Women Climbing the Political Leadership Ladder in Africa: Does Policy Guide Practice?

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Abstract
This paper is largely based on literature review. Its aim is to explore the hurdles that women face in their quest for political leadership in their communities in Africa. The paper is guided by feminist philosophical thinking that argues for the interests of women. The major aim is to remind the world that they are paying leap services to the feminist course. The paper argues that although the world has passed and ratified progressive conventions and laws to ensure that there is social, political and economic fairness and justice in the treatment of women, there are serious gaps in the implementation of these policy and legal frameworks throughout the world, especially in Africa and other poor countries. The paper, thus, argues for a global audit and policing mechanism that ensures that governments abide by the gender rules and regulations that they claim to be their guiding frameworks. In fact, a complete overhaul of the prevailing mindset is required if anything close to fair and just representation of women in political leadership is to be realized. The challenge is on how to change this mindset as there are vested interests and centuries of social experiences.
Keywords: women, political leadership, policy, practice, feminist philosophical thinking, gender.

1. Introduction

As observed by Kirai and Kobia (2012), in Africa, traditional beliefs and cultural attitudes regarding the role and status of women in society are still prevalent. It has been established that from a traditional and cultural point of view throughout the world, women's role is typically of homemakers. Men; on the other hand, are seen as bread winners, heads of their households. Men have the right to public life (Sadie, 2005). In fact, Sadie (2005) argues that cultural attitudes are hostile to women involvement in decision- making positions. Thus, African women who aspire to be political leaders have to face barriers that are related to culture and cultural expectations, the choice and balance between work and family, and their own fear of success. This paper explores the experiences and challenges African women face in their quest for political leadership. The paper starts by giving a conceptual and philosophical framework guiding the argument in the paper before looking at the experiences in Africa so far using literature and oral traditions as points of reference. In this paper oral tradition simply means informal passing of information through the word of mouth.

2. Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by a feminist theoretical framework. The study is therefore couched in the discourses of gender and development. Such discourses locate their roots in the universal concept of human rights. According to Kolmar and Bartkowski (2005), feminism is a theory that calls for women's attainment of social, political, and economic rights and opportunities equal to those possessed by men. Feminism basically challenges the hegemony of patriarchy, which poses as the major impediment to the advancement of women (Musingafi and Mafumbate, 2014).

3. The Road Travelled So Far

In African politics, women have been marginalized because men monopolize the decision making structures. One underlying problem for women has been the difficulty in dealing with the inherent patriarchal structures that pervade the lives of people, the processes of state and the party (Nzomo, 1997). In many societies, women are still assigned a secondary place by the prevailing customs and culture. Kenworthy and Malami (2011) argue that cultural attitudes toward the role of women in politics play a significant role in accounting for variation in the degree of gender inequality in political representation around the world.

Worldwide efforts to promote women in decision-making roles gained prominence in the 1980s. They were further propelled after the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995 in Beijing in China where delegates called for an international effort to have women represent 30% of their national governments. Since then, many countries have indeed increased the presence of women in their governments. Some of the largest increases have been seen in sub-Saharan African countries. UNIFEM's Progress of the World's Women (2002) report shows that some sub-Saharan countries actually boast significantly higher levels of women's representation in parliament and national assemblies than most of the rich Western and Eastern countries.

According to Kiamba (2008), quotas for political positions increase female leadership and influences policy outcomes. The concept behind quotas is that reserving seats for women helps overcome structural challenges that depress female participation. Over time, this should give female politicians more experience and draw talented women into the political pipeline. The quotas are meant to at least ensure that women's perspectives are represented in government. But according to Coleman (2012), in practice, quotas do not always play out that way. They can be manipulated by political parties to their advantage, and as with any affirmative action programme, the very nature of the quota can tarnish the whole group of beneficiaries as second class (Musingafi and Mafumbate, 2014).

Crowe and Montgomery (2000) argue that a decade before the year 2000, women represented 11.3% of all legislators across both houses of parliament. In almost two-thirds of the world's single or lower chambers, women held less than 10% of the total seats. Only in five countries did women constitute over 30% of the legislature. In this respect, it could be said that women's presence in parliament was, more often than not, tokenistic. By the year 2000, Crowe and Montgomery (2000), further argue that women represented 15.7% of all legislators across both houses of parliament.

