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**The dilemmas of an African woman politician at the crossroads: law, reality and patriarchy**

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## Introduction

I was getting into unfamiliar waters, women had not previously been ministers. Only Elizabeth Bagaya and Mary Senkatuka had been in government. I was stigmatized. Each day, people would gather at the lift to wait for me and say, 'There she is' (Kadaga, 2000:7).

The public struggle by Ugandan women for recognition and participation in the political affairs of the country began in earnest in the 1940s with the formation of the Uganda Council of Women which first battled against unjust laws and later began the agitation for, among other things, increased participation of women in national politics (Tamale,1999:10). However, the women's movement while still in its nascent stages was affected by the turbulent political events in Uganda, particularly the banning of non-government organizations during the 1970s, but survived to grow into the diversity of civic organizations that operate in Uganda today.<sup>1</sup> At the international level the long-cherished principles of freedom and equality enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights were formally restated in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. In relation to participation in public affairs, Article 7 of CEDAW requires states parties to take all appropriate steps to eliminate discrimination against women in the political and public life of the country, and in 7(b) guarantees to women on equal terms with men, the right:

...to participate in the formulation of government policy and the implementation thereof and to hold public office and perform all public functions at all levels of government.

However, the 'appropriate steps' are not defined and are left to each state party not only to define but also to set the parameters thereof. Similarly, the level and extent of the participation remains at the instance of the state.

The Uganda Constitution, 1995, modelled on the convention above, provides for the principles of equality and non-discrimination in Article 21(1) which states:

All persons are equal before and under the law in all spheres of political, economic, social and cultural life and in every other respect and shall enjoy equal protection of the law.

As with the provisions of the women's convention, the standards of equality expected by the constitution in the political or other spheres are not defined, save that article 78(1) stipulates the inclusion of women as well as other marginalized groups in parliament.

The constitution provides for the appointment of cabinet and other ministers who must be either members of parliament, or persons qualified to be members of parliament, under Articles 113(1) and 114(1). Thereafter, persons nominated by the president must appear before the appointments committee of parliament for approval prior to confirmation of their appointments. The ministers hold office at the pleasure of the president.

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<sup>1</sup> Several NGO's like FIDA, National Council of Women, University Women's Association, women doctors, engineers, religious, business and other crosscutting NGO's exist today and are a key component of the women's lobby.

There is at present no specific legislation dealing with equality and non-discrimination, nor with the distribution of cabinet posts between men and women, or with the appointment, tenure, discipline or removal of ministers.

In the circumstances, the de-jure equality as promulgated by the constitution only made it possible for women to access the male domain but did not address how the women were to operate within it.

The first post-constitutional 1996 government in Uganda included a female vice-president as well as 16 female cabinet and state ministers out of 66. In response to my interview, a colleague evaluated the portfolios of women in the government and said,

I feel my appointment was for affirmative action, to increase the number of women in the cabinet...about real power, no, we are not in the right sectors, it is the men who are in the sectors that really matter (Kadaga, 2000:46).

### **Into the male domain**

In the history of Uganda the presence of women in high-level decision-making positions such as cabinet ministers has been erratic, inconsistent and fragmented, with two women ministers during the Amin era between 1971–1979, one between 1979–1980, one between 1980-1985 and a few others between 1986–1995 when the constitution was promulgated. Hence the environment and conditions in which they work, including offices and other facilities, working hours and schedules, the patriarchal attitudes and the support systems are not woman friendly. Since the entry of women into public life there has not been a deliberate programme or policy shift to accommodate the needs of the women despite a clear provision in Article 33(2) of the constitution:

The state shall provide the facilities and opportunities necessary to enhance the welfare of women to enable them to realize their full potential and advancement.

### **Working hours**

The working hours of the Ugandan public service are ordinarily 8 am to 5 pm.

