

## Kenya: Women's participation in the 2007 General Elections

by Penninah Ogada

### Women's participation in the 2007 General Elections in Kenya

In the East African region Kenya is noted for having the smallest number of women holding elective positions. Statistics however, show that women's limited participation in politics and governance is neither due to a lack of qualified women, nor their level of exposure and intellectual skills for participation.

There are *three issues in the public domain* that may offer some explanation for women's limited participation in politics and public life in Kenya.

First is the *socio-political environment* in which the electioneering processes take place. Secondly, the *role of political parties* and their internal structures and operations in facilitating women's participation; and, thirdly, the *socio-economic environment* in which the 2007 electoral processes are taking place in Kenya.

#### 1. Socio-Political environment

The *2007 Kenyan General Election* has the highest number of women political aspirants ever witnessed in the country's history. There are over 120 women cleared through the different political parties to run for parliamentary seats, and, many more are running for civic seats. This scenario is the result of a concerted effort by the non- governmental organizations and civil society activities that started in earnest in early 2006 in the run up to the 2007 electioneering period. Most of the sensitization and mobilization activities have been undertaken by the Gender and Governance Program partners who are funded by development agencies through the UNIFEM kitty for women, and, in furtherance of Article 3 of the *Millennium Development Goals for Kenya*.

Many sensitization workshops and seminars for women aspirants focused on individual skills for capacity and confidence building, including: identification of electioneering issues, development of relations with the media houses, and the packaging the 'self' for public space and elective position. The emphasis has been on "transformative" political leadership, undergirded by the principle that no society can hope to progress when women are locked out of political participation. In Kenya women comprise 52% of the voting population - this is too significant a proportion to be ignored in the decision making processes and public policies that affect the lives of women and those of their families.

Yet, a cursory observation of what happened during the party nominations in November 2007 reveal two disquieting trends: firstly, that political parties are not ready to accommodate women candidates, and secondly that the public mindset is generally so patriarchal that the female gender roles are first and foremost considered before individual woman's leadership qualities can be acknowledged and embraced.

Presently Kenyan political parties revolve around individual founders with whom the parties are

identified, and who are, to some extent, responsible for funding the party activities. This fact defines the extent of women's involvement in the hierarchical structure of the party relative to women's low economic capability in a patriarchal society. The lower the women's economic capability, the further away from the center of power and decision making they are within these parties, and, the less likely it is that aspiring women would be able to negotiate and influence their chances of winning party nomination.

Secondly, until the political parties' bill comes into operation, it is virtually impossible for a woman candidate to fund her own election campaign from her own resources even if she won her party nomination. But more importantly, the cut-throat competition from the male counterparts which includes huge spending on voter bribery, character assassination, mudslinging, false promises, propaganda, and so on, make the cost of involvement in the current socio-political environment too costly in terms of social capital, especially for many career women with leadership qualities. Many career women find the social environment hostile and are not willing to play hard-ball in the political game which is played according to male-stream rules, and at the expense of family and career dignity and social standing - even as role models to the girl child.

During the recent nomination exercises in November, women aspirants were subjected to physical beatings and rape, abductions, and even deliberate delay and hijacking of the nomination exercises in order to cause conflict with women's other gender role performances. In September, Flora Igoki Tera, an ODM Kenya Parliamentary Candidate for the North Imenti constituency in Meru district of Kenya, was attacked and tortured by a gang of 5 men, near her Meru home. Ms Alice Onduto, a parliamentary aspirant for Lugari Constituency who lost in the nominations was shot dead while on her way home in Nairobi's South C estate on 1/12/07. Her assailants have not been apprehended. All this has a two-pronged impact: the female voters are intimidated and denied opportunity to support the candidate of their choice, and secondly, the aspirants are traumatized psychologically and physically intimidated into giving up on the quest for elective positions.

## **2. Role of political parties**

There is no provision for independent political candidates for elective positions in the current Kenyan constitution. This means that any aspiring candidate must be nominated by a political party in order to run for elective political office. The increased awareness of the historical social injustices to women perpetuated by patriarchal structures across the African region, has led the civil society to consistently advocate for ways to seek to redress this anomaly.

One suggestion that has been promoted is that the government should adopt affirmative action as a national policy towards the realization of greater participation by women in public affairs. This is not the first time the civil society and women groups are agitating for affirmative action in Kenya, in fact this policy was first verbalized in the 1970s by Mrs. P. Asiyo - then the only elected woman member of Parliament. In spite of the demonstrated success of this policy in bringing about the desired changes in neighboring countries, the "male-stream" Ninth Parliament did not support the Bill for enactment. Hence the political parties are not bound by any regulation to facilitate greater participation by women in both political party and national affairs.