Many accounts based on theories of socialization have long emphasized the importance of the division of sex roles within a country, especially egalitarian or traditional attitudes towards women as political leaders. It is often pointed out that it is women themselves who socialise their children, both male and female, into a set of male privileges or who agree that harmful traditional practices be practised on their daughters. Women's as well as men's behaviour is embedded in the gender system, which provides the guiding principles for the organisation of behaviour and thought, and a value scheme that supports the dominant position. The system legitimizes principles where various components tend to perpetuate male domination from all angles of life. The political culture may influence whether women are prepared to come forward as candidates for office as well as the criteria used by gate-keepers like party members and leaders, the news media, financial supporters or the electorate. In traditional cultures, women may be reluctant to run and, if they seek the office, they may fail to attract sufficient support to win (Pande and Ford, 2011). Furthermore, one of the reasons there are few women in positions of power, is a lack of unity among women themselves. Since women would be vying for scarce political positions, they tend to see other women as a threat and are jealous of one another.

Culture and religion are also among important reasons why many nations in Africa with a strict Islamic background have often ranked at the bottom of the list in terms of women in parliament. For example, Ajayi and Peel (1992) state that North African politicians were adamant that the franchise for women went against religious and cultural customs.

Women played an important role in the politics of decolonization of West Africa after the Second World War. It has been proven that all mass-based political parties formed parallel women's sections in order to mobilize the support of women at the grassroots. In Ghana the Convention People's Party (CPP) was one of the most militant organizations. Women campaigned vigorously, supported boycotts and strikes and took over the running of the political parties when the male leaders were arrested. Unfortunately, when it came to time for distribution of rewards for loyalty, sacrifice and hard work, women found their male counterparts chauvinistic and they obtained almost nothing. Few women were nominated as party candidates and very few appointed to public office or boards and much fewer received government contracts. According to O' Barr (1984) as captured in Ajayi and Peel (1992), the constraints of European patriarchal policy reinforced the patriarchal structures of traditional, and Muslim, African societies with the result that the wide variety of women's indigenous political institutions were rapidly stripped of their former authority and status.

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, the most comprehensive treaty on women's human rights, which came into force in 1981, has been ratified by 165 states worldwide. It calls for equality between women and men in all civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights and it emphasizes the importance of equal participation of women with men in public life. States that are parties to the Convention are obligated to ensure women equal opportunities in the right to vote and be eligible for election. Despite these declarations, there remains a wide gulf between these official declarations and the representation of women in public life. By the year 2000, women constituted less than one tenth of the world's cabinet ministers and held one fifth of all sub-ministerial positions (UN, 2000).

While access to political positions may have improved, other barriers still exist for women in politics, which may inhibit their ability to effect significant change. Various factors are at work in limiting women's potential to aspire to positions of leadership. Sadie (2005) advanced the argument that at the bottom of the constraints that women face is the patriarchal system where decision-making powers are in the hands of men. In the African context, traditional beliefs and cultural attitudes regarding the role and status of women in society are still prevalent and many women are part of this system finding it difficult to dislocate from this culture and tradition lest they be ostracized. Despite women's education and entry into the job market, their role is typically one of homemaker. Men, on the other hand, are labeled as bread winners, heads of households and have a right to public life (Sadie, 2005). Confining women's identity to the domestic sphere is one of the barriers to women's

entry into politics. Politics by its nature catapults one into public life. Generally, cultural attitudes are hostile to women's involvement in politics.

Some African women such as the former president Joyce Banda of Malawi and the former vice president Joyce Mujuru of Zimbabwe were able to transcend cultural barriers and rise to positions of leadership in politics but more often than not, it meant having to juggle cultural expectations with their leadership roles.

Despite efforts made to ensure that female representation is achieved at all levels of governance, women are still under-represented in many government and non-government organizations particularly in positions of power and leadership (de la Rey, 2005). From statistics presented by Sadie (2005) on the Southern African Development Community (SADC) parliamentary structures, it is evident that the target of 30% representation by women in political and decision-making structures of member states set by Heads of State and Government in adopting the 1997 Declaration on Gender and Development, and to be achieved by 2005 was not met, except in South Africa and Mozambique. For instance, by 2004 the proportion of women in parliament was 15.4% in Angola, 15.9% in Botswana, 12% in Lesotho, 14.4% in Malawi, 17.14% in Mauritius, 25% in Namibia, 22.3% in Tanzania, and 16% in Zimbabwe while South Africa and Mozambique had 32.8% and 37.2% respectively.

