

**Women's engagement with political  
parties in contemporary Africa:**

**Reflections on Uganda's experience**

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**Policy Brief 65**

**December 2009**

Published by the Centre for Policy Studies, an independent research institution, incorporated as an association not for gain under Section 21 of the Companies Act.

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**Supported by the Royal Danish Embassy, Pretoria**



## INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

This paper reviews and reflects on the experience of women's political engagement in contemporary Uganda after the introduction of multiparty competitive elections in 2006. While the paper explores the recent political changes in Uganda and the experiences of women, it places this in a comparative context, by reflecting briefly on the experiences of other selected countries on the continent. It points out that while women's representation in politics appears to have improved in Uganda, the concrete reality - particularly in relation to their location within the political parties - still leaves a lot to be desired.

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Political parties have been a focus of much debate in the recent past because they have a critical role to play in virtually all political systems around the world. They structure national political processes and political contestation, engage in competitive electoral politics, nominate prospective public representatives and political leaders, and compete to run institutions of government. Yet there are still debates about whether or not political parties are tools of democracy or sources of tyranny and repression<sup>1</sup>. From some feminist perspectives political parties are often viewed as principal instruments of patriarchy, marginalising women in politics and government. This is because political parties generally continue to be spaces for male dominance, where women continue to face serious obstacles<sup>2</sup>. Nonetheless, political parties remain necessary; women have to devise ways to engage effectively and strategically from within them in order to transform them and maximise their chances for greater political influence over policy processes and decisions to improve the position of women in society, politics and government.

## THE CASE OF UGANDA

Uganda presents a unique experience in terms of women's political representation, specifically in relation to their place in political parties and government. For 20 years, since the National Resistance Movement came into power following a protracted guerilla struggle in 1986, Uganda was governed under the country's so-called no-party democratic system, also known as the Movement System. Under this system electoral competition took place within a framework of individual contestation rather than the conventional system of party contestation for political power. Individual political candidates stood on their own individual programmes and platforms. Although political competition was not totally devoid of party influence, since parties had an impact on selection processes in some way, the overall framework was of individuals fronting their individual programmes and ideas. During the very period when political party contestation and involvement in government was opened up, a number of affirmative action policies for women and other marginalised groups,

such as the youth and people with disabilities (PWDs), were introduced. For women, these policies saw their representation in the national parliament and local government councils increase to 30 per cent during the period of no-party democracy, which resulted in Uganda often being cited as a success story with regard to positive improvements in the representation of women in politics and government.<sup>3</sup>

Yet this apparent improvement obscures a reality of continued political marginalisation and therefore disempowerment. Thus, this increased presence needs to be interrogated, especially in the context of the transition from a no-party system to multiparty competitive elections (between 2005 and 2006). As part of the process of increasing women's presence in formal politics, Uganda implemented a unique quota system which entails the creation of special 'add-on' seats for women at national and local government levels. In this arrangement, women on the reserved seats at national level have a separate constituency (i.e. district), whereas the mainstream constituencies are at county level. Similarly, the reserved seats for women at local government level have separate constituencies, known as women councillor seats. Therefore, while the presence of women in Ugandan politics has improved significantly as a result of this formal quota system, it has nevertheless had the effect of constructing and entrenching the position of women in society as secondary citizens<sup>4</sup>.

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On 23 February 2006, Ugandans went to the polls on the basis of multiparty competition, breaking a two-decade-long freeze. During the transition period from the previous no-party system to a multiparty political dispensation, there was no effort to go beyond the special 'add-on' seats in the national parliament and local government. A number of women's organisations (under the umbrella body Uganda Women's Network (UWONET)), made women's minimum demands to political parties and organisations, requiring these organisations to ensure that women constituted at least 40 per cent of personnel in political parties and organisations governing structures. However these demands were generally ignored by the parties, and women continue to be marginalised and disempowered with regard to party leadership structures. The following subsection will focus on four key sites where political power and influence are wielded (ie party leadership, candidate selection, women membership of the dominant party, and the Women's League in Uganda) to illustrate the point.

