

EMPOWERING WOMEN FOR POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

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Theme – Freedom In Christ: From Slavery to Empowerment

“Woman, You are set free from your ailment” Luke 13:12 [NRSV]

The President and the Steering Committee, Honored Guests, Wonderful Women of God, I greet you all in the name of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ .

I would like to first give the Lord thanks and praise for bringing us together thus far. Thank you to the organizers for giving me this opportunity to share with you my experience as a Member of Parliament and what I think would empower women for political engagement using my experience.

In 1994 during his inauguration as the First President of a democratic, non-racist, non-sexist South Africa President Nelson Mandela said

“Freedom cannot be achieved unless the women have been emancipated from all forms of oppression. All of us take this on board that the objectives of the Reconstruction and Development Programme will not have been realized unless we see in visible practical terms that the conditions of women in our country has radically changed for the better, and that they have been empowered to intervene in all aspects of life as equals with any other member of society.”

President Nelson Mandela, 24 May 1994

This statement President Mandela made having experienced the contributions that women made during the negotiations and the drafting of the Constitution of South Africa.

United Nations Deputy Secretary-General Asha-Rose Migiro at the International Women Leaders Global Security Summit in New York in 2007 highlighted the importance of empowering women to build healthier, better educated, more peaceful and more prosperous societies. *“Study after study has shown us that when women are fully empowered and engaged, all of society benefits,”* She continued to say *“but while global goals and commitments on women’s empowerment are in place, “we still have far to go in implementing them fully - from school enrolment to women’s economic independence and representation in decision-making bodies,”* She noted that in almost all countries, women continue to be under-represented in decision-making positions; their work continues to be undervalued; and violence against women and girls continues unabated worldwide.

What do we mean by empowerment? Empowerment is policy of providing special opportunities in employment, training, etc. and in South Africa it was specifically for black people and others who were disadvantaged under apartheid. It generally means also to equip or supply people with ability or to enable them to reach their full potential and make an impact in society.

Women around the world are decision-makers one way or the other, in their homes and families, in government circles and their places of work. In South Africa there is a slogan **“ wathint’abafazi, wathint’imbokoto”** aXhosa/ Nguni idiom meaning, **“you touch a woman, you touch a rock”**. This implies that women are not helpless in the face of existing challenges.

But what does it really mean to empower women politically? Political empowerment cannot be separated from economic and social empowerment. They are mutually reinforcing.

Women's political empowerment is seen as political participation in elections and government processes. It is necessary to give women a voice in the policies that affect their lives and benefit their economic standing. In return women's economic empowerment entails that women have the authority to make their own decisions regarding use of their resources. It leads to prosperity for their families and communities. As is the common saying in South Africa "empower a man and you empower an individual but empower a woman and you empower the whole nation" Social empowerment liberates women from the mistreatment, exploitation, and oppression that inhibit women from reaching their full potential. This is often achieved through education and training.

This presentation will try to answer the following questions:

- What are the major obstacles women faces when entering parliament, which also impact on their performance in parliament?
- What are the main means of overcoming these obstacles and how are they carried out?
- What are the mechanisms and strategies women can use to impact on the political process before elections ?

The concept and practice of democracy has been increasing in popularity. This should have led to the participation of women in decision making but instead it created reservations about women as decision- makers. One asks the question as to why democracy should be linked to gender. To address this question some countries have adopted the quota system in order to have an inclusive representation in parliament. Of course the issue of quotas has its own challenges and limitations but be that as it may it does improve the situation. Politics, though representation in parliament is mainly legislative , it also involves everyday concerns on how people live . This means that politics are inseparable from human rights. Human rights are a fundamental aspect of any democracy.

In a democracy the points of view of the different groups involved must be taken into account in formulating any decision or carrying forward any strategy. Democracy must be inclusive of the opinions and perceptions of women as well as men. This is important because women are in the majority and also are a caring part of society.

What are the major obstacles women face when entering parliament, which also impact on their performance in parliament?

These are mainly socio-economic, psycho-cultural and political barriers.

