

## Feature Article

# Towards Women's Effective Participation in Electoral Processes: A Review of the Ugandan Experience

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## Introduction

Uganda is currently seen as a model country in relation to women's numerical participation in politics. This is a result of many processes, including the government policy (enshrined in the Constitution) that instituted affirmative action for women at all levels of the political structure. This affirmative action policy, in particular the mandatory inclusion of women in local councils and the reserving of a proportion of parliamentary seats exclusively for women, brought more women into mainstream politics and key government positions (Vision 2025 Vol. 2, 1998). Affirmative action at both national and local levels, which has given women a share of nearly 25% in parliament and a minimum of 30% in local government, places Uganda well above the regional (sub-Saharan Africa) average of 14.3%.

Beyond this general picture, however, there are various sub-texts in the political process that inform gender identity in national politics. Elections and the process of selecting those who ultimately govern are among the critical aspects. This paper will examine some gendered spaces in elections as a political process, and document some of the experiences of political participation by women. Here we note that the topic of gender and politics attracts often only generalised mention, hence eluding critical analysis. Tamale's path-breaking analysis of Uganda is exceptional in that it goes beyond merely noting numerical participation to interrogate the ways in which gender affects politics, and how this dynamic contributes to shaping the character of Ugandan politics. Looking at women largely as new entrants in the national legislature, Tamale provides an insightful analysis of their experiences, including their marginalisation and harassment. She challenges academics and activists alike to transcend numerical questions of participation and to look critically at how gender as a factor of social organisation affects women and men in politics (1999).

This paper attempts to trace discourses around women and formal politics in Uganda, and to document some of the outcomes for women of the exercise of suffrage. Drawing on two major elections in Uganda (the 1996 and 2001 presidential and parliamentary elections), the paper maps out the ways in which gender is negotiated, highlighting the fact that political participation is indeed a gendered process. This analysis is done within the context of Uganda's unique no-party system, the Movement System (described in more detail below), where, for instance, the standard issues of party nomination and voter turn-out do not apply. Hence, rather than (for instance) undertaking a count of how many women and how many men voted for a particular candidate, I seek to unearth those hidden ideologies and practices in elections that have a far-reaching impact on how women are constructed as political actors. The process of political participation is therefore analysed through an array of social institutions, such as the family and the specific problem of election violence at household level. I also consider the unique ways in which individual women have to negotiate their way to parliament.

It is useful to situate women's public presence within a historical perspective. During the early years of colonial rule, the entire Ugandan populace was disenfranchised. In 1945, three Ugandans were formally incorporated into the colonial Legislative Council (LEGCO) for the first time. However, it was stipulated that the African representatives should be men of substance and authority (Kanyehamba, 1975: 20). The very language used automatically eliminated women from nomination for the LEGCO. The first African woman to enter the LEGCO did so only in 1954. In 1961, during the run-up to the first direct elections, it was still being debated whether women should be permitted to participate in elections (Kanyehamba,

1975; Tamale, 1999). Rebecca Mulira, one of the very first Ugandan women to attempt to enter the legislature, recounts:

Men campaigned against us and we lost .... After that loss I realised that women had to fight to enter into decision-making ranks ( *Arise Magazine* , No. 19, 1996: 23).

Nassali (1998) observes that Ugandan women were not only initially barred from being voted into public office, but were also generally marginalised as voters. She argues that in the first nation-wide LEGCO elections in 1957, women were effectively denied the right to vote on account of franchise restrictions, such as property, income and employment pre-qualifications (1998). This meant that Ugandan women, the majority of which were engaged in unpaid and invisible subsistence work, were disqualified from voting. This notion of women as “minors” when it came to elections and other broader political processes was sustained in the post-independence period until the mid-1980s, when the National Resistance Movement (NRM) came to power.

The increased presence of women in Ugandan politics is often attributed to the broader process of the guerrilla struggle, which drew different categories of the populace into direct public participation in different capacities. This, together with developments at the international level, has made gender balance in public politics and decision-making a legitimate cause. As a result, the face of formal politics has undergone change, although it can be argued that this represents cosmetic rather than deep transformation.

