Malawian women’s participation in State politics: what are the constraints?

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Malawian women lead their communities as democratic representatives, by participating with men in state politics – but not to the extent that they could. Contemporary formal state politics is constructed as a masculine domain, and only a small minority of women find space within this sphere. In seeking to explore reasons why this is the case, a qualitative study was conducted with 15 women from Zomba, Lilongwe, and Blantyre, who have been active in state politics over the years. The findings offered in-depth insights into the limits and constraints inhibiting women’s involvement in politics. These relate to economic income and education, as well as to gender stereotypes and gendered expectations of women in the family and society.

‘Women’s success in the political arena and the continued entry of women into the political elite are fundamental to changes in society’s attitude towards leadership and in women’s perception of their own abilities as political leaders’ (Ahern et al. 1997, 101).

Women’s active involvement in state politics is a very important element in filling the gap between women’s and men’s social and economic positions in Malawian society. The majority of those who hold public office in Malawi are men. Feminist frameworks warn us that men do not always have women’s interests at heart; men are also not best equipped to make decisions on behalf of women (Rai 2000).

My research on Malawian women in politics is a modest contribution in this regard. I remember vividly that once, when having a conversation with a friend on what life is like for most of us Malawian women, her reply to me was ‘Ku Malawi akati entertainment a zimayi ndi Maliro ndi ma kitchen party basi’ (‘In Malawi if we talk of entertainment for females, we talk of funerals and The Kitchen Party’). As crude as this might sound, there is some amount of truth in it. While her comment was ostensibly about entertainment, its underlying meaning is that women are relegated to the private sphere of the home, and to participation in non-political public events.

Sitting in one of my gender studies courses at the University of Pretoria, I thought back to this conversation, and questioned whether there was any difference between women’s lives in the city of Zomba when I was growing up in the 1990s, and women’s
lives there now. In my opinion, nothing has really changed; women’s role is still that of the caretaker, and is limited to the private domain.

My motivations for doing the research which underpins this article stemmed from the belief that when women analyse and develop understanding of their problems, they are able to gain ownership over the process of change, as they take control of their lives. It is hoped that the distribution of the results of this study could serve somehow to encourage the political participation of young women in Malawi, as well as the other Southern African states. Finding out the reasons why many capable women in Malawi have remained within the boundaries of ‘female roles’, and not made it to decision-making positions, should go a long way towards solving the problems they have faced. Once women find their way to public positions which enable them to lead society, it can be anticipated that many of women’s specific concerns, which arise from their positioning in the gender division of labour – questions of provisioning and caring for the elderly and children, of bringing up and replenishing the labour force, of equal rights and justice between the sexes – will be taken into account when formal and state institutions pass laws and define social and economic policy. It is these laws and policies which shape the lives of women, determining their life chances, and shaping the futures of their children and other dependents.

In my article I will trace some of the reasons why Malawian women do not participate fully in formal, national-level state politics. Why has Malawi, since independence, had only one female presidential candidate? The first and only female presidential candidate stood briefly in 2004, before eventually withdrawing from the election race. Why, despite women’s visible interest and efforts in participating in politics, have only a selected few made it into government posts? Only 13.6 per cent of the seats in parliament are held by women (UNDP 2006). Despite this, women in Malawi still show incentive to enter the world of politics. For instance in the 2004 elections, 46 female candidates out of 363 stood as independent candidates in the elections, representing a larger percentage than in any single political party (Khembo 2005). The study was also carried out in order to increase awareness of the many constraints that Malawian women face, in order to suggest ways in which policy makers can support the goal of gender equality in Malawi.

The context and background

Malawian women have been returning to the political stage. The change came after domestic unrest and pressure from Malawian churches and the international community. This led to a referendum in which Malawians were to choose and vote for either a multi-party democracy or the continuation of the one-party state. On 14 June 1993, the people of Malawi voted in favour of multi-party democracy. On 17 May 1994, Bakili Muluzi, chairman of the United Democratic Front (UDF), was elected state president of Malawi in the same elections (Posner 1995; Kaspin 1995). The
The foregoing reveals a long history of political activity. Malawi has been a democracy since 1993, but unfortunately, given the exclusion of more than half of Malawi’s population (that is, women), from full participation in democratic processes, Malawi can hardly be defended as ‘democratic’. Contrary to popular belief, the institution of a democracy does not automatically lead to equal representation of women and men in government.

The Malawian woman is well socialised into the idea of voting and political participation. When one goes to political rallies, Malawian women are usually in the majority. One then wonders why, in spite of women’s obvious and apparent interest in politics, and the fact that they are the majority in the population, their participation lags behind that of men.