SOCIOECONOMIC: It goes without saying that the social and economic status of women in society all over the world has a direct influence on their participation in political institutions and elected bodies. The socio-economic obstacles impacting on women's participation in parliament are mainly

- Poverty and unemployment: Women are major contributors to national economies through both their paid and unpaid labour. As far as the latter is concerned, rural women's input and their role as a significant female electorate should not be underestimated. Although the importance of women's biological and social roles is clear, their input in all spheres of life often goes unrecognized. Eradicating poverty will have a positive impact on women's increased participation in the democratic process. The economic empowerment of women, along with education and access to information will take women from the limitations of the household to full participation in politics and political elections
- Lack of adequate financial resources; they have no money of their own; the money belongs to their fathers, their husbands and in-laws. Given the rising cost of running an effective campaign, this poses another serious hurdle for women in the developing world.
- Illiteracy and limited access to education especially political knowledge and choice of professions
- The dual burdens that women face of domestic tasks and professional obligations, and the patriarchal society that women live in. Women move from their father's home to their husband's home to their in-law's home. "They are like refugees. "as one MP once said. They have no base from which to develop contacts with the people or to build knowledge and experience about the issues. Of course, we cannot run away from the fact that women are multi-tasked and should use that skill to their advantage

SOCIO-CULTURAL:

Traditional cultural values militate against the advancement, progress and participation of women in any political process. Societies all over the world are dominated by an ideology about "a woman's place" and that image is managing a home or play a role of a working mother which has nothing to do with politics. Women are expected to be involved in social issues and play social roles. That is the gender ideology and cultural patterns that exists. Even at organisational levels women are targeted not to lead but to be scribes. In some instances, women are forced to vote in certain directions because men feel that is the best direction for the family.

Women's lack of confidence is multifaceted namely, lack of confidence in running actual elections, lack of confidence in themselves leading to underrepresentation in formal political institutions, including parliaments, governments and political parties. With confidence and determination women can reach the highest levels in the political process. That is why women should believe in themselves and should do away with the widespread perception that men have to be their leaders. Women are equal to and have the same potential as men, but only they can fight for their rights. Women are very good campaigners, organizers and support-mobilizers, but they rarely contest parliamentary positions. A certain culture of fear prevents women from contesting elections and from participating in political life.

The way in which women are portrayed in the mass media is a major barrier. The image of a woman leader requires that she be asexual in her speech and manners, someone who can be identified as a woman only through nonsexual characteristics. Women politicians in general, and women MPs in particular, have to overcome this difficulty of feeling uncomfortable in the political field as though they are somewhere where they do not belong, behaving in ways that are not natural to them. Women internalize many of these ideas, and end up feeling a sense of guilt when they cannot correspond to this almost impossible image that is expected. This leads to frustration and under performance as before doing anything one has to adjust to the almost impossible image. Women have to be proud of their womanhood. A woman should be prepared for

the fact that when she becomes a politician, she does not cease to be a woman. Women are multi-tasked and creative and these skills should be able to add value to their presence in parliament. The ability to make decisions and implement them is not a gender-specific trait, but a common human one and is a natural trait.

POLITICAL: Men dominate the political landscape and have formulated rules for the political game thus creating a male dominated model for political engagement. This results in women losing interest in politics. The right to stand for elections, to become a candidate, and to get elected, is based on the fact that they have the right to vote. However, that women's right to vote does not factor into them voting for other women as the candidates are mainly male.

It is clear from the electoral systems that political structures rather than social factors play a more significant role in women's parliamentary recruitment. A voter's political literacy i.e., the capacity to make coherent choices and decisions when voting is not based on formal education or the political will to improve the situation but on the campaigning ability of that political party or person.

Among the political obstacles that women face, the following feature prominently:

- The prevalence of the masculine model of political life.
- The lack of party support, such as limited financial support for women candidates and limited access to political networks
- The lack of contact and co-operation with other public organizations such as NGOs and women's groups or organisations. Governments might declare their commitment to democratic forms of change but it is unrealistic to expect governments alone to secure women's rightful place in all spheres of society. Women's movements and women's groups tend to keep their distance from women MPs, or do not invest in organized channels of communication and lobbying on issues related to promoting women to decision-making levels. This is as a result of the lack of awareness of the potential benefits of this networking function, or the lack of resources to invest in such contacts "Margaret Dongwe an MP from Zimbabwe agrees that networking is important when she says
"Networking with women parliamentarians to share our experience is very important. This in itself will inspire women. Other women will not feel isolated from the parliamentary process. At every opportunity, at every forum, each and every time women MPs must share information, ideas, knowledge. They must make sure that women are the most informed people within society. They should not create the impression that to be an MP is a special privilege for some and not for others. All women have the ability to be Members of Parliament."
- The absence of well-developed education and training systems for women's leadership in general and for orientating young women toward political life in particular is a challenge. Women have to balance between family life and parliamentary work. The content and priorities of decision-making, which are determined by the interests, backgrounds and working patterns of both sexes becomes very obvious in decision making, as this balance reflects. In addition to their party and constituency work they have to serve on committees, network within and outside their parties and play the role of parent and spouse. Though women play important role in campaigning and mobilizing support for their parties, yet they rarely occupy decision-making positions in these structures
- The nature of the electoral system, which may or may not be favourable to women candidates. The selection and nomination process within political parties is also biased against women.

Therefore it is necessary to examine the process of how women make it into parliament before focusing on what they can do to maximize their effectiveness once inside.

First, we examine the steps involved in the legislative recruitment process in order to elucidate how women can increase their chances of getting nominated and elected.

Second, we look at one particular mechanism proven to be effective in increasing women's representation: a country's electoral system. Which electoral systems are best suited to elect women and why? What specific factors should women be concerned about in the actual design of electoral systems? After this I hope to provide some insight on one effective and practical strategy that women can use to increase their parliamentary representation.

The Legislative Recruitment Process and Its Impact on Women

Women need to know the recruitment process. In each and every party there are recruitment structures that will drive the recruitment process. There are areas that each party need to agree on and the criteria to be used for selecting potential candidates. This is important for aspirants.

The stage at which the party gatekeepers actually choose the candidates is perhaps the most crucial stage for getting women into office.

For women to get elected to parliament **they need to pass three crucial barriers namely aspirant candidates, political party selection and the last stage depends on the electoral system of that country.**

While the steps involved in moving from eligible to aspirants to candidates to MPs are the same in most political systems, the actual process varies dramatically from country to country. In particular, party structure, party rules and party norms along with the country's social and political system impact on the recruitment process at different stages.

Personal Level: Aspirants

The first stage consists of a person deciding that she wants to run for the elected office. The decision to aspire to office is generally seen as being influenced by two factors: personal ambition and opportunities to run for office. For women openly aspiring to run for office is a difficult but necessary step to gaining political representation. A woman's assessment of her chances and therefore her willingness to run will be affected by the number of opportunities to run, how friendly the political environment will be to her candidacy, and an estimation of the resources she can generate to help her campaign if she decides to run.

One of the most important factors that can help increase the number of women seriously considering running for office is the extent to which a country has a women's movement or organizations focusing specifically on women's issues. Women's organizations provide women with experience in public settings, help build their self-confidence, and provide a support base if a woman decides to run for office. A woman who can draw on resources from a woman's organization to help support her campaign is more likely to run and is more likely to be seen as a viable candidate by the party apparatus.

Getting Selected by the Party

The next step is to get selected by the party. The process of nominating candidates is one of the crucial roles played by political parties. Nomination procedures vary from country to country and can be distinguished by a number of features, including, for example, for local government or national elections. While these various systems emphasize different factors in choosing candidates, under any system an important consideration for parties is presenting candidates that the party believes will maximize their vote. If certain types of candidates are seen as a liability, party selectors or nominating structures will shy away from nominating them. There seems to be a set of characteristics party selectors look for in possible candidates across all countries. The most widely valued characteristic is an *aspirants' track record in the party or organization* and in the *constituency*. The level at which nomination is done is important and also the high rate at which the candidate is re-nominated. Even for new candidates, *a past history of party participation and activism is important, although not a requirement. Visibility in the community* either through one's profession, holding of public office, or other activity is also highly desirable.

Party rules and norms will affect the way in which a party carries out the actual process of nomination. In some parties there is policy on the minimum percentage that women should hold. This guarantees representation of women and is a significant advantage.

