



Women, elections, stories and style: female politicians strengthen their voices

By Paula Fray, Patricia A. Made and Mercedes Sayagues



Abstract

Throughout 2008, 2009 and into 2010 women and men throughout Southern Africa and beyond will go to the polls. Elections are big news in Africa, just as the coverage of politics and elections worldwide become fodder upon which the mainstream news media thrive. Women's entry into the political arena as female politicians championing their parties' agendas or other political, economic and social issues; as political candidates vying for public office; or as voters who use the power of the vote to make a statement about the issues that are important to them, are stories that have emerged in Africa's media. This article looks at some of the representations of women's political issues, and at identities of women politicians that emerge in the media during elections. Based on the Inter Press Service (IPS) Global News Agency's "Strengthening Women's Voices in Elections in Africa" Project, this article reviews some of the outcomes of pro-active engagement between the media, female politicians and women's activist groups.



Key words

gender, governance, elections, media coverage

Women politicians face media challenges

Sarah Palin and Pamela Mburia live thousands of miles away from each other on opposite sides of the globe and their life paths may never cross. However, the two women have something in common: as aspiring female politicians, they both have had their battles with the media. Looking back on her bid as the first woman running for vice-president of the United States on the

2008 Republican-party ticket, Palin lashed out at the media, which she felt had done her more harm than good. Her reading habits, her spending spree on clothes and her family's personal lives made sensational headlines and stories. Palin believes the media did not give her a fair chance and that the media constructed an identity of her for the American public that was not authentic.



ILLUSTRATION: FRA

Attack of the Lipstick Pitbull

Polls show women voters are willingly surrendering to Sarah Palin, writes David Osborne

Democrats may not want to believe it but there is fresh evidence that the addition of Sarah Palin, the "hockey mom" governor of Alaska, to John McCain's ticket is winning him women voters in droves.

In a tidal shift that could prove decisive, enormous numbers of women who previously favoured Barack Obama have had their heads turned since the introduction of Palin, according to a new ABC/Washington Post poll.

The Palin phenomenon shows no signs of fading, in spite of a drip-drip of news revelations that hardly flatter her.

This week, *The Washington Post* reported that after becoming governor in 2006 Palin started charging taxpayers a "per diem" allowance for days she spent in her private

the mansion in Juneau that she has never cared for.

Nor does there seem to be much room left for Palin to defend her claims, repeated in Republican television advertisements, that she opposed the now infamous "Bridge to Nowhere" project in Alaska, with clear evidence that, at first, she supported the wasteful scheme.

But for now, at least, women seem to be falling in love with Palin. They are not the only ones. A Gallup poll this week showed McCain opening a 15-point lead over Obama among independent voters who are not members of either of the main parties.

But it is the hockey mom wars that will preoccupy the generals of both camps. Although white women favoured Obama over McCain before the conventions by 59-42 percent, the

41 percent. That is a 20-point change. "The poll is wrong," said David Plouffe, the Obama campaign chief, on hearing the numbers.

"I don't think you'll find many others that back up a 20-point reversal. We certainly are not seeing any movement like that. Palin, from time to time, particularly on the demographic stuff, can have some pretty wild swings."

At Obama HQ in Chicago they certainly hope so. Yet there can be no doubt that the race has been transformed since the end of the St Paul convention and that it can be traced back to the anointing of Palin, the "lipstick pitbull", and the binding rock star status she has since assumed. McCain's campaign events are drawing crowds the likes of which he has never seen before.

The question, however, is whether it is a love affair that will

avenues of retaliation, including deploying women surrogates to try to plug the dam. Hillary Clinton was in Florida speaking for him on Monday and plans are afoot to send forth Governor Kathleen Sebelius of Kansas and Senator Claire McCaskill of Missouri soon.

Rather than attacking Palin directly they will try to focus voters' attention on matters of policy in particular those women who voted for Clinton, whose policy priorities are just about diametrically opposed to Palin's.

If the McCain managerie cannot believe his luck, it is not admitting to it. Strategists have seen a doubling in just seven days of "Women for McCain", female grassroots volunteers for his candidacy. They are now to be deployed across the swing states to canvass for him every Monday evening between now and elec-

tion. Palin has become just the ticket for McCain, even though a few Republicans still fret she might overshadow him.

"She's a daring and exciting pick that has really rejuvenated support and respect for Senator McCain," said Crystal Benton, the campaign spokeswoman.