I would argue that the nature of women’s political participation reflects conventional gender roles and relations: women are followers and supporters, not leaders. Most Malawian women, from the time they are born, are socialised to be subservient to men, and conditioned to take up household responsibilities and subordinate positions. This, then, affects the nature of their participation in the public sphere. It also sets up barriers to individual women’s attempts to enter political life as leaders. Traditional and cultural beliefs exist which hinder women’s self-worth, and influence society’s perception of women not being anything more than housewives or mothers. Thus, a woman politician in Malawi is not just a politician, but someone who has deviated from the norm of what womanhood is about.

The research

By using a qualitative approach, an attempt was made to build understandings of the particular situations of Malawian women. Fifteen women took part in this study, between the ages of 25 and 80. The women were selected and identified through existing social networks – snowball sampling (McIntyre 2005) – which allows one to identify members who in turn identify others who might be able to share important information with the researcher. All the women who were interviewed were politicians or had participated in politics in the recent past. Ten of these women were still active in politics, and the other five women had moved on to do other things such as corporate and private-sector work. The women were interviewed in the districts that they were resident in: Lilongwe, which is the capital city of Malawi; Blantyre, an industrial city; and Zomba, which was Malawi’s first capital city.

The women’s vivid stories, drawn out in the interviews, illuminated ways in which politics are linked to a set of activities. The women explained how both the ‘public’ and the ‘private’ are connected in one way or another. In this way, the data offered the researcher access to women’s ideas, thoughts, and memories, in their own words.
Constraints to women’s political participation

In response to the question of why women remain a small minority active in state politics, the women discussed the strong cultural constraints and belief systems that relegate them into non-political roles. Socialisation processes result in men having chauvinistic attitudes towards women’s capabilities, and women often fail to support other women who try to challenge these attitudes. Women’s lack of support to each other is often not seen as a part of this social system; rather it is seen as natural. These factors affect all women’s ability to become active politically as leaders. In addition, women in poverty are affected by additional structural limitations (such as inability to find time to pursue political activities, and limited education). All these factors come together to keep women controlled and entrenched within positions of subordination. Below, I go into more detail about each of them.

Cultural and traditional beliefs

Cultural and traditional beliefs appear not only to have hindered women’s political participation, but have also kept women out of many sectors of life that could have led to their empowerment. In the interviews that were carried out, the women spoke of how a woman’s place is already set and predetermined by the fact of being born a female.

*as much as she would want to work hard, [a woman] has to divide her time between her family and her profession ... when people are promoting women ... they say that if we choose this woman, at sometime she’ll have to take leave for maybe 3 to 9 months, and they ask themselves if they can afford that. Women might be voted against because of such reasons; even if they say they are willing to take up the challenge*

(Ms C, 2006).

Even if the nurturer role leads to prejudices against women being employed or playing public roles, women accepted the role as a natural one. Ms I spoke of how at one time, she nearly passed up a chance to get involved in politics because she was pregnant. It was her husband who encouraged her to remain committed to politics.

Women’s role in the political institutions of society could be different if men shared the social responsibilities which follow the biologically female role of pregnancy and birth. Women who spoke of the need to travel away from home usually identified a ‘loving and understanding husband’ as necessary and critical for the creation of a supportive environment. For instance, Ms N said: ‘As a wife, I know I have a good husband who understands me, if he didn’t I should have stopped all these things a long time ago ... I am a married woman and when I am late, not that my husband complains but people say how does she get home when she is late like that, not knowing that it is part of the job and when I am finished I can get back home and be happy with my husband’. Women spoke of how their husbands understood their
being away from home as part of the job of being a politician, but pointed out that although their husbands accepted this, most of Malawian society would question their allegiance to their families.

Paradoxically, being seen to be married is an important factor in women’s political success. This contradiction arises because it would appear that Malawian society is yet to trust single female politicians, and that marriage is one of the important components for Malawian women to have a ‘favourable’ political career. As a researcher my observations have been that married female politicians are better listened to, and are taken much more seriously, than the ones who are single. This could be due to the fact that most African traditions champion marriage over singledom; there is a social ‘checklist’ that a girl is to be marked against to make sure that she is marriageable by a certain age (Mkamanga 2000). Ms G spoke of a general reaction by men towards females entering the world of politics: ‘I have been around men who question a woman’s motives the minute they see she is in politics. They come up with all sorts of silly ideas, saying ‘awa kodi anawankhumudwitsa ndani?’ (‘who disappointed this one?’).

Single women entering politics are said to do so because of the following reasons: that they are bitter towards men, that they are looking for a mate, and that they are loose and confused. Marriage, on the other hand, serves as vindication for acceptable female politicians. By the mere fact of being married they are deemed to have entered politics for positive reasons and nothing else. As a result, married female politicians are awarded some amount of respect and are taken seriously, as compared with the unmarried politicians. Only one respondent, Ms R, who was a divorcee at the time of the research, believed that she did not need a man’s support. She said it was men who held successful women back and she was of the opinion that men want a weak, meek wife.