However, it seems that the schedule of a minister was designed, or by practice and usage over time has evolved, for an incumbent who can afford to devote considerable time to the public, since there was somebody else (a wife) to manage the rest of his life at home and within the family. Both male and female ministers are expected to officiate at public functions on weekdays (including some evenings) on weekends and on public holidays. For the women ministers who still have to carry out their usual functions of wife, mother and care giver, the days can be endless:

As a minister, I work full time, even at weekends. I officiate at several functions especially on Sundays ... people think I ought to be free ... they do not realize that we are wives and mothers ... they want attention all the time (Kadaga, 2000).

In a survey in the southern African region, a Namibian woman member of parliament confirmed the unending work:

I spend the whole weekend before going away cooking dinners for the coming week, and making sure that the children have everything they need for school (Foster *et al.*, 2003: 85).

### **The ‘old boys network’**

An unusual feature of public governance and decision-making is the phenomenon of the ‘old boys network’, an almost exclusive yet regular planning, networking and decision-making caucus, composed of former school-mates, room-mates, long-time associates of various types in government who usually convene at the Kampala Club and other places.

However, this informal caucusing invariably takes place after the official working hours, in the evenings and weekends and involves sports as well as drinking. It is unlikely that a woman minister or legislator will be able to belong to the ‘old boys network’ because firstly most men and women in leadership went to single sex schools, and so could not possibly have been school-mates of each other, but even where they went to the same mixed school, it would be unlikely that a woman politician could keep up with the daily sporting, drinking and meeting habits of the men. Besides, neither the family nor society would accept that conduct. Drinking in public is viewed with a lot of trepidation by women politicians because of the risk of being labelled as a ‘drunkard’, ‘prostitute’ or ‘loose woman’ and as one colleague noted in an interview:

We are soon going for the budget, we must lobby the backbenchers we must drink with them, but how shall we do so? ... women are not supposed to get drunk, they will become the talk of the town. Men can get drunk and fall without any rumours.

And yet important alliances, strategies and decisions are made at these gatherings and one may find oneself faced with a *fait accompli* at a more formal meeting. A woman politician will usually wait for the formal cabinet or other forums to present a position and hope to convince colleagues about her proposal, or sit on the phone and individually contact various members for support. It has become apparent to the women politicians that governments are not run entirely within the formal structures. The existence of a vibrant ‘old boys network’ is therefore a dilemma for the women who despite their ‘legal equality’ are constrained by the semi-autonomous social field, from carrying out certain activities vital to their role.

The former Speaker of the House of Commons, Betty Boothroyd, described part of her schedule as a junior whip:

I used to sit all night, have a break for ten minutes, come back again at one o’clock and go on until five or six in the morning. I saw the dawn coming up over the palace of Westminster many times (Abrams, 1993).

The dilemma of a working woman is not very different except that in the case of a woman minister or legislator, it is probably that much harder because of the additional calls on her time, in order to complete work schedules as well as satisfy the appointing authority and the consuming public. Many colleagues echoed what women leaders habitually go through.

Family expectations of the wife/mother as caregiver seem not to have changed despite their additional public responsibility and it becomes clear if she wants both worlds, the family and the political, it is up to her to fulfil both and she must create the time for that.

A number of colleagues interviewed in the study agreed that all of us women leaders spend less time with our families than we did before. So those who had children over 18 years declared themselves lucky because their children did not require as much attention as the young ones. One colleague was quite disturbed and said:

I have failed as a mother, because my last child has been brought up by the housemaid, because I am always busy.

### **A deafening silence**

The complete absence of enabling legislation to support the equality and non-discrimination clauses that would govern the relations of men and women in public life exposes the women to unpredictable conduct by the men with whom they are expected to work as equals. As a consequence there are men who still assume that women are sexual objects and are available for their personal pleasure, notwithstanding their status in society. A number of colleagues admitted to having been subjected to sexually obscene and suggestive overtures (Kadaga, 2000). A workplace devoid of internal management regulations can be quite traumatic for the women:

Touching, pinching, caressing and hugging all involve physical contact with a woman. If they happened on the street, between strangers, a

criminal prosecution would ensue for assault. But in a workplace, people know each other and want to work in a pleasant atmosphere. In reality, manhandling a woman reflects the view that women's bodies are available to men (Hadjifotiou, 1983:16).