## **Party leadership**

Party leadership has remained male-dominated. Apart from the one case of the Uganda people's congress where a woman was elected as chair of the party after her husband's death, all parties clearly demonstrate lack of inclusiveness (see Table1)

Table 1: Gender composition of national party leadership structures (2006)

	NRM	FDC	UPC	DP
Chairperson	M	M	F	M
Deputy One	M	F	M	F
Deputy Two	F	N/A	N/A	N/A
Deputy Three	M	N/A	N/A	N/A
Secretary General	M	F	M	M
Treasurer	M	M	M	M
Publicity	M	M	M	F
Others	F (women Mobiliser)	F (Envoy)	F (Women Leader)	F (Women Affairs)
<b>Key:</b>				
NRM National Resistance Movement				
FDC Forum for Democratic Change				
UPC Uganda Peoples Congress				
DP Democratic Party				

*Out of the 808 candidates in the 2006 parliamentary race for the mainstream seats, only 33 were women, constituting only 4.1 per cent of the electoral contest.*

Source: Ahikire & Madanda, 2006<sup>5</sup>.

## Women and selection of party candidates

It is particularly important to note that women largely continue to occupy the reserved seats in the national parliament and local government. This means that the political parties continue to restrict the number of women candidates fielded for the mainstream seats. For instance, out of the 808 candidates in the 2006 parliamentary race for the mainstream seats, only 33 were women, constituting only 4.1 per cent of the electoral contest (see Table 2).

Table 2: Women's representation by political party (2006 elections)

Party/Ticket	Number of candidates	Females	% of Females in party total	% of National total
NRM	214	12	5.6	36.4
FDC	138	5	3.6	15.2
DP	68	5	7.4	15.2
UPC	78	1	1.2	1.2
CP	5	1	20.0	3.0
JEEMA	6	1	16.0	3.0
Independent	290	8	2.7	24.2
Others	9	-	-	-
Total	808	33	4.1	
<b>Key:</b> JEEMA Justice Forum; CP Conservative Party				

Source: Ahikire & Madanda, 2006.

The failure of parties to field a higher number of women on the mainstream seats means that women as a social group remain largely in the ghetto of the political mainstream in Uganda. Uganda's current record of 30 per cent women representation in parliament is not the result of women making greater inroads

into the mainstream of representative parliamentary politics, but is because of the special 'add-on' seats reserved for women.

## Women representation in the dominant party

The majority of women politicians in Uganda, including other prominent women, tend to belong to the dominant party (the NRM). This is understandable given that a dominant political party has the necessary political power and institutional capacity to formulate and implement the right policies and programmes to address issues of concern (ie equity in representation) for women. Therefore women stand a much better chance of success in terms of mobilising for gender equality, not only within the ruling party but also in terms of government public policies. Moreover, achieving policy success on gender equity issues through mobilising from inside the ruling party tends to create a 'contagious effect' on other political parties<sup>6</sup>. In other words, the ruling party has the ability to set the policy agenda on a range of issues, and other political parties might not be able to ignore these issues.

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South Africa is a case in point. Here, women in the African National Congress (ANC) have made significant strides in pushing the ruling ANC to adopt favourable positions on a range of policy issues of concern to women (particularly on issues of equity in political representation) which has tended to put political pressure on many opposition parties to make the necessary rhetorical public statements in support of these issues. This has greatly contributed to dealing with entrenched patriarchal leadership structures in politics<sup>7</sup>.

In Uganda, however, the prospects for women to enhance their ability to drive change through their membership of the NRM seem severely limited. A key factor to note here is the fact that patronage politics, combined with the entrenched positions of patriarchal leaders, continue to operate effectively in Uganda. Suttner alludes to the consequences of strong political leaders in contemporary Africa in terms of the reduced influence of ordinary party members in the decision-making processes of their parties:

...the average member of most political parties plays little role in the formulation of policies and even senior members may find their role is diminished. The leader tends to take policy decisions without internal democratic procedures and involvement<sup>8</sup>

Walle and Butler<sup>9</sup> also note that African political parties are plagued by weak organisational structures, low levels of institutionalisation and weak links to the society that they are supposed to represent. In contemporary Uganda, these problems are aggravated by the fact that the political parties were not allowed to operate for two decades, which froze their internal democratisation and

institutional development. The deleterious effects of the institutional and democratic underdevelopment are that their patriarchal leadership structures and patronage practices have endured. The patronage system, combined with patriarchal leadership structures, operate to weaken women even further inside the party. The overall effect of this marginalisation and disempowerment of women inside the dominant party is that they are unable to lobby effectively for greater gender equity policies, which in turn limits the prospects of the ruling party taking the lead and setting the policy agenda for the other political parties in Uganda.