One of the many achievements towards gender parity in the political sphere could be seen in Uganda during Yoweri Museveni's government. His government has been applauded internationally for the increase in the numbers of women in representative politics from the national legislature down through all five tiers of local government where women averaged 30% of local councilors. As of June 2001, 25% of the Members of Parliament were women (Goetz, 2002). These increases in women's public presence were accomplished through the creation and reservation of new seats in national and local government for women, the quota system. In addition the principle of affirmative action in administrative appointments aided contributed to the increase. This increase was achieved despite issues of politicized ethnicity and religion in Uganda. Currently, in Uganda there is the 'add-on' mechanism of incorporating women to politics and this has been based on the principle of extending patronage to a new clientele and also extending the state through creation of new representative seats and new political resources. The good part is that women are not the only beneficiaries of this approach.

Nevertheless, women in Uganda and elsewhere in African states have to stay alert and maintain their security in politics. One way as Goetz (2002) suggests is to guard against the relative autonomy from male or party interests which are hostile to a gender equity agenda and this can be done through the women's capacity to promote gender-equity legislation.

The greatest strides occurred in Rwanda, where after the genocide of 1994, women's representation in politics increased by almost 49 percentage points following the 2003 general elections. These were the first elections held in that country since its divisive 1994 conflict, and the resultant phase of reconstruction. In the aftermath of the conflict, Rwandans seized the opportunity to strengthen their democratic process and instituted a number of changes, including reserved seats for women in the National Assembly and Senate. In addition to the Inter-Parliamentary Union 24 reserved seats in the National Assembly, 15 women were elected to non-reserved seats, making a total of 39 women (49%) elected to the Lower House. This compares to the average of 15.1 as compared to rest of the world. Rwanda's constitution also reserves six out of the twenty seats in the upper house for women. The significance of this part of the constitution cannot be understated having almost reached parity, the National Assembly of Rwanda displaced long-time champion Sweden in the world ranking of women parliamentarians. This huge achievement can be attributed to the persistent lobbying of Rwandan women who helped draft the new constitution and also secured the creation of a ministry for women's affairs (www.developmentafrica.com/gender.html).

Changing cultural norms have been noticeable in some African countries. A trend has developed in a number of countries holding elections in the past few years, namely sensitising the electorate to the importance of facilitating women's entry into parliament. For the 2002 elections in Lesotho, special campaigns and workshops were held to sensitise women and men to adopt a more gender-balanced political approach. These campaigns are generally aimed at improving the image of women in politics, and in broadening cultural perceptions of women's role in society.

The more gender-sensitive parliaments would ensure that all policies and legislation, including the national budget, was analysed from a gender perspective. Finally, gender-sensitive parliaments include a special parliamentary committee in charge of monitoring obligations under national, international and regional human rights instruments, and are also entrusted with task of proposing amendments to existing legislation, or introducing additional legislation, so as to protect women's rights. These parliamentary committees enjoy a strong relationship to a number of non-governmental women's organizations, (Sorensen, 1998)

LeBeau on www.developmentafrica.com/gender.html says Namibia's quest for democratic governance has borne witness to significant strides in the sphere of gender equality through government policies and programs which embrace the domestication of international conventions and national policies as well as gender-related law reforms. There has been some progress in Namibia in the social and legal gender equality

movements, as well as great women's participation in positions of power sharing in particular women in politics. This trend towards women's participation in power sharing has been part of the overall empowerment of women. It appears Namibian women need a 'critical mass' of women in positions of power and decision-making to act as a catalyst for social change. In Namibia, the struggle for gender equality is not only played out at the social and legal levels, but also in the political arena. Therefore, development of greater gender equality must simultaneously occur at the social, legal and power sharing levels.

In South Africa, despite a history of violence and racial tensions, the country has also made promising advancements in women's political representation. Unlike Rwanda and Uganda which have constitutional quotas for women's representation in politics, South Africa does not have such quotas. The country depends on its 1996 constitution which only stipulates that the Republic is founded on certain values, including non-sexism. Despite a lack of explicit national quotas, women's representation in local government has been on the rise with a representation of 19% after the 1995 elections, 29.6% after the 2000 elections and an impressive 40% after the 2006 elections. The African National Congress (ANC), has since 1994, pledged a commitment to having women represent 30% of their elected officials at all levels. Before the 2006 election, they even said that they were committed to having equal representation at the local level. While they were unable to obtain an even fifty/fifty representation in all provinces, some provinces actually went above the 50% representation by women, while others fell a little short. This has resulted in other political parties being pressured to follow the ANC lead (www.developmentafrica.com/gender.html). This in turn has led led to a general increase in women's representation at the national level as well. Women represented 27.75% of the National Assembly in 1994, 30% in 1999, 32.75% in 2004 and an amazing 43% by 2009. So while South Africa does not have constitutional quotas like Rwanda and Uganda have, the influence of the voluntary quotas implemented by the ANC has helped push national politics towards close to equal representation.