Conduct such as the above has the effect of disempowering the woman, who, not wanting to give in, will either withdraw from active participation in the programmes of the particular sector or devise other strategies for minimizing contact. This contact is, however, crucial because, as indicated earlier, the men ministers hold the key government portfolios. The absence of enabling legislation is a negation of the CEDAW committee's general recommendation 19 of 1992, whereby the states parties were requested not only to include in their country reports information about sexual harassment but to put into place measures to protect women from sexual harassment and other forms of violence or coercion in the workplace.

### **Patriarchy**

Patriarchy is a set of social relations between men, which has a material base and which, though hierarchical, establishes or creates interdependence and solidarity among men and enables them to dominate women (Walby, 1986:43). The patriarchal domination of women occurs both in the public and the private spheres. The private system of patriarchy is implemented mainly within the household and the larger extended family, especially in the context of the traditional African set-up.

## **Public but invisible**

One of the features of male domination in the public sphere is that women are not barred from the public space but among the indicators of their exclusion is the type of portfolios which women ministers are appointed to. In parliament they have to contest for leadership of the standing and sessional committees. Yet the appointment of women should not just be a matter of form but one of substance. In 1991, the United Nations platform on the role of women in public life identified the following unique contributions of women to public life:

- 1 A particular concern for justice and ethical dimensions of politics, derived in part from their having experienced injustice;
- 2 A talent for setting priorities and accomplishing complex tasks learned in the course of balancing competing demands for their time and attention, in their families, at work and in the community;
- 3 An awareness of the value of consensus and agreement because of their central role in social relationships;
- 4 A concern for future generations.

(United Nations Platform, 1999)

Upon appointment, they are expected to work as efficiently and effectively as their male colleagues. The population also expects them to bring visible services to their areas and the country at large. Yet generally they are already disadvantaged in that they are not in the key portfolios. Additionally there is no law that regulates the distribution of portfolios in the cabinet, so one has no legal basis even to demand a particular representation.

At the time of the study (2000) there were two substantive ministers in the Energy and Gender portfolios. The rest were either ministers or ministers of state in the office of the president, the prime minister, or in the other ministries. This means that while women have been elevated and have gained access to the cabinet, they do not hold the key portfolios and therefore any plans, programmes or services have to be negotiated through the male cabinet ministers or the substantive minister. Today the majority of women ministers are in the 'invisible' ministries such as minister of state for pensions, parliamentary affairs, security, disaster preparedness, Northern Uganda reconstruction, industry, elderly and disability affairs, education and defence. Although there are male ministers who are also ministers of state, working under other substantive ministers, their 'invisibility' is more than made up for by the 'visible' portfolios. The status of 'invisible' combined with the trivialization of their presence and activities in public life, both by the media and the public, further disadvantages them and makes their roles not only redundant but irrelevant.

With regard to the physical infrastructure and amenities, again the plans were made without considering the needs of women working in government offices. A colleague noted:

The structures of government were made for men. Just look around, even sanitary disposal bins are not available ... all facilities were designed for men.

In my particular case, while in the ministry of parliamentary affairs, after writing three informal minutes to the permanent-secretary over a period of several months, I threatened to table the issue of his failure to purchase a sanitary disposal bin for me at the top-management

meeting (the monthly meeting of the ministers, permanent secretaries and heads of departments). I needed the sanitary disposal bin to be placed in the men's toilet, which I shared with them. Apparently the need for the disposal bin had not filtered through to the minds of the permanent secretary (male) and the office superintendent (male). In the parliament buildings between 1962 and 1997, there was only one ladies' toilet reserved for the women members of parliament — 45 between 1989 and 1996 and 52 between 1996 and 2001. Today a few additional facilities have been provided for the women.

