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Widening the frontiers of democracy: towards a transformative agenda in Botswana politics

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Abstract

This article is about the struggles of Batswana women to attain gender equality. The article traces women's exclusion from public decision-making much broadly as a fundamental feature of the Tswana patriarchal structure. This situation tends to reinforce itself within the public sphere in terms of discriminatory legislation and other forms of marginalization. The favorable international climate and the institutionalization of the women's movement are identified as some of the factors that have helped to bring about positive change. However, it is urged that in order for their marginalization to be effectively addressed, the focus of the women's movement should not be on increasing numbers per se, but on transforming institutions. Women representatives should be at the forefront of pushing this transformative agenda.

Introduction

The under-representation of women in decision-making structures has become a subject of much discussion and debate in recent years for a number of reasons. First of all it is generally accepted that "a government by men for men can't claim to be a government for the people by the people" (Lowe-Morna, 1999:13). It is precisely because of this reason that the Inter Parliamentary Union Council resolved in 1992 that "the concept of democracy will only assume true and dynamic significance when political parties and national legislation are decided upon jointly by men and women with equitable regard for the interests and aptitudes of both halves of the population." (Ibid) Women's participation in decision-making is therefore about realizing equality and justice. .

It is known that women constitute the majority of the world's population and that contrary to earlier thinking, they are active in politics. They sing in party choirs, conduct door to door campaigns, recruit members for their parties, and many are responsible for organizing party activities such as national conventions, fundraising events etc.. Despite this they continue to be under-represented in decision-making structures. This under representation of women in decision-making structures in part reflects a wider problem of socio-economic, cultural and political marginalization of women throughout all societies and a major weakness of many liberal democracies. For example, women constitute the majority of the poor, suffer all sorts of discrimination and abuse in most cultures, and are virtually excluded from most public fora where decisions, which directly affect them, are made.

As Thenji Mtintso (1999:37) has so correctly observed, "this under-representation, discrimination and oppression surely must be an anathema to democracy. Nowhere, says a report of the United Nations (UN) to the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, is the gap between de jure and de facto equality among men and women greater than in the area of decision-making" (Ibid). Botswana has not been an exception when it comes to the under-representation of women in decision-making.

This paper is about the struggle of Batswana women to get representation in decision-making. Its focus is on the struggle to get representation in politics, and thus it does not look at the broader decision-making structures in Botswana society. The paper notes the experiences and gains made, and concludes by urging that the struggle for gender equality should not be just about increasing numbers of women in decision-making, but that there should be a transformative agenda which such women undertake to pursue once they enter decision-making institutions.

Women and Decision-Making in the SADC Region: A Situational Analysis

As we stated in the introductory section, the under-representation of women in decision-making has been and continues to be a global phenomenon. Table 1.1 summarizes the situation within SADC. Although figures for the DRC are not available, the general situation for the region is clear. The table shows that on average, the percentage of women in parliament is about 15 percent in three countries, namely South Africa, Mozambique and the Seychelles have the highest proportion of women parliamentarians. The same table also shows that with the exception of the Seychelles, the situation is almost the same at Cabinet level. In addition, Botswana is not substantially ahead of the newly democratizing states in the region.

Recently, a SADC publication also revealed that the situation of women's representation at local government level was similar. It noted that "Statistics at local government...range from 3.1 percent in Zimbabwe, 6.3 percent in Zambia; 18 percent in South Africa, 15 percent in Botswana to 25 percent in Tanzania and 41 percent in Namibia (the other two countries have quotas for local government) and 52 percent in Seychelles" (SADC, 1999:10). Since the last election in 1999, the proportion of women's representation at local government level in Botswana has risen to about 19 percent.

The same publication also noted that "women representatives at local government level in Seychelles and Namibia are the only example in SADC of the minimum 30% target for women in decision-making by 2005 being surpassed before the deadline; and in the case of Seychelles, of gender parity being achieved" (Ibid). In Botswana there are two women mayors out of a total of fifteen and there are about ten male deputy mayors and only five women deputy mayors. These figures illustrate clearly that the under-representation of women is one of the biggest challenges facing the SADC countries.