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Furthermore, there is a general climate of fear and therefore reluctance to express opposition to the NRM because of the greater possibility of violence that tends to characterise elections. Hence for many women in Uganda the best strategy seems to be not to openly display support for any set of policies or candidates, and only express choice through the ballot box. While this is obviously better than having no right to express a choice at all, it nonetheless restricts the ability and freedom of women to participate openly and actively in the political system.

### **The role of the women's leagues**

Women's leagues are important structures within ruling parties in many countries in the continent and have been subjects of much debate in the past. While some critics view them as structures that serve to politically marginalise and disempower women, others see them as potential instruments for women to enhance their lot within their parties. Drawing from the experience of Ghana and, more importantly, South Africa, it can be argued that these structures are potentially influential, especially if they are controlled by women themselves, with the necessary legitimacy and authority structures. In Uganda, all the major parties have their own women's leagues. However these leagues usually lack the necessary political influence, are largely invisible as policy actors, and their leaders lack political clout. Their presence in many parties in the continent, including Uganda, is therefore largely symbolic.

## **WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION AND EXPERIENCES IN SELECTED AFRICAN COUNTRIES**

This subsection provides brief outlines of experiences in selected African countries with respect to policy instruments for promoting and/or effecting women's representation in politics and government.

## **Rwanda: Proportional representation (PR) with a constitutional quota system**

In 2003 Rwanda surpassed South Africa's high record at the time of more than 27 per cent female representation in the national parliament, reaching 48.8 per cent, which had increased to 56.6 per cent by 2005. This even surpassed the feted (38.7 per cent) average in Scandinavian countries. Article 76 of the Rwanda Constitution plays an important role in this, establishing a quota system for women. The Rwanda case demonstrates an electoral system that compels the parties to field women in mainstream seats.

## **Tanzania: First past the post (FPTP) plurality system with a constitutional quota system**

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Since independence, women have occupied 'special seats' in parliament, as is the case with the youth, the elderly, and army personnel. This was fixed at 15 per cent until the 2000 constitutional amendment created a minimum of 20 per cent and a maximum of 30 per cent. The elections of 2000 saw the representation of women rise to 22.3 per cent (61 of 274). At the local level the figure is 25 per cent of the seats and these special seats are distributed among the political parties in proportion to the number of seats awarded in parliament. In other words, here the quota is effected after the outcome of the election, not before. In addition, political parties usually nominate at least one woman to stand for election in each constituency. The Tanzania system is a version of the 'add-on' special seats quota system which marginalises women in the parties, as is the case in Uganda.

## **Kenya: FPTP with no constitutional quota system**

Kenya lags far behind many of its neighbours in terms of women's representation, with the percentage of women in parliament being between 6 and 7 per cent. It has no formal mechanisms for women's representation. The country's political parties have not introduced measures to counteract the absence of constitutionally mandated quotas for women's representation.

## **South Africa: PR system with no constitutional quotas, but political party quotas**

In South Africa the issue of women's quotas was articulated amidst concerns about the risks of entrenching women's status as a marginalised social group confined to and protected through specialised forms of representation. Many women's groups in South Africa have pushed for greater mainstreaming of women's representation in leadership positions in political parties, government (local, provincial and national) and parastatals. The Uganda model of separate



and special seats for women was rejected for this reason. One opposition Democratic Party member, Dene Smuts, expressed this sentiment succinctly, "when you send a person into public life under a quota system, you automatically send her with a question hanging over her head about her competence"<sup>10</sup>. Therefore while the country's constitution does not mandate quotas, its PR list system allowed the parties (in particular the ruling ANC) to address issues of equity in representation, not only for women but also for other minorities. The ANC has pledged its own quota system, currently promoting a policy of a 50/50 split representation for women and men. This has had an impact on some of the opposition parties, which have also pledged to increase women's representation in their structures, even though many of them have resisted setting explicit quotas to achieve this.

