

V. GENDER AND GOVERNANCE - A NEW AREA

We touch the untouchables

By Thenjiwe Mtintso*

Women's oppression and domination exists in all societies. That domination is embedded in all aspects of life, is treated as if it is natural, has always been and will always be. And yet it is not natural but a social construction that is transmitted through socialisation from generation to generation using institutions such as the family, education, religion, the state, media etc.

Policies, laws, rules, that direct and are binding to society, emanate from governments and parliaments. Governments and parliaments are thus not just decision-making centres but the power that rules society.

But governance, (the exercise of political power over society), its institutions e.g. government and parliament, its systems and processes are patriarchal in character. Men and their values dominate this sphere, and policies, laws and relations within are gendered. All these impact on, and are impacted upon, by all other spheres in society including the media. Most governments and parliaments are supposed to be champions of democracy. And yet, nowhere, says a UN report to the 1995 Fifth World Conference on Women in Beijing "...is the gap between *de jure* and *de facto* equality among men and women greater than in the area of decision-making." That gap is an anathema to democracy and human rights.

Media is a product of society. It reflects power relations, values, ideas, attitudes, culture and practices of any given society. It impacts on, influences and shapes society. It also reinforces and entrenches power relations and gender stereotypes. This it does by what it reports or not, who and how it reports. The objectification, commodification and subjugation of women are at their worst in the media.

Entry of women into politics and decision-making arenas is a problem to society and to the media, the reflector and reflection of societal stereotypes. These women become a problem because they challenge the social fundamentals i.e. patriarchy and masculine authority. They throw overboard all that we have been socialised into believing. This is why they are directly or indirectly labelled. The labels reflect the underlying assumptions about where they should be – in the private sphere.

Women in politics will either be completely ignored or where they are not, they will be projected as either foolish having entered the decision making sphere by

default, through nepotism, "horizontally" or through their beauty. In reporting about such women the media will either patronise them, ridicule them, treat them as impostors to the decision making throne, as bodies not minds, appendages (wives, partners) and not independent individuals or as tokens or beauty objects giving colour to the decision making sphere. On the rare occasion that some of them are recognised, they will be projected as superwomen, exceptional, and rare species. At those moments they will be accepted into the male world as "honourary" men.

Show me a male politician who has ever been described as the "husband of", whose attire is described in detail or who is asked about who designs his clothes or asked about how he balances parliamentary work with his family responsibility.

Government regulates society and the media moulds society's attitudes. The two "lord" it over society, acting as untouchable, neutral benevolent agents keenly interested in governing and informing society. And yet they are neither neutral nor above society. They are "lords" of patriarchy. Governance operations exclude women from its institutions and the media confirms to society that they neither belong nor have a contribution to make there. While there may be no conspiracy between these patriarchal institutions, the outcome and consequence of their operations is the marginalisation of women from decision-making and the entrenchment of gender relations in society.

By now you surely are not still wondering why it is important for GL to pry into the workings of the "untouchables". GL is committed to the transformation of gender relations in and through the media. It has veered into the domain of governance and the media to expose how these "lords" of patriarchy interact to marginalize women.