All in all, Malawian society still has to accept that it is every citizen’s right to choose to be a politician or not, whether they are a woman, a man, single, or married.

Some of the women politicians described their inclusion in politics in contradictory ways. They sounded proud of themselves but, at the same time, uncomfortable, apologetic, and in some instances grateful to the men for bringing them in. Ms I asked: ‘Nanga ife ndife aayani kuti atisankhe kuti tikhole mundale?’ (‘Who are we to be chosen to participate in politics?’).

She clearly did not believe that women’s participation, let alone her own participation in politics, was normal. Some Malawian female politicians believe that women are generally sensitive and emotional; therefore they lack the capability to evaluate political issues by themselves. Politics is often associated with strength, deceit, and fighting; all associated with men.

Socialisation processes
Cultural beliefs were said to stand in the way of women’s political participation in terms of the way boys and girls are socialised, be it at home or at school. Ms N stated:
'The cultural background we have teaches us that the man is the head of the family, we have been taught that the boy is stronger than a girl, and we have discriminated against girls, which leads to boys being leaders in everything'.

Most of the women interviewed spoke of their own lives and how they were treated differently from boys. They spoke of how they were asked to do certain domestic chores at the expense of their schoolwork. This eventually blunts the girls' ambition. Girls are constantly preoccupied with the range of tasks set for them. Obviously this does not include politics. The female politicians interviewed said that this also affects women’s self-esteem. The women spoke of how the Malawian government still had a long way to go to transform such attitudes.

The Malawian government could also be accused of perpetuating such cultural beliefs, in the way female ministers are allocated to so-called ‘private ministries’, as compared with the male ministers who are allocated ‘public ministries’. As of this moment, female ministers in Malawi are found in ministries of health, gender, education, and information, compared with the male ministers who are well represented in the key ministries, including the defence and justice ministries.

**Lack of mutual support among women**

The research also suggests that a reason for Malawi’s lack of women politicians is the ‘pull-her down syndrome’ among Malawian women (Mkamanga 2000). The female politicians in the interviews stressed that women were difficult to work with, as compared with men. Women were constantly trying to outdo and out-maneuver each other instead of working together. Ms M had this to say: ‘Culturally, women are like that. They don’t want to facilitate another woman’s advancement. Women are jealous – they feel they would rather be under a man than another woman. Even the women in senior positions have a critical attitude. They always want to see what it is you are doing wrong, rather than right’.

My research suggests that if Malawian female politicians were seriously to take a stand and campaign for other female leaders, this would in itself make a big difference to the numbers of women in Malawian politics. Most respondents were unclear about how society could empower women, but generally said that traditional beliefs ought to change. Yet the groundwork for such wider change needs to be laid by women themselves: women should stop working against each other, falling victim to stereotypes that undermine them. Women leaders need to work together, and support and inspire other women to move into key positions of power.

**Women’s relative poverty**

Women living in real poverty stand little chance of entering political life because of the barriers posed by lack of many different kinds of resources. Their time is taken up by the need to generate income, and they often lack sufficient education (discussed in more detail in the next section) or training. Without this background it is impossible to
enter formal political institutions, which operate on the assumption that all political leaders have a high level of literacy, knowledge of the world, and the confidence which goes with these. In most African countries, poverty is ‘feminised’ (Gewecke 1996) – that is, women usually live in more difficult economic circumstances compared with men in the same social group.

In this research, the method chosen – of interviewing women who were already experienced in political life – meant that very poor women were not the key focus. However, women in the research did recognise that women’s lower economic status, compared with men, held them back from leadership positions in politics. The women who are currently in politics come, more or less by definition, from more affluent backgrounds. However, even they had found it difficult to fund their political activities. They spoke of the need for sufficient funds, in particular in relation to campaigns. One needs to have a lot of resources to carry out a good campaign. Here, patronage relations with husbands could come in useful. Ms O stated, ‘I am privileged for having a good successful husband. Finances during campaign time were not a problem to me because of this’. These women are expected to compete with men who are generally positioned in a more profitable part of the labour market and therefore are able to command more funds and are able to fund their own campaigns.

**Limited education**

As suggested in the last section, lack of education acts as a major limitation to women’s participation in politics all over the world. Limited education is a major factor that stops most Malawian women from participating in politics. The female politicians interviewed for this study spoke of how women are considered less capable than men. This view stems from the general observation that most women lack an education.