"When she said she'd stand up to the ol' boys network in Washington, that really inspired a lot of women."

In a sign of the campaign's growing confidence in her, final details have been agreed for Palin not simply to give a sit-down interview with ABC, as was originally expected, but to give the network's main anchor, Charlie Gibson, full access over two days.

Gibson should have the opportunity to ask her about her

particularly about the per diem claimed by the governor when she reportedly spent 312 nights in Wasilla over 19 months. Also her husband, Todd, reportedly claimed expenses from the state for trips that he made.

Can hockey moms really swing American elections? Sixteen years ago, Bill Clinton's campaign mastermind Mark Penn identified "hockey moms" as a key group of voters.

This group of white, suburban, middle-class voters - so-called because they spend a significant amount of time ferrying children to and from sports activities - helped propel Clinton into the White House.

In 2004, George Bush's then-strategist Karl Rove focused on the so-called "security moms" who could be scared into voting Republican by playing up fears of terrorism after 9/11. This backfired because there were not enough of them to

women were more interested in health care, which John McCain has consistently polled women voters.

Two months ago the poll them overwhelmingly supported Obama over McCain.

The arrival of Palin changing that. But the interest in her among women voters.

The latest poll reveals that there is no such monolithic "female vote". The single, low-income who turned out for Clinton million - are increasingly by Republican women about Palin's deeply conservative views - fewer

According to feminist media researcher and assistant professor of Communications Studies, Mary Douglas Vavrus, "That the institutions and texts of mass media largely structure public life and suffuse it with meaning, is crucial to understanding politics and political campaigns in contemporary United States. News media are integral to the process of initiating, perpetuating, and even expanding identities of persons associated with or thrust into the political-public realm." (Varus 2002) Yet, while Palin may complain of too much media focus and a negative portrayal of her identity, she was highly visible and she did have a voice.

Mburia, on the other hand, believes that the media in her country, Kenya, not only do not give women politicians their due, they largely render women politicians invisible. Mburia ran for parliament in the East African nation's 2007 controversial polls. Like many women in the public arena or seeking to enter it, Mburia found in the run-

up to her country's 2007 polls that at first the media often ignored her voice and the issues important to the lives of women.

Several research studies on the media in Southern Africa, for example, clearly show that both the state and privately owned media gravitate towards those in positions of power and formal authority in the public, as the primary newsmakers and newsworthy voices, but these criteria do not easily extend to women. A case in point is South Africa, where although women constituted more than 30% of representation in government at the national level, 28% at the provincial level and 28% at the local level, research conducted on the 1999 and 2004 general elections in the country showed an absence of women's voices in election-related news. In addition, in the Gender and Media Baseline Study, women politicians constituted only 8% of the sources in the category of "politicians"

who spoke in the news stories monitored for one-month in 12 countries across Southern Africa.

IPS encounters

Mburia joined several other African women politicians in 2007 at a seminar convened in Johannesburg, South Africa by the Africa office of Inter Press Service (IPS) global news agency to find ways to strengthen their voices in the media. IPS, the world's leading alternative information provider, has consistently introduced programmes and strategies since the 1980s to increase women's and other marginalised groups' access to freedom of expression in and through the media. Moreover, the agency's Africa network has worked for the past two years to give greater voice and visibility to women politicians and to issues of priority to women voters. Training was key to showing IPS's network of African journalists how easy it is for the media to tell only one side of the political story through only the voice of one sex. The journalists were re-trained and the agency's editors provided guidance on covering elections

from a gender perspective, or with women as a central focus of the news coverage.

Accustomed to strategies aimed towards its own journalists and editors, the agency this time stepped out to work with women politicians and aspiring politicians to help them understand how to engage the media as knowledgeable and credible sources on the gender equality and rights dimensions of the political, economic and social issues in their countries. The frank and candid discussions between journalists from West, East and Southern Africa and female politicians at their face-to-face training session provided each side with a chance to interrogate and admit the gender biases and prejudices that keep the media from giving women a voice, and which cause women politicians in Africa to shy away from the media.

At the end of three-day encounter, which included discussions on issues such as gender and governance, gender and HIV and AIDS, gender violence, women, politics and news, and practical sessions where the



Women politicians and media engage during "Polls to Polls" encounter.