Table 1.1 Summary Table of Women in Decision-Making in the SADC Region

COUNTRY	WOMEN / PARL.	% WOMEN PARL.	WOMEN CABINET	% WOMEN CABINET	WOMEN DEPUTY MIN	% WOMEN MIN
ANGOLA	34/224	15.1 %	4/28	14.3 %	5/43	11.6%
BOTSWANA	8/44	18.0 %	2/15	14.5 %	2/4	50 %
DRC						
LESOTHO *	10/97	10.3 %	1/12	8.3 %	0/2	0.0 %
MALAWI	16/192	8.3 %	2/22	9.0 %	2/9	12.9%
MAURITIUS	5/65	7.6 %	2/25	8.0 %		
MOZAMBIQUE	71/250	28.4 %	3/21	14.2 %	4/33**	12.1 %
NAMIBIA *	14/99	14.1 %	3/21	14.2 %	5/22	22.7 %
S. AFRICA *	119/400	29.8 %	8/27	29.6 %	8/13	61.5 %
SEYCHELLES	8/33	24.0 %	3/14	21.4 %	(no such posts)	
SWAZILAND	7/95	7.3 %	2/15	13.3 %		
TANZANIA	45/275	16.3 %	3/23	13.0 %	3/23	13 %
ZAMBIA	16/158	10.1 %	2/24	8.3 %	2/28	7.1 %
ZIMBABWE	21/150	14.0 %	3/21	14.2 %	3/16	18.7 %

Note: * Upper and Lower House; ** new figures not available; CABINET: Minister's only

Source: SADC Gender Unit

Explaining the Under-Representation of Women in Decision-Making

There have been numerous explanations of why women the world over tend to be under-represented in decision-making structures. Thenji Ntintso (1999: 37) has summarized these set of explanations as follows: the first set of explanations focus on the socialization of women right from childhood. It is urged that "Women have been excluded or under-represented in institutions of power, like parliament, because right from childhood, their socialization directed them away from activities of power." Thus, according to this school of thought, women tend to be less ambitious than men and mainly because "they have

internalized society's expectations that they are not suited to policy-making positions." (ibid).

Other explanations focus on what are considered to be barriers to women's participation in politics. According to this approach, women do have the will and ambition to participate in politics, but "are systematically discriminated against by men in authority who refuse to promote them and by legislation which limits their opportunities for employment, training and so on" (Beckman and Amico, 1994:76).

An important set of explanations identifies patriarchy as a system and ideology for the continued marginalization of women. Even in democracies where there is supposed to be equality, patriarchal attitudes have become so entrenched that they are literally taken as natural. Patriarchy as a system or ideology permeates all institutional life. This is why even after women enter Parliament; it can not be assumed that they will advance the cause of women. Even Parliament as an institution is not without patriarchal influences and ideology. Thus Ntintso (1999:40) has urged "because Parliament is so patriarchal and power is so obvious, women are in danger of being swallowed by its culture, its ethos values and priorities. Women sometimes tend not to want to "rock the boat" and in that way act as "honorary men" in adopting male behaviors." Out of fear of being marginalized, Cooper and Lybrand, (1994) discuss with reference to Australia and New Zealand that women "fear moving against the mainstream and in that way find themselves compromising and promoting the very patriarchal agenda."

It is against the above that for a transformative agenda is required as the only way of guaranteeing an end of the marginalisation of women. As Rai (1998) has rightly concluded, "women's representation in the parliament, while important on the grounds of social justice and legitimacy of the political system, does not easily translate into improved representation of women's various interests. Thus, access is important, but what is required is even more than participation, but concrete actions that will result in a transformation of institutions and power relations in the whole of society"

Women in Leadership

According to Setswana culture and tradition women are not expected to assume leadership positions. Actually, it starts right from the family or household level where the traditionally designated leader is the man. At a community level, chieftainship ran along the male line. There is a Setswana idiom which says, *ga dinke di etelelwa pele ke manamagadi* which translates to "women should not lead". The traditional meeting place or assembly at village level maintained the same principle. In traditional Tswana culture, women were not even allowed to attend this assembly where major decisions about the community were taken. As the reader will appreciate, virtually all societies, including some of today's established democracies, went through this stage.