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## CONCLUDING REMARKS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

As Uganda prepares for the general elections in 2011, the experiences of other countries in the continent will provide vital lessons to draw from in terms of genuine women's representation in politics and government. It is clear, from the few cases of countries outlined here, that the PR electoral system is an important contextual factor for countries which have made strides in achieving greater representation for women in politics and government. Even if prospects for such a system being adopted in Uganda are bleak, at least in the near future, it remains useful if and when electoral reform becomes an issue of public policy debate. However, there are other methods of enhancing women's participation in political parties. Other countries, such as South Africa, have demonstrated this.

Given that Uganda has just emerged from a lengthy period during which organised parties were not allowed to participate in elections, and therefore experienced poor institutional development and democratisation, the responsibility for greater equity for women's representation in politics will have to be shouldered collectively by society, with government playing a more active policy and legislative role in the future. This will need to be underpinned by strong political parties, which are highly institutionalised and internally democratic, to allow for greater women's participation to shape and influence policy processes towards improved equity for women. In terms of specific policy lessons for Uganda:

- Multiparty politics is crucial to achieve substantial women's political participation.
- Women must be part of political parties and internal processes to drive change from within.

- A women's specific space (eg a league) within the parties is necessary, so long as it is used by women themselves to act strategically rather than for top-down manipulation and patronisation.
- Proportional representation electoral systems increase prospects for a fairer representation of women in politics and government, through political parties, especially in the absence of constitutionally mandated representation quotas.
- A strong women's movement is necessary for setting standards, norms and accountability

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Heywood, A. 1997. *Politics*. Houndmills: Palgrave
- 2 Razavi, S. 2000. *Women in contemporary democratisation*, Occasional Paper No.4, Geneva, UNRISD.
- 3 The 1995 Constitution has various articles that address women's political participation. The National Objectives and Directive Principles of State Policy enshrined in the Constitution stipulate that the state shall ensure gender balance and fair representation of marginalised groups on all constitutional and other bodies. Specifically, Article 32 provides for affirmative action at both national and local levels.
- 4 See the two authors: Tamale, S. 1999. *When Hens begin to Crow: Gender and Parliamentary Politics in Contemporary Uganda*, Kampala: Fountain Publishers. Ahikire, J. 2007. *Localised or Localising Democracy: Gender and the Politics of Decentralisation in Contemporary Uganda*, Kampala: Fountain Publishers.
- 5 Ahikire, J. and Madanda, A. 2006. *Towards Effective Participation of Women in Multiparty Politics in Uganda: Documenting Experiences in 2006 Elections*, a study supported by the DANIDA Election Support Programme, Kampala
- 6 Matland, R. E. and Studlar T.D. 1996. The contagion of women candidates in single-member districts and multi-member districts, *Journal of Politics*, 58(3): 707-733.
- 7 Ballington, J. 2002. Political parties, gender equality and elections in South Africa, G. Fick et al. (eds) *One Woman One Vote: The Gender Politics of South African Elections*, Johannesburg: EISA (Electoral Institute of Southern Africa).

- 8 Suttner, R. 2003. Transformation of Political Parties in Africa Today, Occasional Paper No. 19, Johannesburg: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.
- 9 Cited in Randall, V. and Svasand, L. 2001. Political parties and democratic consolidation in Africa. Paper presented at ECPR Workshop on Parties, Party Systems and Democratic Consolidation in the Third World, Grenoble, 6-11 April. P. 10
- 10 Ballington, J. 2002. Political parties, gender equality and elections in South Africa, G. Fick et al. (eds) One Woman One Vote: The Gender Politics of South African Elections, Johannesburg: EISA (Electoral Institute of Southern Africa).