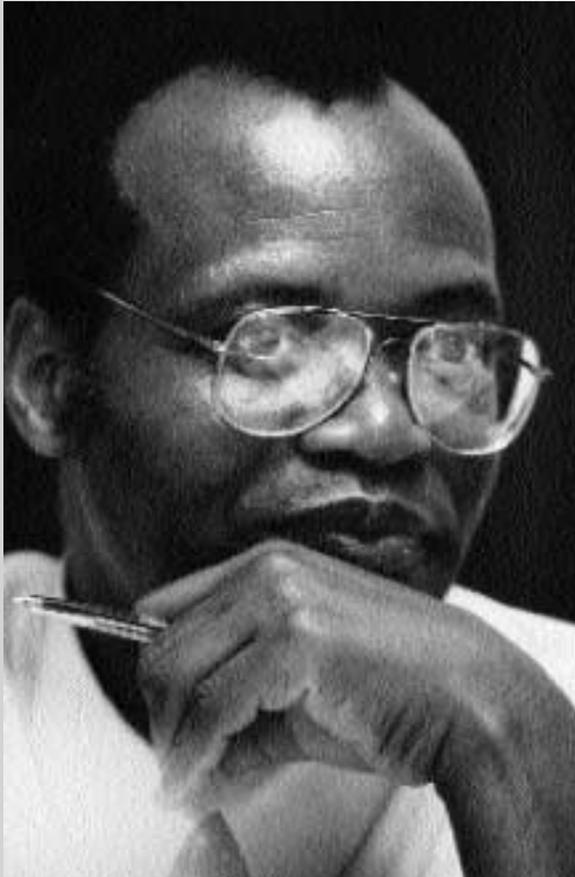
There is an intrinsic relationship between democracy, gender equality, governance and the media. A complex web of patriarchal relations, interactions, intersections and pretenses, governs these systems. We intend to expose these. We want to dig up the obstacles strewn in the path of women's access to decision making by society and institutions such as the government, parliament and the media. We shall explode the myth that women belong to the private sphere and have no business in the public sphere.

Our first project, as this report reflects, is an answer to the irritating question of what impact do women make in politics. That is but a starting point. We challenge the untouchable and henceforth they will never be the same.

Gender and governance in Southern Africa: Up to now strategies for increasing the presence of women in decision-making in SADC have focused on numbers. In collaboration with the SADC Gender Unit and SADC Parliamentary Forum, GL has initiated a research project on the qualitative difference that women make to governance in Southern Africa and will launch a media campaign based on the research findings. The Mott Foundation and the EU Foundation for Human Rights are supporting this ground breaking study- the first to go beyond numbers and assess the impact that having a “critical” mass of women in decision making brings in those Southern African countries, and in those areas where the 30 percent target has been achieved.

Spreading the word

By Muna Ndulo*



Gender Links participated in a major international conference on: “Democratic Reform in Africa: Taking Stock of its Impact on Governance and Poverty Alleviation” held at Cornell University, Ithaca, United States of America from October 25-26, 2002.

The Institute for African Development, Cornell University, in collaboration with The Poverty, Inequality and Development Initiative, Cornell University and Center on Democratic Performance, Binghamton University organised the conference which assessed the relationship between democratic reform and development and the progress made in these two areas. While the link between governance, development and poverty reduction is gradually being accepted world wide, some interrelationships remain open to debate.

The conference was designed to highlight the types of issues that cut across both the political and economic reform spectra, and to identify how well they are being addressed in the quest for development and good governance. It also discussed obstacles to democratic reform and areas of future focus. The conference aimed to contribute to policy analysis and development. A major emphasis was on how to increase the level of control of disadvantaged people, especially the poor women and children, over their lives. It also analysed successful civil society strategies and the methods they employ to advance good governance and poverty alleviation.

Participants included senior practitioners, policy makers and researchers from all over the world including Southern Africa. GL Executive Director Colleen Lowe-Morna gave a paper at the conference entitled “From: Rhetoric to Reality: Gender and Governance in Africa.” In the paper she provided an overview of gender and governance in Africa; examined the different arguments that have been put forward for equal representation of women in decision making; examined the links between access by women to decision-making and delivery on the ground; and examined what some of these links are through examples of legislation and economic governance initiatives in African countries that have strong representation of women in governance structures.

She highlighted the need for more research on the qualitative difference that women bring to decision-making in Africa. The proceedings of the conference will be published as a reader on Democracy, Governance and Poverty Alleviation.

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FUTURE DIRECTIONS

As the research is yet to be completed, it is difficult to determine precise directions that will be taken. Preliminary indications include:

- ✓ Publicise the research findings, making maximum use of GL's media connections
- ✓ Communications training for women in decision- making (see IV).
- ✓ GEM commentary and opinion service (see IV).
- ✓ Media training on gender and governance linked to upcoming elections in six countries in the region.
- ✓ Special initiative on women in local government- one of the most neglected and yet important areas of women in decision making.