The Decade of the 1980s and its Lessons

During the 1980s, the prevalent view in Botswana, and indeed internationally (articulated by the Women in Development School) was that women needed to be integrated into development, and that women's concerns such as issues of health, and education were not political issues. The other prevalent view of the time was that women did not participate in politics and further that they lacked both the capability and interest to do so. At face value, statistics seemed to bear testimony to this view. For example, out of 36 parliamentarians in 1984, only 2 were women. While 14 members of the cabinet were men, only one was a woman.

In a radical departure with the trend of thought and what was known (or assumed that time), two members of the Election Study Project concluded following primary research on the issue of Gender and Politics in Botswana, that there was actually no need to "integrate" Botswana women in politics as they were already engaged in politics. In addition, that "women are as interested in and competent to exercise political power as

men” and that where their participation is deemed as limited, “this is a comment on the overall limits to the democratic character of the Botswana Political System” (Molokomme and Kimble: 1984:11)

From the evidence generated, Kimble and Molokomme (1984) concluded that “in terms of conventional, general political indicators, there is no evidence to show that women in Botswana are any less interested or active than men. Second, that on the evidence of activism and general contribution to areas of great importance to society, (many of which have consequences for the political sphere in so far as they take the burden for social welfare off the shoulders of government), women clearly show a developed sense of responsibility to the nation which is wrongly described as “apolitical.” But they also noted the absence of women in the sphere of leadership and high office.

In addition, women’s NGOs adopted a “non-political” agenda and, there was nothing in either manifestos of political parties or from women organization’s self declared objectives which suggested that this problem of lack of women in positions of leadership needed to be corrected.

The Citizenship Amendment Bill and the formation of *Emang Basadi*

In 1982, parliament amended the Citizenship Act. Prior to this Amendment, the Act allowed Botswana women married to foreign men to pass on their citizenship to their children. Law allowed such children to declare their preferred country of citizenship when they reach the age of twenty-one.

With the Amendment, such children could not possibly have their mother’s citizenship, until after they turned 21 and qualified to apply for citizenship like any one else. It has to be added too that this Act applied to all children born within wedlock between Botswana women and foreign men irrespective of whether such children were born in Botswana, or whether their fathers were stateless.

This legislative amendment did not go down well with a group of women who felt that the Act: (a) was a violation of their rights (b) discriminated against them on the basis of sex.

After a few consultative meetings with various key leaders in the country such as some members of the House of Chiefs, this group of women decided that there was need to form an association to promote women’s interests. The primary goal of this association would be to fight/challenge all laws, which discriminated against women. In fact, the group noted that the Citizenship Act was one among several pieces of legislation discriminated against women. In addition, the association would seek to promote women’s interests in general. Subsequently in 1986 it was registered with the Register of Societies and given the name EMANG BASADI. This name was derived from the National Anthem, and its literal translation is “women stand up.” The formation of this association signaled a turning point in the struggle of Botswana women against discrimination.

The Unity Dow case, institutionalization of *Emang Basadi* and the adoption of a clear political agenda

Once registered, Emang Basadi adopted a similar approach to the one already practiced by the veteran Women’s Associations such as the YWCA or BCW. It conducted a number of workshops for members and the general public at large. The major purpose of such gatherings was sensitization of the public and to ensure that issues of discrimination are problematized. At this stage, the agenda was broad, ranging from law reform to the maintenance of children born out of wedlock. The second aspect of the strategy was “silent lobby” where the association tried to persuade key decision-makers such as members of the House of Chiefs, the president and some members of Parliament of the need to repeal discriminatory legislation.

This strategy largely did not work. The method was quite low key and naturally ignored. Secondly, the organization had a limited urban membership of working women a

factor which led many detractors to ignore it or dismiss its concerns as simply "issues of a few educated women who are married to foreigners", or who are simply "anti-Tswana culture." The private media was also quite small and at its formative stages. It largely ignored this organization. What was even more problematic was the fact that Emang Basadi was not institutionalized. It simply operated as a voluntary network of dedicated friends. It was this lack of institutionalization that initially limited the potential of Emang Basadi to have any meaningful and sustainable impact.