The gendered nature of electoral processes in Uganda is of course shaped by the socio-economic context. Uganda is one of the poorest countries in the world, with dismal social and economic indicators. Women tend to constitute the poorest of the poor (Tanzarn, 2003). The gendered impact of different dimensions of poverty and deprivation, as reflected in education, access to productive assets, health, and employment, impinge on the ways in which women participate in political processes such as elections. For example, the gender differential in access to education (the literacy rate for women is 51% as opposed to 77% for men; Tanzarn, 2003) suggests that fewer women than men are qualified to contest parliamentary elections.

The socio-economic indicators also point to the way that women and men are differently located in the political process. Men are advantaged, as economic and social resources often translate into political resources of legitimacy and capacity to finance political competition. However, as Longwe (2000) reminds us, even women with the requisite education and resources confront a glass ceiling in public politics, as a result of institutional factors combined with patriarchal political culture.

This paper draws on field research that included key informant interviews with different actors, designed to obtain their views on the question of gender in electoral politics with particular regard to the 1996 and 2001 presidential and parliamentary polls. In addition, group discussions were held in one district, Mukono (located in the central region), and in the vicinity of the capital city, Kampala. Here, the major aim was to capture broad discourses informing the way in which women as voters and candidates participated in elections. Participants in these discussions included local councillors, ordinary men and women, youth leaders and women from CBOs (community-based organisations). My analysis also draws from press reports, and reflects the issues that assumed significance in terms of public discourse.

### **Framing the Debate**

Although elections in Africa are often highly compromised processes, voting remains a

critical activity, particularly if viewed against the background of suffragist struggles in both developed and developing countries. Women's rights to vote have never been automatically conceded. Electoral politics therefore remain a basic indicator of democratic politics. We need to bear in mind, however, that participation in elections cannot be taken as an end in itself in terms of informing women's effective political participation. As Hassim argues:

Electoral politics are important in a democracy especially for subordinate, under-organised and numerically dispersed groups (such as women) ... Electoral participation is an important measure of the extent to which individuals can exercise their citizenship rights ... (1999: 12).

As far as gendered space is concerned, the right to be voted to public office is a vital space in the electoral process. According to the Ministry of Gender and Community Development, the number of women in top public positions in Uganda is still less than 20%, despite the deliberate government policy of affirmative action (Facts and Figures, 1998). This is the result of social organisation, historically constructed according to the equation female equals domestic and male equals public. This brings us to a core feminist debate on political participation – that on the private/public divide.

Very briefly, liberal feminists all too often sought equal opportunity without sufficiently deconstructing the binary relation between public and private; while radical feminists have insisted that “the personal was political”. Socialist feminists such as Goetz have drawn attention to the state's role in codifying and policing the boundaries between the public and private.

In current debates, feminist analysts from the South argue that the public/private dichotomy, while central to Western feminist notions, does not relate to the developing world. Conceptualising these two spheres as binary opposites denies their interconnectedness and simplifies their relationship (Bonnin, 2000). What is vital is the interplay between the different constructions of the two spheres, and the implications for the concrete exercise of citizenship in electoral politics, for example. The parameters of what is public as opposed to what is private are not only broad and porous; they are also fluid.

Alternative perspectives on the public/private dichotomy foreground the fact that far from being mere bearers of the divide, men and women are constantly constructing and negotiating the boundaries as active agents (Fraser, 1992). This becomes even more relevant when we look at the political participation of women in the context of state mechanisms that have brought them into the realm of formal politics in large numbers. Here we are talking about modes of exclusion that go beyond physical presence, which are embedded in the interaction between the public and private spheres, and the ways in which that interaction informs the character of formal politics. The increase in the number of women in formal politics seems to have recentered the private domain in such a way that the public is increasingly made private, while the private also becomes publicised in very unique ways. (For example, election violence, discussed further below, occurs both within the family and the public sphere.) It is therefore useful to examine the fluidity of these boundaries, and the implications for formal politics in general and women's political participation in particular.

