

Zambian Women in Politics: Special measures may be needed to ensure more women in political office in Zambia

**By Kanni Wignaraja and Viola Morgan, Wednesday, 07 September 2011*

Where have all the women gone? Long time is passing. This year alone, there will be over 30 presidential elections held around the world. Over half of these will be in Africa. On 20 September 2011, Zambia goes to the polls to elect a president, members of parliament and local councillors. Another chapter in the country's democratic history will be written as people exercise their right to vote and to choose their leaders at all levels. So where are the women representatives in this process?

The intention of this article is to focus on why in Zambia, where over half of the registered voters, and in the past elections over half of the voting population have been women, the actual numbers of female candidates standing for local and national representation is on the decline? Why this negative trend and what can be done to increase women's political representation in the country?

In democratic societies, the legislature more closely mirrors the demographic composition of the state. The state of gender equity is one of these fundamental mirrors of society. In almost all African countries, as is the case in Zambia, women comprise over 50 percent of the population. The African Union has set a standard of gender parity in political representation for its member states. And it is indeed a success story that women's representation in parliament on the African continent is higher than in most parts of the world. And it continues to rise. Of the 50 countries with the highest representation of women in Parliament, 13 are in Africa. Among these are Rwanda (highest ranking in the world at 56.3%), South Africa, Mozambique, Angola, Tanzania, Uganda, Burundi, Namibia and Lesotho.

Zambia, however, is going counter-trend. Zambia had 12% women in parliament in 2006, 15% in 2008 and 13% in 2010, well below the sub-Saharan average of 20%. In 2006, the nominations were 106 (15%) women of 709 total nominations, which was a little higher in percentage terms than what it is today. In the forthcoming elections, there are only 14.7% women of the approved nominations by all parties for parliament. This, sadly, takes us backwards. These numbers can only mean a further drop in women representatives in the new parliament, post 20 September 2011. So Zambia will not even come close to meeting its MDG target of 30% women in parliament by 2015, let alone its AU/SADC target of 50% by the same year.

Why this low showing of female candidates in the political sphere in Zambia, and why does Zambia lag behind most of its African peers? There are many reasons that are advanced that attempt to explain this situation. Some put it down to most female candidates lacking the financial backing to run a full campaign. Others blame it on party nominating committees for their perceived lack of confidence in women as 'winning' candidates. Still others claim that the political environment is driven by personality politics and that voters tend to elect better known male candidates rather than new women candidates.

Others argue, and not as convincingly, that women are just not tough enough to make it through what is considered a hostile political race. It may also be that many highly capable women leaders prefer leadership roles in the private sector and non-government arena rather than in politics. Variations of these issues are faced by women in politics the world over. However, many countries

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have stepped-up to put in place measures that break through these structural, cultural and other barriers, to increase women's representation in political office.

In spite of the challenges, women the world over have led movements of social and political change; they have survived wars and brokered peace; their savings form the economic backbone of the household, the informal sector and rural economies; their investments send children to school and have ensured that they are better fed and immunized. Since 1979, 32 countries, of which over 60% in developing world, have had women as presidents and prime ministers. Where countries have created an enabling environment, traditional norms and practices have been overcome and women have been empowered to contest and win elections. The barriers to overcome are many and this cannot be left to social and cultural change alone.

So for Zambia to stop this slide, and to ensure the full political role and contribution of over half of its population, the country could consider the following policy and legislative actions, as tried and tested positively by others:

First: affirmative action has been used as a necessary tool to initiate and maintain a given number of seats for women in local councils and in national parliament. Most countries that have achieved significant increases in women's political participation have done so through the use of such quota systems. Quotas aim at ensuring that women constitute at least a large minority of 20, 30 or 40 percent, or even to ensure full gender parity at 50-50 percent. In some countries quotas are applied as a temporary measure, until the barriers to women's entry into politics are truly removed. Recently, Rwanda became number one in the world in terms of women's parliamentary representation — 56.3 percent women - through the use of a constitutional quota.

There are three types of gender quotas used in politics: reserved parliamentary seats as defined by the constitution; legislatively determined political party candidate quotas; voluntary but publicly monitored political party quotas. Studies confirm that quotas do fast track women's representation. It should be noted, however, that the introduction of such quotas can be contentious and comes up against resistance, especially by those who benefit from the status quo. It should therefore be a well thought out, locally contextualized and a publicly debated policy choice, prior to implementation in any country.

Second: a political party commission that supports and regulates the role and functioning of political parties, including setting standards for internal democracy, transparency and inclusivity. These standards could then include specific gender considerations in party structures and operations. This would comprise measures that ensured women candidates get a fair share of the party nominations; establishing rules-of-the-game for campaign financing that also supports the less well-off candidates; and ensuring a broader party commitment to support aspiring female candidates.

Third: civil society groups, including non-governmental organizations, volunteer bodies and women's movements, as well as male leaders as champions, can play a pivotal role in advancing women's political representation. These individuals and groups can effectively extend women candidates voice and exposure particularly at the grass-roots level, and ensure broader community awareness. Their role is also critical in more broadly enhancing women's literacy and civic education, initiating young aspiring female candidates into the local political networks and public dialogue spaces, and supporting movements for social change that address the deeper cultural norms that are hidden barriers to women's political roles.

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Fourth: the mass media has a significant role to play in recognizing the equal value and dignity of men and women and to adequately inform the public about the rights and roles of women in society. If local and national media organizations play their role responsibly, they can help break negative stereotypes, construct positive public image, convey balanced and positive stories and provide the airtime and editorial space for women candidates and their campaigns, thus keeping this issue on the national transformation agenda.

Fifth: and finally, the bottom line is one of social justice and fair play. Equal access to resources, dignity and respect in the political arena which a society must demand and its leaders must demonstrate, a culture of tolerance for diversity and difference – these are some of the fundamental values and principles that will engage and entice more women to contest elections.

The visible role and engagement of more women in politics is a clear signal to the country and to the rest of the world, of the state of a society's long term health and stability. Men and women bring different experiences, ideas and perspectives to the seats of decision-making and policy making. Keeping women away from elected bodies and limiting their political and policy making contributions diminishes the democratic space and holds back human development.

On all counts, having more women in political office is good for Zambia. Zambia can and must take its place alongside the many countries in the region, and be counted among the more gender inclusive democracies of the world. This is long overdue and would be welcome. Going back to the words of the old song we began with, "Where have all the (women) gone, long time passing...when will we ever learn, when will we *ever* learn."

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