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Negotiating patriarchy? Exploring the ambiguities of the narratives on “male champions” of gender equality in Uganda Parliament

Amon Ashaba Mwiine

abstract

There is an emerging trend in which global development actors insist that gender equality programmes and initiatives must involve the participation of men, to the extent, in some cases, of calling for men and boys to empower women and girls. In Uganda, studies exist on how women gender activists have drawn on some men to speak to gender equity issues on their behalf. In some of these studies, supportive men are constituted as ‘champions of gender equality’, as if to express gratitude to and celebrate as unexpected, the significant role these men are seen to play in promoting gender equality. In this article, I draw on interviews with women gender activists in and outside Parliament and some male parliamentarians to explore how and why women opt for men to speak to gender issues on their behalf. I also examine ways in which men who are ‘selected’ to represent female voice on gender issues perceive and represent themselves with regard to promoting gender equality and their relationship with women and other men. The article specifically engages with concerns on whether gender inequalities are challenged or institutionalised through the use of male promoters of gender equality in Uganda Parliament and assesses the implications such manoeuvres have for thinking about gender and feminism, in particular African feminism.

keywords

power, patriarchy, male champions, Nego-feminism, gender equity

Introduction

Globally, there is a trend in the development sector where United Nations (UN) agencies, bilateral donors and multilateral institutions such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) insist that gender equality programmes and initiatives must involve the participation of men, to the extent, in some cases, of calling for men and boys to empower women and girls (Straughan, 2017; Mwiine, 2018). In her

speech during the launch of UN Women HeforShe campaign, Emma Watson – an actress in the famous Harry Potter movies and a UN Women Goodwill Ambassador – called upon men to be involved in supporting gender equality and women’s empowerment. She argued that “when women and girls are liberated from the shackles of gender oppression (with the assistance of men), men will also be free” (Mwiine, 2018:7). This is partly motivated by the need to include men in liberal Women in

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Development (WID)-inspired approaches and negotiate around male resistance to gender equality initiatives (United Nations Division for Advancement of Women (UNDAW), 2008). The role of men in addressing gender inequalities is also exemplified in Gender and Development (GAD) centred approaches which “sought to tackle women’s subordination through an explicit emphasis on socially and historically constructed relations between women and men” (Cornwall, 2000:18). In an article entitled *Missing Men? Reflections on Men, Masculinities and Gender in GAD*, Andrea Cornwall demonstrates how, far from addressing men’s identities, social practices and cultural representations and how they influence their relations with women, men, in all their diversity, were often missed in the GAD discourse.

Male involvement in empowerment of women has been controversial and critiqued by some feminist writers who recognise the danger of men speaking and acting on behalf of women, instead of addressing the power imbalances and privileges men enjoy. Shamim Meer (2011:1) warns that “men are once more in charge – only this time they’re in charge of women’s liberation struggles” while Cornwall and Rivas (2015) argue that the narrative of ‘involving men’ as opposed to holding them to account, answerability, and obligation deprives the gender equality debate of its power to talk about patriarchy, privilege and power. Similar concerns have been expressed by Sylvia Tamale (2014:2) who asked: which men are women working with and:

how do we ascertain that in this new dispensation where men are working on gender equality the concept of gender is not taken to merely mean ‘men and women’ and not stripped of the notions of power, privilege and subordination?

Some of the feminists’ issue with the place of men in gender activism stems from the idea of male representation of female voice on women’s rights issues and whether this does not institutionalise a system where men are now expected to speak on behalf of women (Edwards, 1996). The contentious but popular narrative of ‘male involvement’ is exemplified in the Uganda Parliament where women gender activists talk about

‘selecting’ some men to speak to particular women’s rights issues on their behalf.