### **Gender roles reversed?**

For most women, becoming involved in politics meant seriously challenging the patriarchal discourse of family that constructs men as heads of households and women as those who are controlled by men (Foster, Makaya *et al.*, 2003:84).

The elevation of women in Uganda may have seemed abstract and far away at the time the constitution was promulgated but suddenly, after the general elections in which several women were elected (52 in 1996 and 75 in 2001) the public sphere became a reality in a number of homes and families. Almost overnight there were more women in 'traditional' men's jobs of decision-making and governance. The patriarchal society that had been socialized to accept gender-based divisions of labour and the strict allocation of tasks between the sexes, received a jolt to its attitudes, beliefs and practices, in the process having to make certain adjustments. However, gender stereotyping did not dissolve overnight and still persists in the attitudes and practices of the society. In a number of instances, family members were unable to come to terms with the new status and responsibility of the women. As a colleague related during the interviews:

The recognition and precedence given to me as a minister, rather than just as a wife in the family was too much for my father-in-law. He eventually began complaining that his son was not getting sufficient attention because I was busy with ministerial duties.

Male domination of the family is so ingrained that even after adult children are married, the patriarch of the home still exercises some inherent authority over all those who are younger than him. In the context of Ugandan society, the family does not refer only to the nuclear family but a host of other relatives who form the larger extended family. Subsequently, one's elevation is 'owned' by several people.

The father-in-law was obviously piqued that there now appeared to be a reversal in the gendered roles of wife and husband with the wife taking over the traditional position of head of the household and relegating his son to an unacceptable position.

Another colleague recounted a similar experience, but this time concerning her husband:

My husband finds trouble with the protocol. He is uneasy about my precedence, even though he does not say it ... at times we have to go to occasions separately so that he can feel comfortable and free ... At times people (in our village) hint that I should leave politics so that my husband can come in ...

In the case of a third colleague, it was her mother rather than her husband who was unhappy about her daughter's appointment. In her view, the work of a minister was so demanding that

it would break up her daughter's marriage. In the opinion of the mother, her daughter would not have time to cook, clean, nurture the children and carry out her sexual obligations in addition to meeting the demands of her ministerial post.

Some of the spouses and partners were happy and made the effort to assist their wives and partners in executing their responsibilities by taking on additional household activities or taking care of the children. Some were actively engaged in the election campaigns for their partners while others were disturbed by their elevation. As a fourth colleague reported:

My partner was not happy about my appointment ... he was suspicious about how I got the job in the first place ... and why was he not consulted about his wife's appointment? ... maybe I was promoted to cater for the interests of some big shot ...

The spouse must have felt disempowered by a loss of control over his wife's activities since:

... the social class and lifestyle of a family are determined mainly by the husband's occupation outside the family and he is expected to control what happens inside it, even to the extent of deciding whether or not his wife should have a paid job outside. Any deviation from this is seen as threatening the man's very identity. For example it is believed to be shameful for a husband to earn less than his wife, to be less tall, for the wife to have a stronger personality or greater intelligence (Rogers, 1980:16).

The spouse's attitude confirmed public perceptions as to the reasons women are appointed to high profile public offices — namely that they were expected to perform certain sexual roles.

Another colleague's experience was much worse:

My husband resents my being in government ... he makes me wake up at night to serve food. He even insults me in front of the children, often he says, 'a mere woman being a minister, huh!'

The man must have been totally convinced about the 'abnormality' of a woman doing a man's job and made it his business to remind and re-inforce the gender roles by ensuring that the 'minister' complied with the social etiquette of a good wife and submitted to her husband by serving him like any ordinary wife does, whatever time her 'boss' (husband) returns. In that way he would re-instate his authority over the wife who had temporarily escaped into the public sphere which was out of his control, and where she was somebody other than just a wife.