The interconnectedness of the private and public is taken up in feminist debates on citizenship (Pateman, 1989). Under the veil of formal equality, we therefore find citizenship as a differentiated relationship of belonging, action and accountability between citizens and many different institutions that have influence over their lives (Jones and Gaventa, 2002). For women, this is true even in cases where there are specific mechanisms such as quotas to propel them into formal politics.

The question of quotas has been a subject of feminist debate and there is still little

agreement on their efficacy. However, the general agreement is that specific mechanisms are necessary to get women into decision-making positions, and it is the nature of those mechanisms that should be at stake in terms of the most effective instruments to deliver effective and legitimate political power. It is therefore important to examine the nature of quotas and how these construct women as political actors and as legitimate candidates in electoral processes.

## **The Political System and Gender Representation**

Uganda was plunged into civil war barely a decade after independence in 1962, with the military takeover in 1971 and the subsequent depredations of the Amin regime. The country collapsed into tyranny, anarchy and civil war for over two decades. When the National Resistance Movement (NRM) came to power in 1986, it was primarily a guerrilla army, given coherence only by its loyalty to the person of Museveni, and its priority of seizing power. It did not have structures to inherit, nor did it have any "formal internal structure for electing leaders or debating policies" (Goetz, 2002: 567). Following the takeover, the NRM suspended political parties and established an alternative system of political competition known as the no-party system, which came to be called a "Movement system". Political parties were suspended, as they were viewed as a source of division and a major contributor to the civil unrest (Kwesiga, 2002). The no-party system therefore officially removed structured political participation through particular party procedures, replacing it with a system of individual merit that formally allows any person willing to stand for office to declare his or her candidature. The key elements of the no-party system in Uganda are thus electoral politics, individual merit contests and restrictions on party activities (Carbone, 2001: 12). Legally, this means that every aspirant stands and is voted for on the basis of personal merit, and any use of political party, tribal, religious or sectarian affiliation in canvassing support could lead to the disqualification of a candidate (Furley and Katarikawe, 1999: 11).

The Movement system evolved from resistance councils established in war zones to mobilise popular support against state repression. In these councils, there was a degree of people's participation in addressing local and community problems. The council system (which operated from the village level to the national legislature) had an element of inclusiveness in that for the first time, social groups such as women, youth and disabled citizens had mandatory spaces in the electoral mechanism. With regard to women, the affirmative action policy was put in place to ensure that there would be a female representative to the national legislature from each district (hence the term district women representatives).

Affirmative action for women in Ugandan politics operates as follows. There is a general county-based constituency seat for which both women and men can compete, although this contest tends to be dominated by men. The affirmative action seat for women is at district level, making its constituency three to four times larger than the general constituency seat. In formal terms, the two seats have quite different terminologies. Aspirants to the general seats are referred to as constituency MPs, while the aspirants to the affirmative action seats for women are referred to as woman MPs. Election for the general constituency seat takes place by adult suffrage. Election of district women representatives, on the other hand, is by electoral college. These electoral colleges comprise Local Council Executive and Women Council committees, as well as local government structures known as Local Councils. These are drawn from the village level, the parish level, and the sub-county level.

The number of women holding affirmative action seats therefore corresponds to the number of districts in the country. In 1996, there were 45 districts and hence 45 seats for women district representatives. By 2001, the number of districts had increased to 56, with an automatic increase of women's seats in the legislature. The impact of this kind of affirmative

action in terms of the numbers of women in the electoral process is tremendous. It places at least 112 women in the electoral contest (if we assume a minimum of two contestants per seat, as is usually the case). The number of women who run for the general constituency seats is also increasing. For instance, in the 1996 parliamentary race, the number of women contesting constituency seats totalled 26, with 8 winning. In 2001, 32 women ran for the constituency seats, with 13 winning (Tripp, 2002: 8-9).

The mandatory inclusion of women, as well as the general societal awareness that this has generated, have certainly changed the general picture of public politics in Uganda. However, women's location in the electoral process, both as voters and candidates, is still circumscribed, both by mechanisms in the public arena and dynamics at the private and family level. The following sections seek to explore this by focusing on the location of the women's movement in Uganda within the election agenda; gender-based violence as part of election violence; and the unique ways in which women candidates have to negotiate their campaigns during parliamentary elections.