As early as the 1990s, Tamale (1999) introduced us to women MPs who had entered Parliament largely through affirmative action and how they used different tactical strategies to speak to issues of gender inequalities in a male-dominated Parliament and thereby ensure that these issues are heard. Women’s strategies which included, among others, “toning down the language of their demands, as well as selecting a soft-spoken woman or even a man to present the women’s case in a moderate manner acceptable to most men” (Tamale, 1999:117) pointed to an institution that constrained women as intelligible speakers. Men’s representation of women’s voice in legislative debates especially on gender issues still features as a strategic manoeuvre (Ahikire and Mwiine, 2015; Wang, 2013; Uganda Women’s Network (UWONET), 2013) despite two decades of gender activism, increasing numbers of women in the legislature and a Constitution that outlawed discrimination on the basis of gender among other gender equity policy reforms. Yet we cannot *simply* dismiss women activists’ option of male representation as mere legitimisation of male hegemony, exemplified through men’s exercise of “power over” women.

Moving beyond universal conceptions of “power as something which is exercised over others” (Purdy, 2015:3), I draw on Michel Foucault’s notion of power as complex and manifested through dynamic contestations and negotiations to understand female gender activists’ actions and male MPs’ reactions, instead of assuming that power is possessed by one group and denied to another during gender equity legislative processes. In a critique of “power over” others – what Peter Morris (2002) calls “exercise fallacy” – Foucault (1982:789) provides an alternative conceptualisation of power as about “acting upon an acting subject or acting subjects by virtue of their acting or being capable of action”. I also draw on Obioma Nnaemeka’s (2004) notion of Nego-feminism, an emerging strand of African feminism characterised by strategic and conscious negotiation of patriarchal resistances and negation of ego and Tamale’s ethnographic work on gender and parliamentary politics in Uganda to explore women’s narrated experiences of how they

select some men to speak to gender issues as a tactic to negotiate men's resistance to these issues on their behalf in parliamentary debates. I ask, why do women opt for male representation? How do women gender activists select the men they work with? How do these men relate with women and other men in the process? Does women's selection of men to critique gender inequalities on their behalf challenge or institutionalise already existing forms of patriarchy in Parliament?

Methodology

This article draws on 11 interview conversations I conducted with six women gender activists in and outside Parliament and five male legislators in 2016 in Uganda. Participants are identified using pseudonyms to ensure their anonymity. Female participants included Susana and Maria, programme coordinators in two different women's organisations; Acol and Rina, both of whom are executive directors of women's rights organisations and Janet, a former Member of Parliament. I also interviewed Dora, a programme official on gender-based violence prevention in one of the United Nations agencies in Uganda. Male participants included Fred, Christopher, Seba, Kissa and Davis. Apart from Davis, a judge of the high court of Uganda and a gender trainer, the rest of the male participants were legislators in the 8th Parliament (2006-2011). All participants were purposively selected based on their central role in promoting two gender equity bills (prohibition of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and Domestic Violence Bill) in the 8th Parliament (2006-2011). The two bills – which were the central focus of this study – were passed into law with apparent male support. The interviews were part of a case study that investigated the role of male legislators - some of whom are labelled 'male champions' - in promoting gender equality in the 8th Parliament.

Notably, scholars such as Wang (2013) and Ahikire and Mwiine (2015), the Uganda Women Parliamentary Association (UWOPA) (2012) and a research report by UN Women – Uganda office (2015) have noted an increasing trend in which women gender activists often draw upon male support to promote gender equity issues and often label such men as 'champions'. In its 2012 strategic plan, UWOPA highlights building support among

male MPs as one of its strategies and reiterates that "women MPs will lobby for the support of their male counterparts in the realization of the Strategic Plan [and] efforts will be stepped up to solicit male champions to promote the Women's Agenda" (2012:10). However, these studies hardly interrogate the labelling of men as "champions", the meanings this category might embody and its implications for gender equality.

In this article, I draw on recent feminist scholarship that engages with interviews as "social encounters" and participants as co-producers of knowledge in interviews (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009; Heyl, 2001; Pattman and Bhana, 2017) as I explore women's narrative accounts of their selection and relationships with men as "spokespeople" for women's rights issues in Parliament, the labelling of some men as "champions" as well as men's responses to these.