It was not long before some of the concerned women realized the limitations of this method of operation. Consequently, one woman, Unity Dow made history in 1992 by challenging the Citizenship Act in court. She urged that the Citizenship Act, by denying her the chance to pass on citizenship to her children actually discriminated against her on the basis of sex. Incidentally, the Botswana Constitution had always been silent on gender discrimination only mentioning race, creed and religion as grounds on which one could not be discriminated against. To some people the constitution's omission was not accidental. Indeed, they argued gender was a ground on which discrimination was allowed; otherwise it was urged the constitution would have been explicit on that matter.

The Dow Case was to become a landmark case. Not only was it an important constitutional case, it was a test case of whether the omission in the constitution was accidental or purposeful. It has also become a very important case nationally because it marked a turning point in the struggle for gender equality in Botswana.

The Dow case has become a political landmark also because it "demonstrated to the world that the constitution of Botswana, while not specifically mentioning sex as grounds on which discrimination is not allowed, does in fact guarantee equality between the sexes. It was land mark also to the extent that it forced to the forefront of national political discourse debate on the tensions between the dictates of liberal democracy on which the post-colonial republic was founded, and the dictates of custom and tradition as well as common law...which were reflected in other areas of law-making and practice" (Selolwane, 1998:397).

The court ruled in favor of Dow, but the state appealed and still lost the case. However, it took the state more than 2 years to finally implement the court decision to amend this law. It was as a result of this delay and rumors of a planned national referendum on the issue of entrenching gender based discrimination in the constitution that Emang Basadi and other collaborating partners decided to change strategies. Emang Basadi had institutionalized itself in 1993, setting up an office and employing full-time staff. It had nevertheless continued its unfocussed agenda.

The turning point was the decision to adopt a clearly political agenda. With the 1994 elections around the corner, it was decided that women should now force their issues into the national agenda, and that these issues can only be forced into the agenda through a political programme.

Why a Political Programme and of What Nature?

The Emang Basadi leadership realized following the delayed implementation of the court's decision that the organization's strategy so far had focused too much on challenging decisions that had already passed the formulation stage and that this was one of the reasons why their requests had so far been either ignored or trivialized. The envisaged political strategy was based on the principle that would raise the political awareness of women and empower them with the tools and techniques of how to influence policy formulation.

At this stage, a number of factors seemed to favor the women's cause. The first was the international or global environment and the fact that 1995 would mark the end of the Decade for Women and that countries were getting ready (around 1993) to go to Beijing in 1995 for the World Conference on women where they would have to share with others what they have achieved since the 1985 Nairobi Conference on gender equality. At this stage, women's organizations were pressuring government to ratify internal conventions

on gender equality and to commit itself in very clear terms. Secondly, with the end of the cold war and the shift in global issues and concerns, the issue of Human Rights, including Women's Rights as Human Rights could not be wished away any longer. Thirdly, the democratization wind was sweeping Sub-Saharan Africa, including Southern Africa. Issues of equality, gender balance in decision-making and the need for building accountable and transparent governments was emphasized the world over.

An additional development of the early to mid 1990s was the end of apartheid in South Africa and the adoption of a constitution regarded by many as quite progressive. Suddenly, Botswana's image of a "shining model" of democracy appeared quite limited when compared with the progressive constitutions adopted by these newly democratizing states, namely South Africa and Namibia.

Thus, by 1994, *Emang Basadi* and its collaborating partners had identified some issues and anomalies with Botswana politics. These included the following:

- (a) That women represent the majority of voters but do not hold political leadership positions.
- (b) That women are the back bone of their respective parties leading in such party building activities such as choir music, fundraising, canvassing and door to door campaigns etc.
- (c) That many women are totally ignorant about how they can use their vote to push for their demands and change their situation.