### **The Presidential Elections: of Voters and Wives**

All presidential candidates in Uganda have been men, with women coming into play as supporters of a particular candidate. In both 1996 and 2001 elections, women were generally seen as cheerleaders, usually for the incumbent President Museveni. In the wake of the 2001 presidential elections, a group of women in the capital formed a mysterious organisation known as the Women's Movement for the Return of Kaguta (WORK), which claimed to speak for the whole women's movement in Uganda. Showing what Goetz described as "grateful sycophancy", WORK urged women to vote for Museveni in return for what he had done for them (Goetz, 2003: 121). Although it was run by only a few individuals, WORK was able to give the impression that all women supported Museveni.

Meanwhile, the connection between women and Museveni continued to be ideologised in familial terms. For example, the chairperson of Museveni's task force was reported as saying that women were "married" to the Movement:

From today, no one should talk about women apart from Museveni and the Movement. What God has united, no one should separate (*The Monitor Newspaper*, February 1, 2001).

This kind of remark accentuated the status of women as a homogenous and secondary political constituency, and as a vote bank for the NRM, for Museveni in particular. Also of interest was the press coverage of all potential First Ladies. Wives of the six presidential candidates were interviewed on their husbands' prospects and what they intended to do if their respective spouses won the race. The responses typically included setting up vocational centres for girls, looking after orphans and establishing NGOs for women's concerns. This kind of coverage created a specifically female space outside of the mainstream discussion of the country's political agenda (see Jibrin Ibrahim's article in this issue of *Feminist Africa* for a discussion of this phenomenon in Nigeria).

Yet it is clear that the issue of women's political role has been highly visible in both elections. In the 1996 presidential elections, the manifestos of the two contestants, Yoweri K. Museveni and Paul K. Ssemogerere, made it clear that women and their representation constituted one of the platforms on which the electoral contest was played out. Museveni's manifesto reaffirmed the NRM's contribution, stating:

One of the policies the NRM is proud to have initiated is that of bringing women into the mainstream of the country's governance ... The NRM has created opportunities for women which were aimed at redressing this historical imbalance.

Meanwhile, Ssemogerere's manifesto strongly stated that it was misleading to resort to tokenism, patronisation and regimentation of marginalised groups by government in the name of affirmative action (1996: 12). His manifesto went on to say that this had bred a culture of tokenism, which had in turn created a spirit of dependency and complacency:

I uphold affirmative action in order to redress historic injustice and disparities in particular with regard to women, the youth and people with disabilities. Care must however be taken to ensure that affirmative action is not a licence for immorality, the breakdown of the institutions of the family, as well as our cherished cultural and religious values, as is currently the case (12).

It is clear that while Museveni's manifesto sought to exploit what the NRM government had done for the women of Uganda, Ssemogerere's manifesto not only critiqued the way in which women had been included, but asserted that they should not be given too much freedom. In other words, women needed to be guarded (against themselves) by men to ensure that society's morals and values remain intact.

In 2001, all candidates and their manifestos pledged total empowerment for women, but stopped short of stating what forms this empowerment would take, and what mechanisms would be put in place to attain it. Women's empowerment was turned into a rhetorical phrase which, when used in the process of collapsing women together with other "vulnerable" groups (such as the youth, disabled people and children), became even more problematic.

A press conference organised by ISIS WICCE in 2001 required representatives of presidential candidates to state what they planned to do for women. One promised concessions on sanitary pads; another said they would encourage education of the girl child. Museveni's representative offered treated seeds to rural woman (*The Monitor Newspaper*, March 2, 2001). The idea of a press conference was a good one, but it was isolated and hence ineffective. There was no real pressure to make candidates accountable to women and gender concerns in the broader sense. However, it did indicate a realisation that the women's movement needed to take advantage of crucial political moments such as presidential elections.