This study's understanding of 'male champions' of gender equality resonates with Jennifer Anne de Vries' (2015:23) description of the category as "... a subset of leadership behaviors that focus particularly on the role of executives in relation to change agendas. It refers to those who have enhanced credibility and positional power to confer approval and behave in ways that actively promote the cause, in this case, gender equity". Importantly, beyond the above definitive marking out of what this category is, the study is more concerned, not with the role of men in working with women to promote gender equity. Rather, it is concerned with problematising the ways (i.e. labelling) in which the title 'male champion' was being used as an accolade or a celebration of someone for an extraordinary task – promoting gender equality – which accentuates assumptions that men are not expected to promote gender equality (Mwiine, 2018).

De-centring discourses on men as "champions" of gender equality

In this section, I draw on interviews with women and show how some of them were reluctant to foreground men who support gender equity as 'champions', a category often used in global gender equality activism, even when they acknowledged men's necessity. I refer to women's framing of their

narratives in ways that refuse to buy into discourses on men as champions of gender equity as the 'de-centring' of 'male champions'. De-centring men as champions is motivated, in part, by women's concern not to accord men centre stage in arguing for women's rights issues even if they are strategically recruited to table parliamentary motions. In an interview with Susana, I asked her who male champions of gender equality were and how her organisation relates to this idea:

Researcher: If you can share with me this whole idea of 'male champions', who are they?

Susana: As an institution we have focused on promoting gender equality and women's empowerment. Ah, we have been doing this work for over 20 years now when you look at our document [the organisation's publication she had earlier shared with the researcher], and we draw experiences from other regional practices, legislation but also from the international community involving processes and events that do enhance promotion and realisation of gender equality.

Researcher: Hmm.

Susana: So, when you look at, for example, we were founded in 1993 at the time when we were looking at preparations for the Beijing Conference in 1995 but also at the national level there was preparation for the Constituent Assembly to review the 1967 Constitution so that we have a new Constitution.

Researcher: Ya

Susana: So, we saw these as strategic processes that women needed to really engage in, for us to have a strong voice on what could work for the women and how women could be protected. So, that is where our gender [activism] started from ...

Researcher: Ya.

Susana: Along the way we made successes as women, as you may see in that book.

Researcher: Ya.

Susana: A lot of things were done; the constitution was really considered as a very [gender] sensitive constitution. There were certain laws that were enacted to reinforce the provisions of the

constitution, the Land Act, you know, the Succession Act and the Domestic Violence Act came later. All these laws were advocated for by women, championed by women to reinforce some of the gender sensitive provisions in the Constitution (11 August 2016).

Susana pays little attention to the category 'male champion'. Instead she shares, at length, women's collective efforts in promoting gender equality in and outside Uganda. Her silence on 'male champions' becomes apparent as she gives a detailed account of what women have been doing over time, consequently putting women at the centre stage of gender advocacy in a context of male domination. The centring of women as subjects in gender equality advocacy is illustrated through Susana's narratives on women activists' hard-won successes such as active mobilisation of women to participate in global women's rights conferences as well as participation in the national constitution-making process and their consequent contribution to gender equity policy reforms in Uganda. She emphasised that these milestones were *championed* by women. It is thus surprising that the first time Susana makes mention of the term 'champion' is in relation to those who promote gender-sensitive legislation, not in reference to men.

The discourse on centring men as 'champions' was also resisted by Acol, an executive director of a women's organisation, in similar ways. I had asked her who male champions are:

Acol: May be just to go back a little bit before even the strategy of working with men. I think it is important to understand the context in which we were working and assumptions that we were working with as women's rights organisation in responding to GBV ... I had the opportunity to be at this organisation in the late 1990s, and I remember one of the things that we tried to do was to break the silence on violence against women, specifically because for a very long time, it was taken as a norm.... and that was our starting point even before we thought of bringing men on board ... " (22 August 2016).