Indeed those who have vested interests in the maintenance of status quo have argued that Kenyan women are so amply qualified that attempts to implement affirmative action would slight their competitiveness and suggest that they are of such feeble mind and weak leadership ability as to require a leg up in the public sphere.

The three major political parties have been crisscrossing the country in the hunt for votes. All the

parties are aware of the significance of women's votes and consequently have been verbalizing their commitment to social justice and, for women's concerns. We all waited with bated breath in November to see if political parties would grant, at least some women aspirants direct party nominations. This has not happened in the three main parties. Such a let-down to women party supporters given that the manifestos of the major parties contain specific clauses about party commitments to women's concerns.

One may be forgiven for being cynical and believing that this may just be one more occasion for politicking and paying lip service for the sake of getting the women's votes without commitment. It is also noted that no party has taken any disciplinary measures against perpetrators of violence against women - even in cases where evidence has been provided and individuals have been named. In the Kenyan electioneering process violence against women are equated with acts of "normal thuggery". Women remain situated far from the center of power within the political parties. They do not hold positions of influence that can impact the party nominations neither do they have the financial clout to fund their own election campaigns.

Therefore following the male-dominated party nominations fiasco that was witnessed in November, many women aspirants had no choice but to migrate to smaller and peripheral political parties in order to receive nomination certificates to for elections. Kenyan political parties are nothing more than vehicles to parliament, and have no ideological distinctions, for practical purposes, and in this regard women incur no ideological losses in changing parties. Women, on the on the hand, lose voter hype and attention when they move to small parties that have no impact and are not popular in their constituencies.

### **3. The socio-economic environment of the 2007 electoral processes**

Becoming a Member of Parliament is the most lucrative job one can land in Kenya today. It is the kind of job that has no strict rules governing the quality of performance, it is a job where the employee becomes the unquestionable lord over the masses. The crushing levels of poverty in rural communities, and the gap between the haves and have-nots continue to disenfranchise the masses (mostly rural women) who have family responsibilities, forcing them to sell their voter's cards in exchange for small amounts of money to put food on the table. The voter's card buyers are agents of unpopular but wealthy candidates who presume to have a monopoly of parliamentary seats and the accruing privileges.

Very few of women political aspirants have this kind of financial resources to disburse to the poor demanding masses among whom the culture of dependency, and financial handouts have been politically engineered and entrenched over the years. This fact makes the sizable block of women's vote very fluid and transient, and therefore cannot be relied upon by women aspirants who do not have the required handouts to give.

Furthermore, women political aspirants suffer a lack of goodwill and family support. Whenever men aspirants are campaigning for elections, their wives and other relatives support them and are their most trusted campaign agents. This privileged support is not true for women aspirants. Even in cases where husbands and male relatives give moral support, it does not translate into active physical and financial engagement, that is, the relatives allow the women to campaign, but do not actively join in to lend their support. Women are physically more vulnerable to electoral violence; they literally require constant security against hired goons. Women are economically compromised because very few have the accumulated funds of their own for campaign expenses.

Therefore, when women political aspirants have no financial support, political good will from political

parties, or access to family resources, for logistical facilitation, then their chances of waging successful political campaign is seriously compromised, and their leadership potential and contribution to the nation will not be realized. These are some of the underpinnings to the low visibility and audibility of women's participation in the highly patriarchal Kenyan political process.

In conclusion one may say that today the attainment of critical mass is occurring faster than the Kenyan political elite would care to acknowledge. Women as voters are both listening and watching the political campaign promises and trends. Many women leaders and voters are hoping to see many more women get into parliament more than before. They are hoping to hear their issues articulated and acted upon by way of public policies by the government of the day, in a manner that would impact their quality of life. The rural women are more likely to demand accountability from members of the tenth parliament than has ever been witnessed before.

Most political aspirants during their campaigns are invoking issues such as: provision of clean and accessible water supply, accessible quality medical services, quality education, roads and marketing infrastructure that would enable rural women to sell their surplus agricultural produce to earn a living, and, physical security to enable them to enjoy the little that is theirs by their sweat. The rural women will be watching the performance of the Tenth parliament, and at the end will act accordingly. These are the key concerns of Kenya's women - politics, class and ethnic divisions aside.

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