According to the African Platform for Action 1994, the circumstances surrounding African women all too often make it difficult for them to do more than hold the franchise in name only; many are not able to fully engage in roles beyond those of wife and mother. In the recent elections in Uganda, another dimension of what it means to be a wife was engaged, specifically with regard to election-related violence. Here wifeness also comes to define how the political is constructed and played out.

*The New Vision* of May 15, 1996, reported that a man had been arrested for allegedly killing his wife for celebrating President Museveni's election victory. In a similar incident, Pross Nakyanzi, a woman in Masaka District, had her eye injured and her leg broken after she was beaten by her husband Joseph Bukonya for celebrating Museveni's victory (*The Crusader*, May 14; *The New Vision*, May 15).

*The Crusader* of May 14 1996, reported:  
*Hubby beats wife over Museveni's victory.*

The man ... allegedly arrived from upcountry where he had gone to cast his ballot in favour of Paul Ssemogerere (the vanquished) only to find his wife jubilating over the victory of her presidential candidate, Yoweri Museveni. A neighbour who preferred anonymity said that real trouble started when on asking for food and water to bathe, the husband was allegedly

told by the wife that with her candidate's win, their roles in the home had changed, with her becoming the man.

The Uganda Women's Network (UWONET) petitioned President Museveni and the Interim Electoral Commission (IEC) in an open letter (New Vision, May 18, 1996). Expressing “a sense of great shock and disappointment”, this noted the numerous and increasing incidents of intimidation and violence against women during the electoral process:

... women have been intimidated in different ways. They have been threatened with withdrawal of family support; they have been beaten, killed, thrown out of their homes; had their voter's cards grabbed from them or destroyed. In most cases, this intimidation and harassment has been done by husbands (New Vision, May 18, 1996).

During the 2001 elections, competition was much stiffer, as the incumbent Museveni was faced with a challenger from within the NRM itself. There was intense conflict and unprecedented election violence, which prompted a parliamentary probe in the aftermath of elections (Makara and Tukaheebwa, 2003: 283). However, compared with the 1996 elections, the 2001 violence shifted (although not entirely) from the domestic arena into more public spaces. It would be interesting to research why family-based violence was more pronounced in 1996, when the elections were generally more peaceful than those of 2001.

### **Icons of Gender in Parliamentary Elections**

The policy of affirmative action instituted in 1989 by the NRM and the subsequent constitutional allocation of seats to women in parliament and local government (1995) have been a mixed blessing. While the resulting numerical presence of women in formal politics has been a major advance, there remain questions concerning the legitimacy and respectability of women as candidates, politicians and public office-holders.

There are, for example, instances of experienced women district councillors withdrawing from parliamentary elections, for a number of reasons. It became clear during the 2001 elections that such contests now involved large sums of money. More economic muscle is needed than ever before, especially if contesting a general constituency seat; this paints a bleak picture for women candidates, who often lack financial resources. Moreover, in popular discourse, a woman who contests a general seat is invariably and overtly described as “standing against a man” (rather than another candidate), and this makes the contest more burdensome. Then the very nature of the affirmative action seat itself presents problems. Because it is necessarily a contest between women, women in the same constituency find themselves pitted against their own friends and colleagues. Further, according to the NGO Election Monitoring Group-Uganda (NEMGROUP-U), there are a number of procedural flaws in the process of electing these women. Registers for the electoral colleges (which vote for women candidates) are often not properly updated; and a loophole in the regulations means that elections are valid regardless of the number of vacancies in the electoral college. In addition, the time allotted for campaigning for women's seats is much shorter than that for mainstream constituency seats, and the display of registers for the former lasts only seven days, compared to 21 days for the latter.

The NEMGROUP observations are the tip of the iceberg in terms of the inconsistencies and problems with the election of district women representatives. The discrepancies between procedures for voting for the women's seats and general seats convey a sense that the former are somehow secondary elections – not to be taken seriously. But there are also more serious implications for women's participation. Women who have contested district seats tell disturbing stories about the lengths they had to go to in order to satisfy the demands of their voters. In the words of one: “You almost have to create a personal

relationship with the councils and perhaps each voter, who in turn holds you ransom. This is not the case with general constituencies.”