A Namibian colleague recounted her bitter experience:

When my party asked me to stand for local elections, my husband got angry and said, 'Why you? Why not me?', then he threatened divorce!

In the mind of this husband, he was threatened by the possibility that a 'mere' wife of his might actually become a community leader, so if she wanted to be a decision-maker (man's job) then she was not a good wife and had to make a choice, either to be a leader or a wife, not both.

In yet another version of male control over women, one of the women ministers was not consulted herself about her appointment, instead it was her husband, as she later found out,



who had been consulted. She was peeved about it and felt that even though she had the requisite qualifications and had been duly elected as required by the constitution, the final say as to whether she would or would not serve in the government lay with her husband. On the other hand, another colleague was uncomfortable and felt she needed her husband's consent to take on the job:

I had to run a home, the family, a ministry, how would my husband take it?

Her concerns were genuine because, despite the appointment, she was sure there would be no respite from her usual household responsibilities as a woman.

### **Public perceptions and media images of women in public life**

Since the liberalization of the media industry in Uganda in the 1990s there has been a proliferation of FM stations, with over 100 now broadcasting, the establishment of several media houses, and the growth of print and electronic media throughout the country, including several tabloids, dailies, and weekly and bi-weekly publications, all of which have to compete for readership and listenership.

Owing to lack of economic empowerment and resources, entrepreneurship and support, fewer than five FM stations in Uganda are owned by women and certainly no daily publication is owned by a woman. Ownership of the overwhelming majority of FM stations, print and electronic media is, therefore, controlled by men who determine what makes news and in what form. These men, socialized from an early age about the gender division of labour, determine through their editorial policies what stories will appear in the print media, what pictures will accompany them and what news will make the headlines on the radio and television. Also, because the internal management hierarchies are male-dominated, women are usually lowly reporters who are not in a position to demand space, or they are consigned to the 'women's page' as editors of fashion, cooking, beauty contests, childrearing, farming (producing for the family) or, in some instances, are used to write articles that denigrate women politicians.

While the print media may not have as wide a coverage in the rural areas of the country, radio stations relay the contents of the print media to the public and are a major link between urban and rural areas, and so can deliberately influence the population. This position was confirmed during a presentation to the Kampala Know-How Conference held from July 23 to 27, 2002:

It must be noted that even those with no direct access to the media still experience the so-called media multiplier effect, in that most people tend to be aware of and to discuss what has been disseminated in the media. Because the media has become a major source of information, it affects people's perceptions enormously. Most of what we learn, directly or indirectly is through the media. We therefore tend to view the world through the eyes of the media (Nassanga, 2002).

Women entering the political sphere therefore provide the news media with a problem as they embody a challenge to masculine authority. They also defy easy categorization since the scrutiny of women's work in our society is usually closely tied to their traditionally-defined roles as women. Images of women tend to conform to prevailing cultural perceptions of them and these help to maintain the patriarchal structure by insulating restricted and limited images of women (Commission on Gender Equality).

In Uganda the media reaches all age groups of the population including children, and it therefore reinforces their negative perceptions about gender roles. This influence is especially confusing to young girls for whom women leaders are role models. The media serves not only to disempower the female population which is just waking up to its potential in governance but also gives ammunition to the detractors of female emancipation and equality.

One of the major avenues that the media use, especially the radio stations (Uganda has a radio coverage of 485 radios per 1000 people), is a series of talk shows which feature 'topical issues' ranging from failed projects, the sins of the government, through to personalities. In such talk shows women leaders are discussed, their beauty, or lack of it, their clothes, their marital status or lack of it, and particularly juicy are the stories of women leaders' troubled relationships. Hints are made about women leaders sleeping about with unnamed high status personalities. In the 2000 study, a colleague had this to say about the image of women ministers:

A person outside politics does not believe that a woman who has a position and power has not slept with a big personality.