In Malawi, literacy levels of males are higher than those of females, at 74.5 per cent male compared with 54 per cent female (UNDP 2006). This, of course, is due to a number of reasons, all related to economic poverty. In a context in which hard choices must be made, many families prefer to educate the boy child rather than the girl child, reasoning that boys are more likely to get higher-paid work as adults. The gender division of labour means that girls typically do domestic chores in the home, while boys are free from this responsibility and encouraged to do school work. Until there are wider changes in the labour market and in the gender division of labour, Malawian women are more likely than men to remain uneducated. In turn, they are effectively barred from adopting leadership roles in the country’s politics, or development in general.

**‘Dirty tricks’ against women politicians**

The women that were interviewed for this study claimed that, in Malawi, there are certain individuals in politics who thrive on making women politician’s lives
miserable, in an attempt to drive them out of politics and keep other women out altogether.

The women told how they were given unflattering names, how they had to work three times as hard as men to prove themselves; how at times male colleagues went beyond fair competition and ‘played dirty’. Male colleagues did not give them the respect they deserved, but rather flirted with them and expected sexual favours from them. Ms G, speaking on how she constantly fends off men’s advances, explained: ‘... despite the fact that they know I am married. They would discuss it among themselves that my being in politics, “a man’s world”, was because I enjoyed their advances, and that it was the reason I was there – “The women who wanted to stay married are at home with their husbands”’.

Ms O spoke of how a group of men came up to one of her campaign rallies, and were screaming insults and allegations, saying she was immoral and incapable of being a role model to young girls. ‘I remember at one time I was standing with my supporters and as they were passing they were saying, “Hule uyo, anabeleka mwana wapatchile” (“She is a whore, she had a baby out of wedlock.”). But I said so what if they call me a whore, I know I am not. There were a lot of negative things being said about me, trying to portray me as a bad woman in that sense then I couldn’t be a role model’. However, it is clear that a majority of women would rather stay away from situations in which they have to face such attitudes.

What, then, motivates women politicians?

Some of the women politicians attributed their involvement and interest in leadership to ‘a natural born’ drive to succeed. Ms N proudly looked back on her political career as being successful and satisfying. ‘It was a great, great success, and a good choice ... if you have gone through politics, there is nothing you can fail to do in the world. Politics is the climax of anything you can do ... Being a cabinet minister, you talk about the country, roads, bridges ... Politics makes you feel really strong’. A number of the married women who were interviewed mentioned that their husbands had supported and motivated them to join politics.

Others gave a greater emphasis to the fact that political life gave them a part in developing Malawi. The women saw this as a worthy cause. Ms R expressed disappointment in that she had stopped being part of this process of development when she lost the elections; she blamed the government for keeping her out of the process. ‘It is a pity that the ruling party is not using me, because I was definitely going to help the government. I have successfully opened up business and people would wonder how a female can do all that. I am always successful in whatever I do, whatever I touch turns to gold’. Ms R believed that despite her having lost the elections, the government should have found a way to use her, because she was a determined and successful person that they could not afford to ignore.
Respondents related development to the attainment of gender equality. Ms G focused on the key issue that women are likely to represent and further a shared agenda which will benefit women as a collective group, whose interests are not necessarily apparent or a priority to male politicians: ‘women need to remember that men are not going to do this for us, we need to do it ourselves’.

Women political leaders potentially inspire young girls and women, through being role models. They also demonstrate to men and boys that women can take on leadership roles in public life. Ms N said: ‘The presence of women will not only help government but they will also encourage young girls. The women in parliament will be role models for girls. Girls will know that such positions are a possibility to women as well’.

Ms G wished that the Malawian vice president was a woman, pointing out that many other African countries have elected females to that position.

Conclusion

This study has highlighted the experiences of Malawian women in politics. It has offered a range of insights into what political participation entails for women in Malawi. Women’s participation as active citizens and high-rank politicians has not yet been normalised, and women will have to strategically and consciously seek to find ways in which their voices in formal state politics are heard and respected.

Encouraging women to lead their communities and societies through participation in politics is not an easy task. Simply incorporating women into politics will not guarantee women’s empowerment. Women face various challenges in order to stay in politics, and additional challenges if they seek to play a meaningful role by representing women’s gender-specific interests.

There are a number of strategies that could be adopted to increase the numbers of Malawian women leading and participating in politics. These include the need for more effort to challenge underlying attitudes and beliefs about women’s role in society. Malawian women’s status needs to change before we even start talking about gender equality in political life.

The greatest battle lies in efforts to transform cultural and traditional beliefs and staunch ideas that say there is a dichotomy: ‘private woman’ versus ‘public man’. Powerful and well-known female politicians can be encouraged to go around schools and talk to girls of their experiences in politics. Schools could also run competitions among themselves, where they can choose bright girls with leadership abilities to be mentored by female politicians.

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