Getting Elected

The final barrier to becoming an MP is being *chosen by the voters*. Elections in *established democracies like South Africa, suggest that voters primarily vote for the party label rather than for the individual candidates*. This is certainly true of electoral systems using *proportional representation. In such cases, there is little reason to see the voters as a serious deterrent to women's representation. The crucial stage of the process under these conditions is actually getting nominated by the party.*

Changing a country's electoral system often represents a far more realistic goal to work towards than dramatically changing women's representation. It is important that women should take note of the following:

Women should organize themselves inside and outside political parties. Being organized in interest groups both inside and outside political parties provides valuable experience for women and gives them a power base on which to build if they aspire for office. Political groups as well as professional groups, such as women doctors or women lawyers' associations, can play an important role as a recruiting ground for women candidates. Being organized also increases visibility and legitimacy. In addition, in political parties where women commonly do a considerable amount of the essential party work, it is important to be organized into a woman's caucus that can lobby for improved representation.

Women should urge parties to set down clear rules for candidate selection. It is more likely that women will benefit if parties have clear bureaucratic procedures for selecting candidates rather than a system based on loyalty to those in power. When the rules of the game are clear it is possible for women to develop strategies to improve representation. When the process is dominated by patronage, rules can be murky and decisions are often made by a limited number of persons, who are almost certainly predominately male.

Changing the electoral system is only one part of a more comprehensive strategy for improving women's representation. Women will need to become active and effective voices within their individual parties and within society as a whole to be able to take advantage of the institutional advantages certain electoral structures provide. Proportional Representation systems are better than majoritarian systems for increasing women's representation.

At a personal level: the need to build self-confidence, especially when dealing with the media. Through public and private institutions partnerships as well as supporting partners, many opportunities related to women's participation as candidates in elections are still possible.

"By building a critical mass of female African parliamentarians, we can ensure that future debates and policies will reflect gender views, which benefits society as a whole," This will be important in view of the establishment of the African Parliament

Finance has been a great challenge. Better information on available funding sources and ways of tapping into them, and addressing corruption by introducing funding ceilings are ways of moving forward and levelling the playing field for all candidates.

The role of Media is very important and plays an important aspect in profiling a candidate. It should be emphasised that improvements in **women's education** can help to create a larger pool of women candidates. Media training and coaching are also as critical tools to address skills gaps while platforms to exchange ideas and learn from one another were seen as valuable. The critical role of **the media in creating awareness** through balance coverage of political elections must be emphasized. Media can make or break an aspirant or candidate MP. Men and women in politics should be given equal importance in media coverage.

Civil society in general, including non-governmental organizations and women's groups, must play a role in advancing women's representation. It is necessary to ensure that commitment to equality is reflected in laws and national policies. Affirmative action is a necessary tool that South Africa has used to maintain at least 30 per cent of women at all levels of decision-making. Women's involvement at the grass-roots level of women's movements and among local elected bodies is one of the empowerment tools that must be used. This will enable women to take an important step towards confidence-building and facilitates the sharing of experiences.

Education has led many women in my society to join political parties or participate in political activities. Education is the most important channel for encouraging women to speak out.

Expanding the pool of women who are qualified for recruitment in political careers is also needed. This can be done by giving women access, from an early stage, to work patterns that are conducive to political leadership, such as special training in community-based or neighbourhood organizations.

Common understanding of the concerns of women, gendered political awareness-raising, lobbying skills, and networking are important for the process of training women for political careers. To that end, **women's leadership schools play a special role, since they are the places where links can be made between the wider groups of women and women politicians; and they are very often the only place where women can be prepared and encouraged for a political**

career in parliament. Special attention should be given also to the involvement of young women in political participation.

The Means: An Overarching Policy in support of Women using South Africa as an example

The Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) that was created by the African National Congress (ANC) office held consultations with women parliamentarians. It also created a Women's Empowerment Programme and included a section on women in its White Paper in 1994. Moreover, it produced a separate draft policy for women's empowerment in July 1995, which set out guidelines for government departments to ensure the participation and empowerment of women in their work.

Following the Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW) in Beijing in 1995, the South African government adopted the Platform for Action. Government departments identified what actions they could carry out in specific periods of time to assist the process of achieving gender equality. These not only included focus areas, like women and violence, or women and health, but mechanisms to promote the advancement of women in South Africa in general. Government action in the context of the Beijing Platform for Action was further strengthened by its ratification, without any reservations, of the Convention for the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1995.