Another lamented:

The public associates us with sleeping with big men, yet we have to relate to all the sectors where these men are...wherever you turn, the sectors are headed by men (Kadaga, 2000).

In her book Tamale (1999) confirms this position:

Sexual innuendo is daily fodder in the Ugandan press. In November 1994, when Specioza Kazibwe was appointed vice-president of Uganda, *The People* carried a cartoon of her swearing in with a caption 'Thigh power'. *The Crusader*, (June 14, 1997) was more direct: 'Specioza Kazibwe is endowed with a bounteous bosom, a feature which is highly regarded in the beauty world as an attribute of sex appeal.'

In addition to the objectification of women leaders, the media also trivializes the work of the women ministers, depicting them as bunglers, inept and inefficient. In some instances the activities, functions and contributions of women leaders are belittled. For example, when the then vice-president of Uganda went to Karamoja (a semi-arid pastoral area of the country) to deal with the famine, the Karamojong washed the seeds that she had distributed and cooked them. She was blamed for several weeks in the press for not having anticipated the famine and for taking an army of ministers to assist her in understanding and handling the famine, implying that this was a waste of funds. It is, however, fine for the president to spend weeks working from different parts of the country!

In parliament, the contributions of women members are sometimes completely ignored and there is no mention at all in the media. Fortunately the official *Hansard* records their contributions and, since May 2003, the parliamentary press service has reported proceedings of the house. In other instances, the media has sought to place blame where none existed. I was recently astounded to have been reported in the *Monitor* newspaper as having let down the population by failing to contribute to the debate on the controversial sale of the Uganda Commercial Bank! It is a well-established practice that the speaker and deputy speaker do not contribute, take sides or vote in any matter because they are the presiding officers and are, therefore, arbitrators. I had, in fact, presided over three sittings of that debate. The editor was unable to explain how I came to be on the list of contributors.

The infantilization of women in political cartooning is rampant. Women are constantly depicted as little girls who are naïve and incapable of making decisions. For instance, in the *Sowetan* of 8 March 1998, Dr Nkosazana Zuma, the South African Foreign Minister is depicted thus:

She is dressed up as a little girl in a nice little dress and she has a bow on her head. She is smilingly giving a 'sweet' to a child with the words 'accessible health care' on it while pushing away a guy wearing a cap labelled 'pharmaceutical companies'.

The accompanying words to the cartoon are from a nursery rhyme. The dressing up of Zuma as a little girl and the nursery rhyme that accompanies the cartoon serve to infantilize her and belittle her political status. (Commission on Gender Redefining Politics)

A few months later, in an editorial, the South African *Independent* newspaper had this to say about Dr Zuma:

Zuma has been one of the most effective cabinet ministers in the Mandela government. It is precisely because of her strong character and the fact that she feels very passionately about her job that Zuma has attracted the kind of negative publicity that surrounds her (1 August 1998).

## **Conclusion**

It is very important for women politicians, activists and academicians to be aware of the real-life situations of women holding certain positions as a result of international or domestic conventions and particularly to ensure that municipal legislation is put in place to deal with the local conditions obtaining in each country.

Indeed, Nhlapo, 1995, observed that:

The tendency of the reformer and the activist to assume that the merits of human rights are self-evident and do not require explaining ignores the widespread scepticism in Africa about the international human rights system.

A number of countries have made serious efforts to incorporate and implement the women's convention, for example, Norway, which in 1978 enacted the Gender Equality Act, while Namibia enacted the Married Persons Equality Act in 1996. The absence of an enabling legislative framework negates the equality guaranteed and provides an excuse for inaction on the part of the state. However it also indicates the absence of an effective monitoring mechanism outside the government — a gap that civil society, together with Parliament, should address. Consistent and co-ordinated advocacy, sensitisation and consultative dialogue would help to bridge the gap between the women's movement and a community that is deeply patriarchal in its orientation.

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