Photo: IPS

journalists worked with the politicians to improve their understanding and perceptions of the media, the women politicians gained insights into issues to put on their political agendas. They also gained tips on how to increase their media profiles, as well as new confidence to talk freely about issues in women's lives, which the media often dismiss as so-called "soft news" best handled by female journalists.

The journalists, on the other hand, noted a better understanding of why covering elections, politics and governance from a gender perspective added more depth and an essential side of the story and analysis on democratic processes, such as elections. The resulting stories in the elections series entitled "From Polls to Polls" also revealed that male journalists could report stories from a woman's perspective.

Moreover, for an aspiring candidate like Mburia, the lessons from the IPS encounter were put to practice right away. Three months after the workshop, Mburia said in an interview that she received more media coverage after the November workshop and in the run-up to the December polls, because she felt better prepared and had been more pro-active to engage the media.

Other female politicians from Ghana, Cameroon and Lesotho, who attended the workshop, said they had a better understanding of how the media operates and were much more confident to approach the media. In turn, they reported that they were better prepared and in command of the subject they were being interviewed on.



Akua Sensa Dansua, Member of Parliament from Ghana, gives the media her views on why more women should be in politics. Photo: IPS

Journalists interviewed after the workshop also noted changes in their work. The majority of the journalists said they had covered stories on female politicians and issues pertaining to women since the workshop, and a number reported planned stories of such coverage. They also said they had made a conscious effort to seek female politicians to voice their opinions and they now had a better understanding of the difficulties female politicians face.

Media spotlight misses men's private choices

I always have a nagging feeling that the Africa we write about is a shadow of the one we live in, that the journalistic chasing after facts and figures misses so much of the active forces and discourses that shape behaviour and attitudes. The perceptions of women politicians by men and women alike are very important -- this came out in the stories. Mentioning their domestic and personal lives is important; the absence of equivalent examinations of their male counterparts is a glaring omission. In the unequally shared tasks of life on this continent, men's private choices are not subject to the same kinds of public pressure (media, religious, bar-room) as women's.

- IPS Africa editor Terna Gyuse

The personal becomes comfortable

IPS produced some 100 stories on elections held across Africa in 2007 and 2008 in the IPS Africa series "From Polls to Polls," which were translated into French and Kiswahili. IPS re-packaged these stories into 100 radio bulletins. In addition, as one of the editors of the stories, Mercedes Sayagues writes below, new narratives on female politicians and issues important to women did appear. However, there are still the grey areas where editors wrestle with how to tell the texture of female and male politicians' lives without falling back into gender stereotypes.

The screenshot shows the website 'Africa: From Polls to Polls' by IPS Inter Press Service. The browser address bar shows 'http://www.ipsnews.org/new_focus/polls/index.asp'. The page features a navigation menu with 'Homepage', 'Latest News', 'Search', 'Languages', 'Contact Us', and 'About Us'. The date is 'Sunday, May 03, 2009 15:08 GMT'. There are several news articles:

- RIGHTS-SOUTH AFRICA: Election Campaign Silent on Violence Against Women** - Stephanie Nieuwoudt interviews LISA YETTEN, gender rights activist. CAPE TOWN - With its emphasis on gender equality, the South African constitution is regarded as a great example for many other developing countries. Yet, despite laws intended to protect the rights of women like the Sexual Abuse Act and the Domestic Violence Act, women in the country still suffer indignities at the hands of police and in court.
- POLITICS: Malawi's Women Challenge For Top Posts** - By Piliirani Semu-Banda. LILONGWE - Sitting side by side, clothed in bright traditional outfits complete with headgear, they looked like any of the women who always dance and ululate for politicians.
- ETHIOPIA: Political Space Narrowing** - By Michael Chebbi. ADDIS ABABA - Bertukan Mideksa has a reputation in Ethiopia as a competent politician, but voters will not be able to cast ballots for her in the next national election. The revocation of her 2007 pardon has sent a chill through Ethiopia's opposition parties.
- POLITICS-KENYA: Taking Up a Women's Agenda** - By Najum Mushtaq. NAIROBI - The first woman from the Muslim

There is also a map of Africa with labels for various countries and a section titled 'African elections' with a link to 'Click on country for more information.' and 'Women and Elections'.

Polls to polls series

I was surprised. In the second paragraph of the second story of the series, taboo words popped up: sanitary pads and periods, of the biological, not the grammatical kind. A male reporter was writing and he had no problems describing without euphemisms the effort of Thabitha Khumalo, a parliamentarian in Zimbabwe, to supply sanitary pads as a matter of dignity and hygiene.