In the run-up to the 2001 elections, parliament proposed an amendment that would see women district representatives elected through universal adult suffrage rather than electoral colleges, but the President turned this down (Gureme, 2001). The debate itself was fiery; one of the women in Parliament who supposedly opposed the move to adult suffrage was slapped by a male MP (Kanyomozi, 2001). The fact is that constitution of electoral colleges for district women representatives is easily manipulated, and favours the incumbent. According to Rwabogo, influential women

support the continuation of the Electoral College because many members are known to them personally and have shared over the years the benefits ... of their positions in the House (2001: 7).

There is also the question of the different dynamics of the affirmative action seats, as opposed to the constituency ones. This is in relation to the notion of individual merit and the kinds of political support given to candidates during elections. Furley and Katarikawe (1999) observe that although electoral law requires non-partisan elections, the practice in Uganda today is that many candidates win or lose on the basis of what voters perceive as his or her political affiliation. In the case of the 2001 elections, the veil of no-party democracy was torn away, with candidates showing open partisanship. The President himself openly campaigned for Movement sympathisers and against multiparty sympathisers.

A gender lens applied to this phenomenon reveals interesting dynamics. The affirmative action seats for women generally tend to be viewed as politically inferior. It has already been noted that the majority of women support the Movement system, both as candidates and voters. This has meant that when it comes to support for hotly contested seats, the women's seats are often considered to be politically irrelevant. For example, some women MPs sought support for their campaigns, but were turned down by the Movement Secretariat on the grounds that there were more important cases to consider. The fact that the NRM reserved money for cases where there were contests between Movement and multiparty sympathisers suggests that election contests are considered significant on the basis of whether “real” stakes are at play.

This, therefore, is how the women's seats have become less politically relevant than the general constituency seats. Multiparty versus Movement contests have been rare in the case of women's seats, with only one such case in each of the 1996 and 2001 parliamentary elections. The 1996 case is worth mentioning; it was contested in the capital, Kampala District, between Margaret Ziwa (Movement) and Nava Nabagesera (multiparty). After a close race, the Movement-supported candidate won. This was followed by an election petition that declared the opponent (the multiparty sympathiser) the winner, on account of election rigging. Margaret Ziwa won the case and was returned to parliament. But what happened next was interesting. Nava Nabagesera was appointed Resident District Commissioner (RDC). [2] To Ziwa, this was tantamount to betrayal; that in spite of her allegiance to the Movement, it was not willing to discredit her opponent.

Affirmative action seems to have been imposed in such a way that the victims of structural imbalances have to prove themselves on the basis of the very yardsticks that marginalise them. It is no longer a question of redressing historical imbalances, but rather of reinforcing the gender ideology that women are less qualified for the political arena (Tamale, 1999). This is why, for instance, women who compete successfully against men for the general seats are given more reverence (*The New Vision*, May 29, 2001). Women such as Winnie Byanyima, Speciosa Kazibwe, Cecilia Ogwal and Mary Mugenyi (who recently won general



constituency seats) are seen as special creatures – *almost men*. In the general press coverage, they were referred to as "The Gallant" (Tamale, 2001).

There are many ways in which to interpret the fact that more and more women are contesting unreserved seats. Some celebrate this as a qualitative change within national politics, one that means that women no longer have to depend solely on the political dispensation of the state for representation, but are actually able to contest seats as rightful citizens. In 2001, 33 women contested mainstream seats against male contenders, compared to half that number in 1996. Out of these, 13 won, compared to eight in 1996. "This is no mean feat", as Tamale puts it. Although I do not wish to downplay the importance of women standing for the general seats, the manner in which this is perceived does suggest that women are required to measure their worth against a male yardstick. This rests on a firm understanding of the political sphere as essentially masculine.