The Political Education Programme

Against the above background, the organization and its partners decided on an interventionist strategy. This would be a strategy to empower women to enter politics where it was hoped their demands and interests would then be represented and protected by themselves. This strategy has the following components:

- (a) *Developing a woman's manifesto*; to summarize the issues and demands as articulated by the women themselves.
- (b) *Targeting women's wings of Political Parties* - to push for change within the political parties
- (c) *Candidate's Workshops*: to sensitize women candidates and to give them assistance on electoral issues that are of concern to women.
- (d) *Voter Education*: to raise public awareness about the value and power of a vote and how they can use it to empower themselves.
- (e) *Advocacy and lobbying authorities for change.*

The strategy was first introduced on a pilot basis in 1993 and has since been broadened and runs across the country on even non-election years.

Accomplishments so Far

A number of changes have occurred in Botswana since *Emang Basadi* adopted this clearly political though non-partisan agenda. It would be naive and an over-statement to attribute all the changes to *Emang Basadi* and its efforts. Nevertheless, it would be a major distortion if these changes would be mentioned without attributing a large part of this success to the tireless efforts of *Emang Basadi* and its collaborating partners. Some of these are as follows:

The issue of women's rights and equality between the sexes is now a household topic in Botswana both at a leadership level and at the level of ordinary citizens. This is not to say it is an accepted issue by all across the board, but simply that it is one of those issues which are now discussed broadly and increasingly accepted by many. In its March 1999 survey, the Democracy Research Project recorded that roughly 70% of all those polled believed that women are as capable as men to run for office.

The implementation of the decision of the Court of Appeal in the Dow case was done in 1995. Other related pieces of discriminatory laws have now been amended. The government commissioned a major study to review all laws discriminating against women in 1997. Government is already considering the report.

Since the 1994 elections, political parties have now made it a tradition to include a section in their manifestos on gender/women. This is a new development.

The National Policy on Women in Development and a National Gender Programme and Plan of Action were developed and adopted.

The Women's Affairs Unit has now been upgraded from a unit to a department.

The government is now a signatory to the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against women. By so doing, government is committing itself to removing all discriminatory pieces of legislation (against women). In addition, the Southern African Community leaders have committed themselves to the Gender and Development Protocol. Botswana is a signatory. Botswana has also signed the Beijing declaration and thus committed herself to its implementation.

Following the 1994 elections, the then President Sir Ketumile Masire nominated two women into parliament. Two had won the election. Thus, there were a total of 4 women in parliament out of a total of 40 parliamentarians. In the past the maximum number of women parliamentarians has been two.

During the 1999 elections six women won elections while two were nominated. This has brought the number of women in parliament from four to eight.

Women have not only been under represented in political leadership positions. They have been under represented at senior decision-making levels such as at the top of the civil service or in memberships of boards. Until the 1999 elections, there was only one female permanent secretary. This has changed after the recent appointment of more women to senior government positions. Two more women have been appointed to permanent secretary positions, and a woman has recently been appointed governor of the Bank of Botswana.

Prior to the 1994 election there was only one female cabinet minister. This number went up to two in 1994, with an additional appointment of a woman to assistant minister level. After the 1999 elections, two women hold full ministerial positions and another two are assistant ministers. Effectively then, the number of women in cabinet has increased to four.

Which Way Forward for the Women's Struggle?

In the previous sections, we observed that the women's movement has made tremendous strides in advancing its cause. We noted that a number of factors have been at play here. First and central was the efforts of the women themselves. Here, the formation of Emang Basadi, its institutionalization and partnership with other stakeholders has been very important.

Secondly, the favorable international climate; i.e. the democratization wave, the UN efforts as reflected in the Beijing Conference and its output, and the favorable support of the donor community. Without these, women would never have been able to finance all their activities. Swedish SIDA, Norwegian NORAD and Dutch SNV stand out as having played a key role.

It would be wrong to suggest that now women have accomplished their mission. Certainly they have made a good beginning. However, available evidence indicates that in order for women to make even more progress, they should pay attention to their own party's primary elections, and critically evaluate whether the present electoral system actually serves them well.