The fourth story, also written by a man, starred another taboo word: menopause. A sociologist in Guinea explained that women, busy as homemakers at a younger age, enter politics later, around menopause, when the kids are grown up, the family less critical, and the husband more supportive. Older

women as assets to society; menopause as a door to a career - that is unusual.

Ten years ago, few male reporters would have felt comfortable writing about these topics, in these words. All the media training on gender across the continent is paying off. Oprah Winfrey's ability to talk about any issue has made the personal, comfortable. Gender stereotyping is eroding. Women's issues are gaining legitimacy and visibility.

This came through clearly in a series of 32 stories on women and elections in Africa that I commissioned and edited for IPS between September and November 2008. We did stories, profiles

and slideshows. We ran portraits of veteran women politicians in Guinea and Sierra Leone, stories on tough members of the opposition in Zimbabwe and Cameroon, and profiles of the first female mayors in Senegal, Madagascar and Mozambique.

Other stories described politics-as-a-men's-club in Swaziland, Ghana and Ethiopia, interrogated and made visible the violence against women candidates in Kenya and Malawi, and the increase of women in Parliaments, to 35% in Angola and 52% in Rwanda was reported as significant political news.

Balancing act

Some reporters, however, were reluctant to ask personal questions from women politicians. I insisted: how many children and their ages, how do they combine work and family life? Bring out the texture of their lives. Gender reporting manuals advise not to ask women these questions, to keep it professional. I think we should interrogate men and women alike. Start asking male politicians how they share domestic and family responsibilities, if they cook, change nappies and watch school plays.

The interest goes beyond the anecdotal. Research by the Inter-Parliamentary Union finds that the single most important deterrent for women to enter politics is their domestic responsibilities. Early on, IPS Africa editor Terna Gyuse and I had a spirited online editorial discussion about fashion. The profile of Sierra Leone's Zainab Bangura mentioned, in the lead, her spectacular wardrobe. Is it relevant to the story how a politician dresses? Against the IPS guidelines, which say no, I said yes.

If a woman dresses in a way that people notice, she wants them to notice: style and fashion as a personal and political statement. Just look at Michelle Obama.

I argued with Terna, who wears dreadlocks, that his choice of hairstyle is a political statement that should be included in his profile.

Most male politicians wear boring clothes; that is why no one notices. Just check out the annual African Union heads of state group photo. However, some do use clothes as a branding tool: Jacob Zuma prancing around in leopard skin and assegai, Thabo Mbeki suited and buttoned up, Madiba (former President Nelson Mandela) in his loose, patterned shirts. Muammar Gaddafi understands (and enjoys) dress power. So do West Africans. Terna relented, and the references to turbans, boubous and kohl-lined eyes stayed, and made the stories more colourful.

Very puzzling in the IPS Africa coverage of elections was the absence of HIV and AIDS in the stories, from high or low sero-prevalence countries. Except as a background fact about Swaziland in one story, neither journalists nor politicians nor voters mentioned it. Why? I asked around, and some of the reasons given were:

- People are saturated of talking about AIDS.
- Working in a box: this is political reporting, not AIDS reporting.
- The response to AIDS belongs to NGOs, donors and activists; elected officials have little to do with it.
- An AIDS platform does not garner votes.
- Politicians said boring stuff about AIDS.

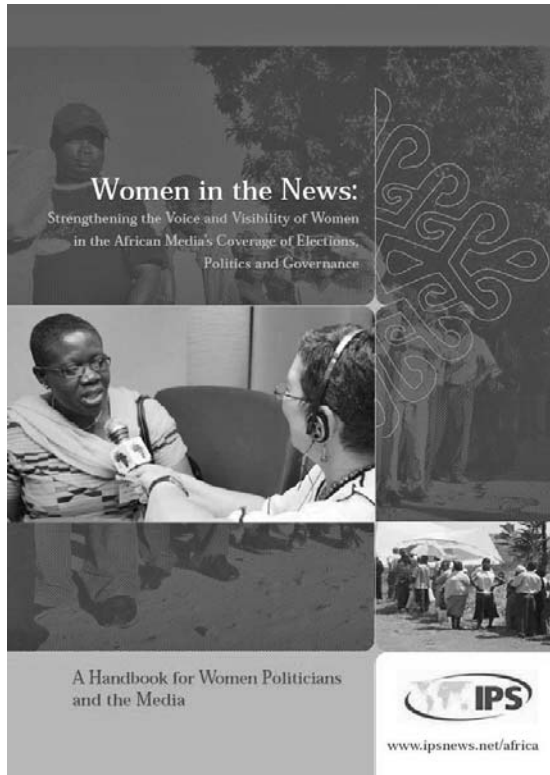
The opinion pollster AfroBarometer also regularly reports that less than one-third of Africans put AIDS among their top three priorities. I let it be. Mentioning AIDS is not mandatory. Editing means striking a balance between standardising and keeping the writer's style, so we can hear the voices of these strong, resilient, courageous women, who are fired up about public service.