The predicament of women being undermined in political circles is prevalent in present day Nigeria where women's participation is undermined due to socio-cultural, political and economic problems. *G*ender equality in relation to political position in Nigeria would have to be included in the constitution of the political parties and as a directive of state policy. Grassroots mobilization of women through political enlightenment was imperative in this African State, and many others for that matter, for effective political participation of women. Recently, the president of Nigeria, Goodluck Jonathan pledged that until the expiration of his tenure, he would continue to work towards the economic and political empowerment of Nigerian women. According to allafrica.com/stories/2013html, he indicated that his administration would do more to ensure that women were given greater access to elective offices and opportunity for wealth creation. This would be done by taking women empowerment a step further by encouraging more women to contest in future elections in the country.

The system of presidential appointments has been a key strategy used to ensure female representation in political governance. In Swaziland, women have gained access to parliament mainly through appointment by the King, and in many other African countries including Botswana and Zimbabwe it is often direct intervention by the presidents that redeems the situation for women in the parliaments (Sadie, 2005).

There are also examples of African women who had the courage to delve into politics when few women did and were instrumental in championing political reforms as well as forming new political parties in their countries. Notable are Wangari Maathai and Charity Ngilu who headed parties in Kenya during the 1990s. Maathai's political activities, such as the Green Belt Movement in her country, were often suppressed by the government as she was viewed as a threat to the state (Tripp, 2003). Charity Ngilu, on the other hand, dared to run for the presidency of Kenya in 1997, despite the fact that she came from a very conservative ethnic group in terms of cultural expectations of women. However, Ngilu had the support of several women's organizations (Tripp, 2003). Other countries, including Zambia, Zimbabwe, Lesotho, Angola and the Central African Republic, have women in the leadership positions as well (Tripp, 2003).

Besides some African countries such as Rwanda leading the continent and the world, in terms of women's representation in politics, others are falling very far behind. Countries such as Botswana, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Madagascar had less than ten percent of women's representation in their lower houses of parliament or national assemblies following last elections. Most countries still do not have constitutional or voluntary party quotas which may be one explanation as to why the differences between countries is so extreme. Liberia provides an interesting contrast because although they have a woman president, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, women's representation in the legislature remains very low at about fourteen percent. Nevertheless, the president has been pushing for legislation to implement a national quota for women's representation of thirty percent in the legislature but has not yet succeeded (allafrica.com/stories/2013html).

Religion also tends to cement cultural norms. As observed by Emmet (2001), all mainstream religions have stereotypical roles for men and women where women are perceived as less equal than men, often being kept separate in the way roles are assigned.

In her discussion of women's experience of religion, Emmet (2001) looked into the rituals performed for and by men in various religions including Hinduism, Islam and Christianity, finding that men are generally

valued and empowered by religion in many ways. Women do not enjoy such privilege, being disempowered by religious structures and practices. In other public arenas, women's access to leadership positions has been hindered by discrimination and stereotyping. It is amazing that women are more or less persecuted for seeking an executive position. This is largely as a result of society's attitude toward appropriate male and female roles. In some west African cultures and traditions, women have exercised power and even become chiefs but often their influence has been symbolic and restricted to the upholding of tradition. Traditional female leaders have often not had the same access to education as their male counterparts, making the transition to formal politics more difficult. Female chiefs are by no means widely accepted. For example, 2009 saw Elizabeth Torto standing in a chieftaincy election in the Kono district of Sierra Leone (allafrica.com/stories/2013html). The intimidation and harassment she received from the powerful all-male society in her village eventually meant she had to be flown to safety in a UN helicopter, which was pelted with stones. In Senegal, there is a backlash against female members of parliament. This shows that it is sailing is not easy once women have reached parliament. Women in public positions are frequently sidelined and undermined by their own parties and colleagues. They are subjected to attacks in the press, verbal harassment, and even physical violence.

Women have the potential to bring about change, but it is believed that they lack organization due to lack of time, given their multiple roles as bread winners, wives and mothers. African women also fear to raise their voices and speak out for fear of victimization supposedly by fellow women but also by men, given the cultural expectations of what a woman should or should not do. Female parliamentarians add vital perspectives to the democratic process, and can stimulate a step change for the advancement of women's rights, bringing attention to issues affecting women in their constituencies and proving that women are more than qualified to act as decision-makers.