This masculinism is especially apparent when individuals campaign for election on individual merit, rather than as candidates fielded by a particular party. The majority of women in Uganda seem to view this system as a positive one for women because it undermines the formerly male-dominated system of party politics. However, it is slowly being recognised that the individual merit approach exposes the individual to the whims of the electorate. For instance, in relation to the 1996 elections, Tamale observes that:

Women spent a great deal of campaign time convincing the electorate of their moral aptness to stand for political office rather than in the articulation of political issues ... Women ... encountered slurs regarding their marital status, sexuality and (in)fidelity. A married woman was penalised for neglecting her husband and family. A woman who was unattached "was put to task to prove that she was not a malaya" [prostitute] (1999: 121-122).

Tamale's exposure of this kind of bias that women faced clearly demonstrates how gendered spaces operated in terms of these political campaigns. While men were required to articulate a visionary strategy, women were required to engage in soul-searching and personal defence. The effect was to remind women that they were principally domestic beings, even when campaigning for public office. Tamale also notes that the failure of women to mobilise politically gave men the opportunity to become self-appointed hunters of "appropriate" women to fill posts of public office, mainly created by the policy of affirmative action. What she does not deal with is the question of the political subjectivity of these women, and the fact that the modus operandi of the political system weighs heavily on the individual candidate, who has to negotiate and bargain if he or she is to succeed. The individual woman candidate is more often than not driven to conform socially. This becomes especially obvious in the process of competing for the women's seats. If one woman attempts to go against the grain of established and traditional norms, the other resorts to those very norms to disqualify her opponent.

Women political candidates in Uganda are therefore forced to demonstrate that they are going into public politics almost "in spite of themselves". They have to be seen publicly as not challenging the patriarchal social order, and this creates new forms of subordination within electoral processes. For example, in some parts of Uganda, women are expected to kneel before addressing the electorate during their campaigns – an extension of the cultural practice where women generally kneel before men when greeting or addressing them. One woman leader was asked how it felt to have to kneel before crowds while campaigning. She replied that it was not a pleasant experience, but hastened to add that:

You see, if you do not do it, your opponent will do it and you automatically lose out. I mean, you lose the vote. It is better you accept that temporary humiliation and move on to change policy from within (personal interview, August, 2001).

In another case, a dynamic young woman candidate had to promise the electorate that she would find a partner and *get married* soon, and that this domestic and personal quest was next on her agenda, as soon as she had won the seat to parliament.

So in their quest for votes, Ugandan women candidates succumb to a retrogressive and patriarchal agenda, seeking to prove their moral uprightness. Women thus allowed themselves to be diverted from addressing national issues to further entrench their domestication.

So the use of the morality card by women has become commonplace. At the level of political subjectivity, it is clear that women are conforming to the ideological machinery that constructs womanhood on the basis of the domestic principle. Women cannot shed this identity simply because they have entered the field of politics. (The result is that they continue to offer themselves to be evaluated primarily according to the criteria of conventional male-dominated politics, rather than seeking to change the gendered character of politics itself.) Even the most radical of women candidates (Miria Matembe, for example) were compelled to make some form of promise that they would safeguard the domestic principle.

What is more, women constantly have to address themselves to the question of “belonging”. Parliamentary elections are constituency-based, and the question often arises as to whether a woman belongs to the district of her birth or of her marriage. One woman contested a seat in the district her husband hailed from, and lost. This was her response:

I want to correct all people who think that I lost parliamentary elections for the Bugiri Women seat because I am not a Musoga ... According to tradition, a woman belongs to where she is married. Even the Bible says that a woman shall leave her family and join her husband to become one flesh. The eight children I produced are Basoga. I was officially married to a son of Basoga ... If the Basoga were to give me votes, the first beneficiaries would be the eight orphans their son left behind. My home is in Busoga and my burial ground too! ... While Ngoma Ngime [the winning candidate] is a man ..., I am a poor widow who only placed my hopes in the electorate, hoping that they would consider individual merit, not “logistics” (*The Monitor Newspaper* July 16, 2001).

