context of globalised politics, the realities of African politics within the prevailing hierarchical world economic order mean that '...[at] the top stratum, which international movers of capital dominate, women are inconsen-

quential, and increased representation would not be likely to produce significant change' (Staudt 1981, 19).

Affirmative action: lessons from Uganda

One of the ways that African governments have sought to redress the problem of women's paucity in decision-making positions is through the introduction of affirmative action programmes. Ugandan women, for example, have a constitutional 'sex quota' – reserved seats – at the level of parliament and local councils. This has helped considerably to boost the number of women politicians. Today, female parliamentary representation in Uganda stands at 18.1 per cent. This has certainly altered the Ugandan political landscape, albeit in contradictory and complex ways.

The benefits to women from the affirmative action experiment are limited by the fact that it was a top-down policy imposed by the state. In 1989, the National Resistance Movement (NRM) government gained the support of women legislators by offering them access to the political world of male power. However, challenging inequality between women and men was not on NRM's agenda. The fact that the state is not a guaranteed ally in the struggle for gender equity makes it extremely important that the women's movement in Uganda marks a critical distance from the state. But women continue to support the NRM government because it gave them access to the political arena, and this has nipped any popular opposition in the bud. Women activists need to stop 'thanking' the NRM for having 'delivered' them from oppression. They should not view the policy as a privilege but a right: it is merely a political opportunity, within which to advance the emancipation of women in all spheres of life.

The problem is exacerbated by the politics of patronage, whereby resource-poor women (and men), in the context of

an underdeveloped economy, have to depend on the resource-controlling state as a vital back-up for advancing their political careers. Complacent in their positions of power, many affirmative action beneficiaries do not engage in serious self-analysis concerning their role in parliament, nor do they seriously or systematically question the gender implications of state-sponsored bills.

The affirmative action policy has proved to be class-centric, largely benefiting an educated elite minority among Ugandan women. In this sense, the policy has perpetuated mainstream post-colonial politics, which has excluded the voices of the largest section of the peasant population (both men and women). In other words, the political situation of the majority of women who face the brunt of oppression and marginalisation, for whom affirmative action was purportedly targeted, largely remains constant. Affirmative action policies are essentially limited in that they neglect class-based interests (Sikhosana 1996). When Uganda introduced affirmative action as an experiment in 1989, it was a reformist strategy, which did not deal with the underlying structural problems of the system. It could only therefore be of limited value to the women's movement in Uganda. Affirmative action is merely a necessary first step toward the difficult road to transformative action that allows for a democracy with a wider base.

Gender issues faced by Ugandan women MPs

Despite the increase in the number of female politicians in Uganda, I found in my research that it is still extremely difficult for women to achieve political autonomy. Gender inequality affects the social interactions of male and female legislators, and remains an integral part of the parliamentary institutional framework (Tamale 1999).⁶ Female politicians face

common problems and challenges, irrespective of their mode of entry into the legislature (that is, whether through affirmative action or the direct route).

When women step over from the 'private' sphere to claim their rightful space in the 'public' arena, traditional values provide a ready tool for men to use to remind them of their 'proper' place. But the same men will hasten to strike down custom as outmoded and archaic if it stands in their way to power and privilege. Ugandan women internalise such traditional concepts and the stereotypical images painted of women by society. This sometimes leads them to resent other 'deviant' women who enter national politics. This explains the women-on-women verbal violence and denigration that was demonstrated in many constituencies in which women were contesting each other during the 1996 general elections.

The male-dominated media in Uganda represents one of the patriarchal pillars that serves to perpetuate gender subordination and oppression. Operation of the old-boy network within the male political elite is extended to include the fraternity of reporters, journalists, and editors who serve as gatekeepers to what makes news. By portraying women politicians as an aberration, or as intruders into the serious domain of politics, they perpetuate the gendered public/private divide. These ideologies are internalised by the public, creating and fuelling feelings of resentment towards women who participate in formal politics.

Sexual harassment of women MPs

My research revealed that sexual harassment was an issue that most women legislators had to deal with on a day-to-day basis. However, many female politicians did not regard the repetitive sexual remarks directed at them as problems, let alone

constituting sexual harassment. 'Brushing it off', both literally and mentally, was the method adopted by almost all victims of sexual harassment in my study. Even the most radical feminists among the female legislators I interviewed adopted passive methods of dealing with it, and did not consider it serious enough to warrant court or other retaliatory action. Even in those cases where a male colleague went as far as making physical contact of a sexual nature, the women legislators either blamed themselves for it, or simply ignored it. Below are two examples from my research.