The African Union has seen to be actively involved in advocating for gender parity in the political arena. According to Heyns and Killander (2007) the AU therefore developed a gender policy whose vision is to achieve an African society founded on democracy, gender equality, human rights and dignity and recognizes the equal status of women and men, girls and boys, with both sexes thriving together harmoniously, in a peaceful and secure environment characterized by equal partnership in decision-making in the development of the Continent. The AU's commitment to gender equality is rooted in the African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights. This commitment is reinforced by the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa, the Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality in Africa (SDGEA) and the Post Conflict Reconstruction and Development adopted by the Heads of State and Government in 2006. The AU Assembly adopted the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa in July 2003 in Maputo, Mozambique.

They also committed themselves to continue, to expand and to accelerate efforts to promote gender equality at all levels, and the determination to build on the progress that have been achieved in addressing issues of major concern to the women of Africa. And one of these major concerns is greater political participation in African States.

AU also recognizes United Nations' Resolution 1325 which is a landmark step that politically legitimises women's role in peace, security in conflict and post conflict management. The resolution contains actions for gender mainstreaming in humanitarian operations and DDR. It also stresses the importance of inclusion and collaboration by UN organs, civil society and the Commission on Status of Women. Resolution 1325 (2000) has emerged as an all inclusive resolution to address gender perspectives and women's specific issues in terms of peace, conflict resolution and post conflict management(DDR) and has already become a powerful tool which has already been domesticated by the AU (Heyns and Killander ,2007) .

Furthermore, African member states are signatories to the UN General Assembly land mark Convention for the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which was adopted in 1979. Although each of these global conferences gave birth to powerful recognition of the crucial role of women, both rural and urban, at family, community and national level, their specific contribution to development has not yet been recognised and evaluated.

The growing recognition of the leadership role of women in all spheres of development including their participation in decision-making at the international, regional and national level are reflected in the creation of platforms of action related to gender. It is in this context that the AU developed a gender policy that focuses on closing the equality gap between men and women in general and particularly addressing gender inequalities which have resulted in women's disempowerments and feminisation of poverty, in order to have a better understanding of the contribution of women in development.

In the AU gender Policy men and women, Heyns and Killander (2007) say, are expected to be the socio-economic-political glue for the integration of the African continent. The AU Parity Principle represents the most advanced global commitment to equal representation between men and women in decision making. Adopted at the Inaugural Summit of Heads of States and Governments of the African Union held in Durban, South Africa in 2002, its adoption demonstrated the commitment of the newly transformed African Union to

address persistent gender inequalities in the continent. Cultivating political will is necessary for sustaining an environment that enables the enforcement of the AU 50/50 Gender Parity Principle and the achievement of gender equality in Africa. The African Union ensures that all political declarations and decisions are geared towards the elimination of persisting barriers that militate against gender equality and women's empowerment.

More recently the adoption of the UN Millenium Development Goals in particular on Gender Equality and Women empowerment, has become an effective way to bridge the gender gap in various areas including political involvement. By embracing the MDGs, the AU hopes to stimulate member states to consider gender perspectives as a transversal theme to be taken seriously if they have to achieve the goals by 2015.

The crosscutting nature of gender requires an organisational and institutional set up that is habitually absent from governments. It demands mechanisms for co-ordination, co-operation, or at the very least sharing of information, which are for the most part either weak or non-existent in these entities. In some cases women's national machineries are not adequately staffed, they are also under budgeted and are frequently placed in a low hierarchical position that does not allow them to have a say in the way other governmental institutions operate.

4. Conclusion

The above discussion clearly shows that there has been a concerted effort to ensure female representation at all levels of governance as such representation is now recognized as a fundamental human right in many countries, and adheres to the principle of fair democratic representation. So far the main strategies used to address the gender imbalances in the various structures of the private and public sectors are affirmative action, the quota system where a certain number of positions are allocated to women, and through presidential appointments in the case of parliament and cabinet. It is therefore hoped that although it is taking a long time, once the situation of gender equality has normalized, the attainment of such positions will be through a competitive process.

It is also clear that, the objective of any gender interventions should not stop at gender equality but what is really sought is the promotion of positive synergies that will act throughout the social system as generators of development, in which all actors become stakeholders and all actors benefit. Acquiring gender equality in political spheres should be seen within a dynamic system of relations embedded in a development process that seeks to empower both women and man. Hopefully, this could help reduce male resistance for they would cease to feel threatened, and contribute to resolve the issue of women accepting the status quo out of fear of losing out in the change in other areas, such as economic security. There remains a lot of work to be done as it appears that it will take time to get to that stage due to the various challenges that confront women in public spaces. Whether the argument that increased women's political representation will bring more successful democracies in African States is true or not, most would not disagree that it is important for women to be an integral part of the political system in any African country.

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