Inter Press Service has long had a global commitment to mainstreaming gender in the media. Since 1975, the organisation has actively pursued initiatives to enhance its reporting through the production of editorial policies and toolkits – such as a Gender Glossary and media manuals – to support the initiatives. The IPS Africa project “Strengthening the Voice and Visibility of Women in Elections” sought to increase the quality and quantity of reports on women in politics; enhance reporters and women politicians’ capacity to engage and develop a sustainable model for replication and adaptation. It did so by:

- identifying and mentoring more than 50 reporters across the African continent to produce stories that reflected the gender dimensions of elections in their countries;
- hosting a pilot training workshop in South Africa which brought together women politicians and journalists from across the continent;
- linking reporters to politicians by commissioning interviews as well as hosting a press conference post-training in Johannesburg, South Africa;
- producing over 100 stories posted on to a dedicated website for use by partnering media;
- translating stories into Swahili and French;
- producing a Checklist for reporters (see an excerpt at the end of this journal);
- producing the *Women in the News: Strengthening the Voice and Visibility of Women in the African Media’s Coverage of Elections, Politics and Governance* handbook for women politicians journalists. The handbook, for use by trainers or individuals for self-learning, is available on the IPS Africa website. More than 1000 copies of the handbook were downloaded before the end of the project. Almost 1000 printed copies were distributed in English and French to gender and media organisations; and
- producing electronic tools that included monthly newsletters and online resources.

Reflecting on the IPS Africa project “Strengthening the Voice and Visibility of Women in Elections” has reinforced our belief that the absence of the opportunities to put the learning into practice limits training. The project is unique in its efforts to bring journalists and politicians together but shares the challenges of organisations the world over who strive to ensure that training has sustained value.

The project, which IPS Africa aims to extend into an ongoing programme through sustainable partnerships, has highlighted the value of a training methodology that links the training – whether actual workshops, the use of the handbook or checklist and coaching – to the production of stories and/or the opportunity to test interview skills through encounters with reporters. The project further enhanced this by giving women politicians access to the knowledge and experiences of other women politicians and activists through linked resources such as a newsletter that provided resource-driven stories. The newsletters contained, for example, interviews with former Minister Geraldine Fraser-Moleketi who spoke on the process of gaining the respect of peers, while campaigner Luta Shaba outlined the steps for a success campaign. There is in an ongoing need for additional resources. Our post-project



evaluation recorded a desire for additional electronic tools to support the existing Handbook and Checklist (available at the back of this journal) as well as expanded coverage.

In extending the project, IPS Africa aims to expand its impact by translating the Handbook into various African languages with an appropriate re-edit to ensure regional relevance. Clearly, the Handbook is only the foundation of support. The evaluation process showed that potential users needed support into translating the Handbook into training activities as well as simplifying some of the concepts into user-friendly explanations. The production of additional electronic tools that can be easily distributed must support this re-editing process.

The lessons learned from this initial project will help develop a programme that supports initiatives across the continent – seeking to replicate the training while expanding coverage. Africa's women politicians deserve more than just a bigger spotlight – they need informed coverage that adds to the debate on elections, politics and governance. And it would benefit all if we in the media continue to challenge ourselves on how we can do it better.

Notes

For more information on the “Strengthening the Voice and Visibility of Women in Elections” project, go to http://www.ipsnews.net/new_focus/polls/index.asp. Resources are also available for downloading.

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Writers Bio

Paula Fray is the Africa Regional Director for Inter-Press Service. Patricia Made is an editor and writer based in Zimbabwe who continues to freelance for IPS as a developer of training materials and programmes. Mercedes Sayagues was the editor of the series of stories on women in elections between September and November 2008. A journalist, she lives in Pretoria and roams Africa.