This shows a woman desperately clinging to dominant social constructions of womanhood. The distinction she makes between herself and Ngoma Ngime is also interesting, as he was apparently put forward by the government to stand against Winnie Byanyima, a woman hailing from the area. Byanyima won the seat in a fierce contest, partly because she had the advantage of being a “daughter of the soil” – although she is married to a man from a different district. To return to the widow’s statement, while in practice most married women stand in their husbands’ districts, she seems to support the notion that a woman loses her original identity once married. In political terms, this suggests that a woman can no longer stand in her district of origin if she marries a man from a different district. Here the dangers are clear. In cases where such a woman might be standing against a woman married to a man from a different district, she would all too likely resort to the same arguments to discredit her opponent.

The above discussion of gender-based election violence, and the ways in which women’s political legitimacy is defined primarily on the basis of personal and private realms, highlights the complex and dynamic process created within formal politics and electoral context. The interplay of the public and private creates a specific terrain for women, both as voters and candidates. Further investigation of this terrain will shed light on how effective participation could be achieved.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Women’s entrance into the national political scene has placed new questions on the political agenda. Indeed, the importance of women’s activism and entry into the political arena, and

to the construction of their citizenship, cannot be underestimated (Lister 1997: 155). As Tamale notes, the culture of formal politics is beginning to register some modest changes:

The presence of such an unprecedented number of females in an institution that was traditionally dominated by men has, for example, introduced a gendered perspective to the law-making process .... Moreover, the increased visibility of women in positions of leadership is slowly changing the attitudes of Ugandans (both men and women) towards women's presence in the political arena. This new consciousness forms the crucial basis for a new kind of political self-organisation for women and for a more radical transformation of gender relations in Ugandan society (2001: 220).

So there are possibilities for the transformation of national politics in current-day Uganda, but there is a need for women to seize this opportunity. Put differently, Ugandan women have yet to fully utilise this window of opportunity to mount a more proactive and autonomous struggle to change gender relations, particularly in state politics. According to Oloka-Onyango (1998), the reliance on top-down state reforms is slowly beginning to realise critical deficits, especially concerning issues that directly undermine male power.

It is clear that the state alone cannot be relied upon to effect transformation of gender relations in formal politics. This will require that women organise themselves. However, the question that arises here is how to envisage women organising in the context of a no-party system. The fact that women are a differentiated category, as shown above, means that it is not possible to envisage simplified notions of unity (Phillips, 1999). The women's movement in Uganda needs to consolidate its gains to act politically and take advantage of moments of opportunity, such as elections. Elections as a particular form of political process provide opportunities for loose coalitions to emerge, and it is possible to forge such coalitions for the strategic purpose of positioning gender on the election agenda.

The precedent already exists. During the constitutional review/making process in 1994/5, women's organisations such as ACFODE (Action for Development), UWONET (Uganda Women's Network) and NAWOU (National Association for Women's Organisations in Uganda), together with the ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development, organised seminars for women voters and delegates. Two developments ensued: one was the formation of the women's caucus, a loose but consistent and issue-based association of women delegates; the other was the establishment of the Gender Information Centre (GIC), which provided support, particularly to women delegates. The GIC acted as a forum for meeting and discussion, as well as a focal point for lobbying, strategy and consensus-building (Nakirunda, 2000). It is a well-documented fact that the synergy between women's organisations, the Ministry of Gender, and the Women's Caucus inside the Constituent Assembly (CA) had an impact unrivalled in the history of Ugandan politics and the women's movement.

This indicates that strategic self-location of women is possible, especially within the context of elections. Activities such as the press conference in 2001 (which brought candidates together to explain what was in the election basket for women) can be organised with more precision and better timing. Such coalitions can also work to re-centre women as political actors, and to create solidarity between women candidates, so that women are less likely to succumb to or collude with patriarchal processes of selection.

During the last two decades, Uganda has made enormous strides in as far as women's location in electoral politics is concerned. There is a need to document these success stories, not necessarily in terms of specific personalities, but rather in terms of particular experiences. This will also help us to draw lessons from experience and develop strategies for more effective participation by women electoral politics.

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#### **Footnote**

[1]This paper was originally drafted as part of the CODESRIA Multinational Working Group on Gender and National Politics.

[2] This position is a presidential appointment in the district, with a responsibility to serve the national interest.

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