The Role of Primary Elections

Almost all political parties in Botswana conduct primary elections every election year to select people who will then represent such parties in the national elections. Almost without exception, these primary elections, tend to produce fewer women candidates than one would have liked. Experience from the recent 1999 elections shows that women do badly at primary elections. The question is, what is the cause of this problem when it is actually the women themselves who dominate grass-roots party organizing in all these parties?

As part of its political education project, Emang Basadi organized a conference in November 1998 with the theme "Women Preparing to Run for Primary Elections."¹ The primary purpose of this conference was to review existing strategies (of the various political parties) meant to increase the number of women in political leadership. One of the interesting revelations at this Conference was that women were generally ignorant and uninformed about the policies, procedures of their party primary elections. It was concluded that this situation could reflect two things. "First, either women have very limited idea of how their parties conduct primary elections, or the parties themselves have not developed procedures that candidates could share with the conference."

At a report back conference following the primary elections of most of the parties, women reported a number of problems that they faced in trying to run for primary elections. These included the following:

- (i) *Personal weakness*: that some women actually lack confidence.
- (ii) *Failure to prepare in good time*; some women started late in their preparations.
- (iii) *Lack of resources*; many women do not have access to the necessary resources such as transport, or even money to reach as many voters as possible.
- (iv) *No knowledge of the Primary Election Systems/procedures* Some women were not knowledgeable about their party's primary election procedures. This situation was aggravated by the simple fact that some of the parties have no clear-cut procedures and some are outright undemocratic. This means that the playing field is far from level for many of the women.

Evidence from the various political parties in Botswana shows that primary elections have been a major reason for breakups of some of the parties, and they are the reason why some key personalities within political parties have either resigned to form their own parties or join existing ones, or even contested as independent candidates. Both the ruling party and opposition parties have been equally guilty of undemocratic primary election practices. For these reasons, and many more articulated at the two conferences, it is clear that women's wings of political parties, and the major party structures have to ensure that the primary elections systems put forward are democratic, transparent, and that they should truly reflect the will of the people. At the present moment, there is not sufficient evidence to ensure that this is the case. Unless this is done, traditionally disadvantaged groups such as women will continue to be left out.

The Electoral System and the Political Empowerment of Women

One of the most interesting developments that has accompanied the democratization wave sweeping Sub-Saharan Africa has been increased concern and questions about the relevance and role of a country's electoral system in promoting democracy within that particular country. This discussion has compelled the pro-democracy community to assess the merits and demerits of the winner-takes-all versus proportional representation etc. Although more research is still required in this area, it has been strongly suggested that "there is an overwhelming evidence to suggest that women stand a better chance of getting elected under the proportional representation system rather than the constituency-based system." (for further detail see Molomo in this issue). Explaining why this is so, Lowe-Morna (1996) notes that "candidates focus on the party and its policies, rather than on a particular individual. This works in favor of women - at least in getting their foot in the door - because of the inbuilt prejudices against women."

In a paper presented at the SADC/EU Conference in Gaborone on "Strengthening and Consolidating Democracy in SADC through the Electoral Process." Molokomme has argued that "the experience of SADC countries supports the observation globally that the proportional representation or list system is more conducive to the representation of women than the constituency based system. Two of the three top countries with regard to

the representation of women in parliament (South Africa and Mozambique) have proportional representation systems.” Although more research may still be required to learn more about these countries, it is reasonable to conclude that the time has come to critically review the role of the electoral system in promoting gender equality. As we noted earlier, it is interesting that as many as 70 percent Batswana surveyed indicated that they believed that women are as capable as men to run for office, yet, when the same women stand for primary elections, the results reveal a bias towards male candidates.

Conclusion

In Botswana, not much discussion has occurred about the relevance and role of the current electoral system in promoting democracy. After the experience of the 1999 elections, and given what we know so far, there is need to revisit all aspects which might be pertinent to the advancement of the course of increasing the number of women in politics. Once the issue of how to increase the number is resolved, there is need to ensure that those same women are sufficiently sensitized and that the original mission of sending them to parliament or council to articulate women’s concerns is not lost.

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