Although I had asked Acol to share with me men's role with regard to promoting bills

on FGM and domestic violence, she requests to share historical insights into gender equality advocacy in Uganda to situate the narrative on men as ‘champions’ of gender equality. She thus takes the interview in a different direction, setting an agenda which downplays the foregrounding of men as actors in gender equity advocacy in ways that negate women’s historical activism against inequalities. She consequently centres the interview on the women’s past organising especially as demonstrated through a critique of the normativity of domestic violence. She alerts us that all this - inscribing domestic violence into the public discourse - happened not *because of* men but in spite of historical male resistance. As she winds up this stretch of conversation, Acol informs us that women-centred activist experience of confronting gender violence against women existed long before they engaged with the idea of bringing men on board to support gender equality.

There is a commonality in ways women framed their narratives, especially when asked who male ‘champions’ were. This included returning to the past to understand the present and imagine the future of gender activism. The narratives also point to an assertion of feminist power especially in the ways which women activists choose to construct and present particular forms of knowledge about their experience of gender equity. In their interviews, Susana, Maria and Acol highlighted women’s individual and collective mobilisation to push for gender equity and constitutional reforms, challenging the social normativity of violence against women, including the choice to engage men in gender equity advocacy as markers of “truth”. This historical approach privileged women’s past activism and enabled them to critique the ‘male champions’ discourse, especially imbedded assumptions that construct it as ahistorical and celebrate men in ways that negate women’s agency. I argue that women’s narratives do not necessarily dismiss men’s critical role in working with women to change oppressive patriarchal regimes. In fact, I reflect women’s view on men’s necessity in gender equity activism in the following section. Rather, women participants critique the politics of *labelling* supporting men as ‘champions’ in ways that have the potential to negate women’s

efforts in promoting gender equity. Women’s wider knowledge of gender equity as demonstrated through their individual and women’s rights organisations’ experiences plays out as a form of power especially as they appear to control what can be known about gender equity. Purdy (2015:4) reminds us that “in order to discover who in a particular situation has power, we must first look at who is creating and disseminating the “truth” of the situation, looking at how this truth is used to pacify others”. I elaborate on men’s presentiment of being pacified by women gender activists later in the article.

Strategic imperatives: male parliamentarians as advocates for gender-sensitive motions

While women participants resisted the idealisation of ‘male champions’, they, at the same time, pointed out ways in which they work with certain men for strategic reasons. Participants such as Janet, a former MP argued that when a man brings an issue of gender to parliamentary debate, it gains acceptability, and is taken seriously by the fellow males as well as female MPs: “men will listen and *then*, women will also listen” (17 August 2016). She implies that without such male approval, contentious gender issues, especially those (prohibition of FGM and Domestic Violence that criminalise male abuse of sexual power) that seek to transform men’s power would not be presented, debated and successfully passed into law in a legislative environment that is male-dominated. Consequently, Janet draws on everyday experiences in Parliament to demonstrate ways in which male voice - which risks reproducing men as audible and intelligible in relation to women - is drawn upon as a necessary ‘compromise’ in a male-centred legislature. Tapping into men’s numerical advantage is also highlighted by Maria, a programmes official at the Uganda Women Parliamentary Association (UWOPA). She noted that while the UWOPA was primarily formed to push for the rights of women in legislative processes, especially during the constitution-making process of 1994, women MPs have since then opted to mobilise male MPs’ support given their numerical advantage in the

House. Thus, building alliances with men, especially those receptive to gender equity issues became UWOPA's strategic choice as particular male legislators were included in UWOPA as associate members. Maria noted, "They [male MPs] are members because UWOPA saw that if they [UWOPA] are to succeed within Parliament which is male dominated, then you need to identify allies, men as allies" (19 August 2016).