Akiiki⁷: *They do all kinds of funny things (laughter). I don't even know where to begin (sighs) ... This guy, you know he calls me into his office one day, he asks his secretary to bring some coffee, blah, blah, blah and we talk. The conversation is going nowhere so I say, 'OK, thank you, bye-bye.' So he gets up to open the door for me and ... (illustrates by grabbing her left breast with both hands)*

Sylvia: *Oh my God, really?*

Akiiki: *Ah-huh, I couldn't believe it, you can imagine such a thing. All of them are the same.*

Sylvia: *What did you do?*

Akiiki: *I just brushed off his arm and walked out. (Laughs.)*

The key issue here is in the MP's contradictory statements: she could not believe what her male colleague did to her, yet she concedes that it is commonplace when she adds, 'all of them are the same'. This indicates that she could not believe that a 'respectable' fellow parliamentarian would treat her in as base a manner as 'other' men outside parliament would. Forgetting that sexual harassment is a standard way of objectifying women in order to maintain power and control over them, this female legislator thought that her personal attributes and status as an MP would protect her. Yet to her male colleagues, first and foremost she was a woman. Her parliamentarian role was only secondary.

That women MPs are working in an environment where their status as 'honourable' MPs is at best precarious is powerfully demonstrated in the experience of another informant in my study:

Akwasi: *One time I went over to say hello to a male colleague. I don't know, maybe I caught him at a bad time ... maybe he had had other things on his mind (chuckles nervously) and then he sort of grabbed me here (points to her crotch). I was shocked, I literally went down on my knees. I said, 'Please, please, I have a lot of respect for you' ... But I wasn't angry; I thought maybe it was my mistake, maybe I took him for granted. I just learnt a lesson that time – that sometimes you have to be careful with men ... By nature they can misbehave simply by the way you present yourself.*

The attitudes and reactions reported here are by no means unique – they echo many other studies of sexual harassment in working environments elsewhere. In the course of their work, women also have to deal with the psychological anguish, feelings of belittlement, and increased self-consciousness occasioned by sexual harassment. But in this case, the legislative work of female MPs is ultimately affected. Such experiences may, in part, explain the apparent reticence and diffidence that generally characterises Ugandan women parliamentarians on the chamber floor.

Conclusion

The unprecedented presence of women in Uganda's parliament has had a significant influence on the political landscape of the country. In particular, it has resulted in a shifting of political sites and a relocation of power (albeit slight), spurring a new kind of political self-organisation for Ugandan women. However, my research suggests that the right of women to participate in politics as autonomous actors is still greatly curtailed in both overt and covert ways. Inequality between women and men, together with the poverty that is the result

of Uganda's under-developed economy, constrains the performance of women legislators. Cultural norms that associate men with the public and political arenas, and women with the private and domestic arenas, operate to perpetuate the status quo. These norms shape unequal gender power relations within state institutions. There is a risk that affirmative action may be a hollow victory, which has little potential to shatter the institutional aspects of sexism in Uganda.

The importance of a strong women's movement to back up women who hold public office is especially important in ensuring that they are aware of the need to reconstruct political structures according to feminist principles (Bystydzienski 1992). But while not all Ugandan female politicians are gender-sensitive, I would confidently state that the majority of women MPs in my country pursue 'women's issues' both inside and outside the legislative assembly halls. The work of female politicians in Uganda is in many ways a reflection of the constraints and contradictions arising out of a patriarchal socio-political setting existing in a peripheral area of the global economy. On the one hand, traditional gender roles and basic issues relating to daily survival give shape to their political work. On the other, their contradictory status as marginalised women in positions of power sets them apart from the masses of Ugandan women. It is these very contradictions that are likely to foster further action for social change by female legislators; the sense of incongruities for these women is bound to precipitate into a particular form of political consciousness.

The struggle for women's emancipation in African politics is a difficult one. Eliminating hostility to women in senior political positions will be a painstakingly slow process. It will take public education and awareness-raising, and the attainment of equal numbers of women and men in national politics as well as the radical

transformation of existing political structures. But as my research and that of others have revealed, patriarchy is not entirely constraining; it has some elements that can be exploited by women to improve their standing. Inspiration can be taken from the new breeze that is blowing across our fair continent. That breeze brings with it the potential for positive change. And as I state in my book, *When Hens Begin to Crow*, the chant of crowing hens will one day reverberate around the four corners of Africa.

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Notes

1. This article is based on a paper delivered at Indaba99, 'Women's Voices, Gender, Books and Development', Zimbabwe International Book Fair, Harare, 1999.
2. African women are not a homogenous group. Despite the common heritage derived from colonialism, economic exploitation, and racism, there are wide variations in the ways that these have impacted on individual women in different regions and communities.
3. This study was part of my Ph.D. thesis research at the University of Minnesota and is also the basis of my book, *When Hens Begin to Crow: Gender and Parliamentary Politics in Uganda* (Westview Press, 1999).
4. It is important to note, however, that education appropriate for engaging in politics was not accessible to most African men, either - only a select group, including sons of chiefs and other notables, received it, in certain colonial administrations.
5. There were exceptions such as northern Nigeria where women gained the vote in 1976, 16 years after formal independence (Howard 1985, 292; Geiger 1990, 228).

6. By gender, I refer to the social and cultural construction that shapes feminine and masculine identities and roles. And because gender exerts a major effect on individual lives and social interactions, many feminists now view it as a social institution in and of itself (West and Zimmerman 1987; Lorber 1994).
7. I use pseudonyms in this article in order to protect the confidentiality of informants.

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