A number of measures have been taken to establish national machinery that would effectively implement gender equality and non-sexism at various levels of government

In addition, parliament has passed legislation to create a National Commission on Gender Equality. The commission commenced its work in 1997. The task of this commission is to promote gender equality in society and to ensure that government and other non-statutory bodies implement their commitment to gender equality. The commission engages civil society and government structures in gender issues, monitor the situation, and advocate gender equality in a variety of ways. The commission consists of both men and women chosen by parliament and approved by the President.

The Human Rights Commission and the Office of the Public Protector, established by parliament, also play a major role in protecting women's human rights, as outlined in the Constitution. The majority of commissioners in the South African Human Rights Commission are women

When developing policies which will affect, directly or indirectly, citizens' lives one must take into account the situations, perspectives and realities of all those who will be affected. Democracy, by definition, must address gender and not be gender-blind.

We need to look beyond the often asked question of how to increase the numbers of women in parliament, and move towards presenting examples and experiences of how women can impact on the political process while working through a parliamentary structure.

Thus far, most of the work has focused on an extremely important dimension: that of studying and assessing the ways and means by which women can enter parliament. The emphasis has been directed towards equality in opportunity to achieve parliamentary power and the obstacles and hindrances faced in this process.

By rules we mean the customs, conventions, informal practices and specific regulations that govern the way a legislature functions. These include law-making processes, division of labour in the assembly, hierarchy structures, ceremonies, disciplines, traditions, habits and the norms of the assembly including its internal functioning and its relationship to other parts of the government and to the nation it has been elected to serve.

The objective in electing women MPs is for them to secure change in one way or the other. There are essentially four types of change that will make a difference to women. They can be categorized as institutional/procedural, representation, influence on output, and discourse.

Parliaments therefore need to change the "male -dominated way " of operating and be gender sensitive.

The following changes women MPs should lobby for:

There has to be **institutional changes** that alter the nature of parliament to make it more "woman-friendly". In South Africa changes had to be made to accommodate MPs with young children to accommodate young women MPs who are mothers. Increased gender awareness is not simply a matter of including women, but also a sensitivity that women are no more a universal category than are men, and that class, age, ethnicity, race, physical ability, sexuality, parenting and life stage, have a determining effect on women's lives, much the same as they do on men's lives.

There has to be **representation change** involving specific actions to secure women's continued and enhanced access to the legislature. Representation change also includes actions in parliament that are designed to place women in important parliamentary positions and to secure their presence in government. It must also include changes in political parties that bring more women to legislatures. Parliamentary women often use the power, their representative status gives them to support improving political opportunities for women in their parties. Similarly, parliamentary women may organize to support women for higher office. Parliaments constitute a crucial pool of recruitment to higher office.

It is important also that parliament has an impact on output, i.e., the extent to which laws and policies have been altered or influenced in women's favour be realised. This includes both putting women's issues on the agenda and ensuring that all legislation is woman-friendly or gender-sensitive. In South Africa the Deputy President established in his office an Office on the Status of Women (OSW), to oversee and co-ordinate policies on women. These were great strides to make sure that laws are influenced in women's favour. Today there is a full ministry with a Minister in charge called Ministry of Women, Children and Disabled Persons.

After all these there must be a **discourse change** which involves changes both inside and outside of parliament. Not only should efforts be made to alter parliamentary language so that women's perspectives are normalized, it is also necessary to make use of the parliamentary platform to alter public attitudes and to change the discourse of politics so that a political woman becomes as normal a concept as a political man. In this way the parliamentary opportunity of greater access to the mass media and to the general public can be used to raise awareness of women's issues and of women's political capacities in public debate.

Conclusion

In conclusion, empowerment of women requires partnership between women and men for changing attitudes and values that are in our societies. Government, organisations, civil society and private sector must also be involved. This will ensure that women enjoy their full rights and take up their rightful place in society and decision-making bodies. President Nelson Mandela once said in his inauguration as the first democratically elected President of South Africa" **We know it well that none of us acting alone can achieve success:** and that is true for all of us in this Gathering. Not to act alone but as a unit. Divided we fall united we stand.
Let us continue to support and network with each other

God bless you

I thank you