Maria thus highlights women's critical reading of the legislative space, its potential to resist particular issues of interest to women and the strategy that would enable them to address this, that is, drawing on male support, on terms defined by women themselves. She shifts the conversation from 'male champions' which was the question I put to her at the beginning of the interview, to look at supportive males as *allies* of female MPs - men who do not necessarily experience the kind of disadvantage that women experience in politics but who, nevertheless, empathise with women's oppression. This conceptual shift moves the debate from 'male champions', a category that connotes masculine attributes of power, excellence, competition and domination to more collegial, empathetic, supportive and cooperative virtues that the notion of 'allies' embodies. Women MPs' alliance with male legislators as associate members speaks to complex notions of power, i.e. "power with", in promoting gender equity. I later elaborate on these power dynamics as part of women's 'surveillance' (Purdy, 2015:5) of men's behaviour which enabled women activists to monitor male legislators' actions towards gender equity debates, consequently generating particular forms of male support in parliamentary debates.

Women speak about 'selection' of male allies

Female interviewees also highlighted the ways in which they monitor male MPs' actions in Parliament, select and train those supportive of gender equity issues to promote these issues. They described the selection of male promoters of gender equality as a three-step process, that is surveillance, identification, and training (SIT) which enables women activists to monitor men who speak on their behalf.

Susana: ...what women [activists] did was to begin identifying some of the men who seem to be receptive to the [women's] advocacy agenda. And most of these people were easily identified within strategic positions of leadership where they had influence and where we were doing advocacy from.

Researcher: Ok

Susana: If it was something we were pushing through Parliament, then we would identify some of the vocal men in Parliament and *really* [emphasis] take time to make them understand what this agenda is, you know, how it could transform the lives of men and women (11 August 2016).

Susana outlines the steps by means of which certain men were selected to promote gender equality. This involved keen observation of the everyday lives of men in Parliament and scrutiny of their actions, particularly with regard to support for women's rights, select influential ones and train them (in both covert and overt ways) on the women's agenda. Similar strategies through which women monitored actions of male MPs with the intention of selecting some of the influential men to work with women MPs to promote gender equity bills are advanced by Maria. She noted:

Maria: What happens is that, we monitor debates on the floor of Parliament. If they bring an issue of national importance on maybe say maternal health, you see how many men are debating on it. What are they saying? Are they in support, say, of having midwives? That is how we identify them. Then we approach them and say look here we have this. That is one way of identifying them on the floor of Parliament. And then in workshops ...

Researcher: Ok.

Maria: You may invite 100 [participants], in there you invite 30 or 40 men and then you see how they contribute. Some will really contribute so [emphatic] negatively and you even ask yourself why did I invite this, oh my God why did I invite this man? But you learn, you get to know them and such people once they understand the basic principle of gender equality, that it is not a woman's thing, we are

talking about men and women, that is when they start appreciating (19 August 2016).

According to Purdy (2015), surveillance of this kind – collecting of information on men’s conduct in gender equity debates, incorporating them in the women MPs’ caucus as associates, and monitoring their legislative actions – is often based on particular motives such as supervision, issuing instructions, monitoring for specific behaviour/action and regulating or governing behaviour, which brings the concept in close relationship with power. In this case, women’s surveillance of male MPs affords women activists what Foucault refers to as disciplinary power – the ability to exercise control over the individuals they choose to work with through monitoring their actions. The lived experiences of women in promoting gender equity legislative agendas give form to theory.

For example, Fred, a former Minister and legislator shared with me how, he would at times be under pressure from the female Speaker of Parliament - whom he characterises as “a very serious gender activist with a Masters in women and gender issues” (2 August 2016) - to respond to specific gender concerns raised during debates on the domestic violence law. Surveillance not only enabled women to gain knowledge (as a form of political power) about men’s behaviours towards gender equity but it also motivated men, as demonstrated in Fred’s case, to speak to gender equity issues the way they did. This way, surveillance, though covert and subtle, produced certain kinds of male support which without some pressure they may not themselves be willing to render.

However, some of the male respondents rejected the idea of being ‘selected’ by women activists to critique gender inequalities on women’s behalf. Interviewees such as Christopher, Seba and Fred were reluctant to identify as ‘products’ of women gender activists’ selection and training. Instead, they highlighted their ‘longstanding’ interest in critiquing gender inequalities. I asked Christopher on how he came to sponsor the FGM bill:

Researcher: Did anyone identify you to champion the FGM legislative process?

