

Elections for Local Government Leaders: Gender and Women Participation and its Implications for Service Delivery

By Perry Aritua¹

Between January and March 2021, Ugandans went to the polls to elect their local council leaders including district chairpersons and district councilors, City Mayors and councilors, sub-county chairpersons and parish councilors respectively. Women under Article 32 of the Uganda Constitution are entitled to affirmative action due to imbalances in their representation in public office created by tradition and history.

Under Article 180(2), (b) one-third of the membership of each local government council shall be reserved for women. Women's representation in public leadership especially elected leadership is important for several reasons:

It is a legal requirement: Universal Declaration on Human rights 1948 - Article 21 (1): "Everyone has the right to take part in the government of his country directly or through freely chosen representation". International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR): Article 25 reaffirms the UDHR principle of the right to participate in public and political life without discrimination.

The Convention on the Elimination of all Forms for Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) (1979) was ratified by Uganda in 1985. CEDAW moved the right of political participation another step toward de facto equality by affirming the obligation of State Parties to take affirmative

action to accelerate the participation of women in politics and their representation in other public decision-making positions. Besides, Article 7 enjoins State Parties to take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in the political and public life of the country and, in particular, to ensure equality and that women have the right to vote in all elections and public referenda and to be eligible for election to all publicly elected bodies.

The Sustainable Development Goals (2015) Inclusiveness & leaving no one Behind Agenda 2030: goal five is to achieve gender equality and empowerment of women and girls. Women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision making are one of the key areas for action and tracking.

African charter on human and people's rights: Article 13 (1): "Every citizen shall have the right to participate freely in the government of his/her country either directly or through freely chosen representatives per the provisions of the law." Article 13 (2) states that: "Every person shall have the right to equal access to public service of his/her country."

The African Union's (AU) Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa 2000 which Uganda ratified in 2010 further affirms the principle of equal participation and the use of affirmative

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action to ensure equal and effective participation of women in politics. Article 9 states that: “State parties shall take specific positive actions to promote participative governance and the equal participation of women in the political life of their countries through affirmative action, enabling national legislations.

African Charter on Democracy, Elections, and Governance: Article 29(3): State Parties shall take all possible measures to encourage the full and active participation of women in the electoral process and ensure gender parity in representation at all levels, including legislatures. Uganda signed the charter in 2008 but has not yet ratified it.

The experiences of women of different demographics and statuses vary from that of men. Women in politics matter because they have something in common with men which they can use to advocate for women and girls’ rights. For instance, during the lockdown imposed by the government of Uganda due to COVID-19 in March 2020, the experiences of women were different from men. Women’s Democracy Network-Uganda Chapter in April 2020, conducted a needs assessment on the effects of COVID-19 on the businesses of market women and women engaged in small businesses in the districts of Arua, Koboko, and Nebbi. The report is accessible on www.wdnuganda.org. Most women consumed their capital due to the slow business and the increasing demands on them since a number of their spouses/partners lost their means of livelihood. The women identified specific policies that would enable them to revive their businesses. Women in local councils can provide a voice for businesswomen and other women in different spheres of life when policies that affect them are discussed and passed in council. Men in local councils need to be gender-sensitive too and aware of the specific issues that affect women and girls, men and boys in their communities. It ensures that they advance the specific issues that affect different interest groups in their constituencies. Male and female councilors can be effective in representing the experiences of their electorate if they engage their communities often, work with CSOs to gather information on the issues that affect specific sections of their electorate, and prioritize pro-people policies as they perform their mandate in local governments.

The interests of men and women are different and sometimes conflicting therefore women are needed in representative positions to articulate the interests of fellow women. For instance, concerning health, women pay more attention to specific issues that affect women such maternal health. Concerning education, girls have different needs from boys

in schools. For instance, as toilets are being constructed in schools, wash rooms need to be integrated within the design of the school toilets to ensure that girls have access to water, soap, and sanitary facilities during menstruation. This ensures that girls can attend school during menstruation. It is therefore important for elected women and directly elected (male) councilors to ensure that they have knowledge of and advance specific interests of girls and boys, men and women when elected into office. This ensures that the policies advanced meet the specific interests of their electorate.

Women’s political leadership allows them to set agendas and, in such roles, they are made responsive to constituencies and the public. Politics is the space in which policies are made. The policies affect the lives of men, women, boys, and girls from different walks of life and status. Women need to have representatives who understand their agenda and advocate for them in leadership positions.

In 2016, women made up 44% of Local Council Leaders. This is attributed to the affirmative action provision in the Constitution of Uganda and the Local Governments Act, which stipulates that one-third of all Local Government shall be women. Affirmative action has encouraged women to compete for directly elected seats.² The figures of elected leaders in local governments will be released by the Electoral Commission after the conclusion of the 2021 elections.

Despite the presence of women in local governments, several factors affect their effectiveness. The factors include: The majority of the women elected on affirmative action have more than one electoral area which they represent. This affects their effectiveness because they do not have additional resources to represent the additional electoral areas that they are responsible for. Illiteracy levels among women in Uganda are higher than those of men. Illiteracy affects the confidence of women and ultimately their electorate because they shy away from speaking in council. The expectations from elected leaders are high. Due to the gaps in service delivery, elected leaders are expected by the electorate to meet the service delivery gaps. With no resources at their disposal to address the service delivery gaps, some women have lost the election. The marginalization of women is still a factor in Uganda’s politics. The electorate is more comfortable with women contesting on the affirmative action seats. This is further compounded by political parties which give the majority of the tickets for the open seats to men. As a result, women are more confined to the affirmative action seat. As a result, due to their limited numbers, the electorate misses out on the advantages women leaders bring to decision

² Gender related laws, Policies and Practices (2019) Presentation by Women’s Democracy Network-Uganda Chapter at a Conference by UN Women in Nairobi-Kenya

making, especially representing the specific interests of women and girls.

In conclusion, it is important to take stock of the numbers of women who have been elected on both the open and affirmative action seats to represent the electorate at different levels within the local government. Further, the needs of elected women and men and youth councillors should be identified and appropriate capacity building programs formulated by the Ministry of Local Government and CSOs to ensure that they acquire the relevant skills and knowledge to effectively represent the different interests groups in their constituencies.

End notes

[Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948](#)

[International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, 1966](#)

[Convention on Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women, 1979](#)

[Africa Charter on Human and Peoples Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa, 2000](#)

[Constitution of the Republic of Uganda, 1995](#)

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