Christopher: Me? Nobody identified me.

Researcher: But a number of women activists I interviewed talked about identifying men to speak about FGM issues on their behalf.

Christopher: Nobody.

Researcher: Nobody!

Christopher: Because even up to now I continue to push issues of gender. So, I don’t think it is to identify you to do that.

Researcher: Ok.

Christopher: Maybe they could say we ‘worked with’, maybe. Because if you don’t have the passion even if somebody identified you, you will not do it. If I am not persuaded and convinced that I should champion a cause like gender issues or such related issues, I don’t think anybody can identify me, and then I push it with passion, no, no, no. You must have the motivation and passion for something (11 September 2016).

Christopher explicitly rejects the idea of women activists recruiting certain men to promote gender issues on their behalf. He indicates that such an approach (of identifying men) presupposes that women are the only ones that are committed and that men have to be persuaded to promote gender equality. Christopher adds that assumptions that men are *just* identified and tasked to speak on behalf of women implies that men are not convinced, motivated or have no personal interest in promoting gender equality. Christopher’s reactions above underscored the need to re-conceptualise power beyond women’s exercise of “power over” men through controlling knowledge on gender equity, surveillance and selection of men to speak to gender issues, to admit more complex ways of understanding the place of men and masculinities in gender discourses.

In an interview with Fred (a former minister and legislator), I asked whether he was selected to champion the domestic violence bill and he rejected the idea. Instead, he argued; “for me, I was doing my work. Yes, as a legislator and a minister” (2 August 2016). It is interesting that while I identify Fred as a close associate of women activists, he is uncomfortable with this association, perhaps not only because of the assertion that women ‘select’ ‘male champions’ (an issue that Christopher and other male respondents disagreed with) but more so

because of the ways in which the title ‘male champion’ was being used as an accolade or a celebration of someone for an ‘extraordinary’ task – promoting gender equality – which may have accentuated assumptions that men like him are not expected to raise and promote gender issues unless they are prompted. Instead, Fred argues that whatever gender issues he supported in parliamentary debates, he was doing his work as an MP and a minister.

Tensions between women and men’s narrative accounts are in no way intended to confuse or belittle men and women’s role in promoting gender equity. Rather, they highlight complex and multiple ways of understanding (gender) power relationships. Women’s views/actions and men’s reactions to these bring to the fore, men’s attempts to subvert binaries embedded in the conception of gender in day-to-day parliamentary debates as synonymous with ‘women-only issues’. This way, male interviewees sought to problematise the position of men and men’s interests, needs, and patterns of practice as gendered. Women’s critique of the ‘male champions’ discourse alerts us to the rejection of similar gender polarities – men as central to gender equity achievements and powerful actors, without whom gender equity may not be achieved. On the other hand, women’s narratives highlight African women’s agency in negotiating patriarchal limitations they encounter in their everyday legislative context. As Obioma Nnaemeka emphasises:

African women are not problems to be solved [in this case by male champions]. Like women everywhere, African women have problems. More important, they have provided solutions to these problems. We are the only ones who can set our priorities and agenda. Anyone who wishes to participate in our struggles must do so in the context of our agenda (Mungroo, 2013:n.p.).

For these women activists, identifying influential men in a historically patriarchal legislature to represent women’s voice on gender equity issues – some of which have been passed into laws – is ‘doing’ feminism. Women activists’ compromises, negotiations, and collaborative alliances as they speak about ‘selecting’ men to promote

gender issues on their behalf, and men’s responses to these, remind us to *listen* to women and men’s experiences of everyday life (Nnaemeka, 2004). They alert us to the need to work towards a feminist politics which critically engages with patriarchy but does so in ways that do not reproduce men and women as homogeneous and binary opposites (Mwiine, 2018). But rather, as bell hooks (2004:xvii) puts it, in ways that are about the “need to live in a world where women and men can belong together.”

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