



Ms. Satang Nabanech is a Child Rights activist and women’s rights advocate. She has in-depth knowledge of the rights and empowerment of women which she has translated into capacity building, programme development, research and practical engagement with grassroots, national, regional and international organizations and platforms she is part of and has worked with.

She possesses strong advocacy, presentation and communications skills as well as good research and networking skills necessary to advance the leadership development for young women that she ardently believes in and passionate about.

The Power of Women’s Political Participation in ECOWAS

By Satang Nabaneh (The Gambia)

1 Introduction

“Full political participation will become a reality for us, as women, when quotas and set-asides become a relic of the past; when our access in participatory institutions at all levels is considered a right; and when we no longer feel compelled to wage campaigns and stage protests in order to have a say in the decisions that affect our lives – be it at the peace table or in the political and economic arenas.” Ellen Sirleaf Johnson¹

A true democracy is characterized by the full and equal participation of women and men in the formulation and implementation of decisions in all spheres of public life. No country can call itself democratic if half of the population is excluded from the decision-making process.² Political

¹ “African Women and Political Participation” Lecture by H.E. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf President of the Republic of Liberia On the Occasion of the 10th Anniversary Of the African Women’s Development Fund (AWDF) 2010 http://www.emansion.gov.lr/doc/20101112AWDF_final_speech.pdf

² IDEA ‘The Implementation of Quotas: African Experiences’(2004) *Quota Report Series 66*

participation refers to activities by citizens that are aimed at influencing the selection and decisions of government personnel.³

The continent of Africa has one female head of state, in Liberia. At the ministerial level, South Africa, Guinea-Bissau, and Rwanda lead the continent. In these countries, women comprise more than 35 per cent of ministerial posts, of which The Gambia has the only female and longest serving vice president. Despite international commitments to bridge the gender gap in the formal political arena which are reinforced by the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the Beijing Platform for Action and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), there are only twelve countries where women hold 33% or more seats in the parliaments.⁴

Within the African Union, the Supplementary Protocol, the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the rights of women in Africa places particular emphasis on the promotion of equality between men and women at all levels of society. At the regional level, several Articles of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance are devoted to this issue.

In the majority of ECOWAS states, and by extension African countries, however, women hold less than 20 per cent of ministerial positions. Among women ministers, the most common portfolios are family, children, youth, elderly, handicapped, social affairs, women's affairs, gender equality, and education.⁵

This paper attempts to identify the socio-cultural and economic factors that hinders the effective participation of women in politics; document best practices as it seeks to drive home the argument for women's political participation in a wider comparative framework, by way of referring to select best practices strewn in the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) region; and finally draw recommendations for the national and local actors.

Women have been kept outside the public domain of politics as most of the political thinkers and philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle, John Lock, and Thomas Hobbes considered women fit only for the domestic roles in the private sphere. The public-private divide remains as the foundation of the various forms of world democracies.⁶ To ensure a genuine political space for women, liberal democracies need to change.

³ Verba, S., N. Nie, and J.-O. Kim 'Participation and Political Equality: A Seven National Comparison' (1978) Cambridge

⁴ United Nation Development (2005), Human Development Report, 2005.

⁵ Based on the map "Women in politics: 2005", Inter-Parliamentary Union and Division for the Advancement of Women, United Nations.

⁶ RM Shirin 'International Perspective on Gender and Governance' (2000) Macmillan Press, Great Britain.

2 Factors hindering Women's Political Participation

The social, cultural and economic conditions of women impede their participation in politics. Discrimination, economic dependency, gender-based violence, and other abuses prevent women from enjoying their rights and entering politics or succeeding when they start a political career.

The 50th session of the Commission on the Status of Women in 2006 adopted agreed conclusions on the equal participation of women and men in decision-making processes which,

“expressed concern at the serious and persistent obstacles, which were many and varied in nature, that still hindered the advancement of women and further affected their participation in decision-making processes, including, inter alia, the persistent feminization of poverty, the lack of equal access to health, education, training and employment, armed conflict, the lack of security and natural disasters.”⁷

2.1 Socio-cultural factors

Women in West Africa involved in politics face a variety of social and cultural barriers that greatly hinders their effective participation. These are manifested in the form of misconceived socio-cultural beliefs, prejudices and stereotypes which are generally male-dominated. These beliefs strengthen cultural values, practices and structures that pin down women to specific traditional gender roles and family responsibilities. Society fore-mostly sees women as primary caregivers.

2.1.1 Patriarchy

Patriarchal politics entails the belief that the man is the 'natural' head of household, and that this decision-making role naturally extends to the public domain of national politics. Andrienne Rich defines patriarchy as:

“a familial-social, ideological, political system in which men by force, direct pressure or through ritual, tradition, law and language, customs etiquette, education, and the division of labor, determine what part women shall or shall not play in which the female is everywhere subsumed under the male.”(Rich 1977:57)

Lerner succinctly defines it in the following prose:

Patriarchy in its wider definition means the manifestation and institutionalization of male dominance over women and children in the family and the extension of male dominance over women in society in general. It implies that men hold power in all the important institutions of society and that women are deprived of access to such power.⁸

⁷ 50th session of the Commission on the Status of Women (2006) <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/csw/csw50/bk-info/ECN62006CRP4.pdf> (CSW agreed conclusions 1997/3, para 11)

⁸ G Lerner *Reconceptualising the family* (2000) 65.

It is this belief that justifies treating women as legal minors, or second-class citizens. From this perspective, a woman needs the permission of her husband, or other supervising male, in order to undertake any action in the public sphere. This 'right to rule' is often underpinned by the (unscientific) belief that men are biologically superior, especially mentally. This claim is then used as the basis for male exercise of political power.⁹ For example, Sierra Leone remains a male-dominated society and politics has been regarded as male domain issue.”¹⁰

As one expert notes: “a traditional, strong, patriarchal value system favours sexually segregated roles, and so-called ‘traditional cultural values’ militate against the advancement, progress, and participation of women in any political process.”¹¹

2.1.2 Gender role ideology

The perceived traditional roles of men and women have not changed in relation to daily practice. Popular perceptions often suggest that women's "proper" place is still in the home rather than in politics.¹² The responsibilities that women have for their households put constraints on time with the unequal division of labor at home. The gender profiling is thus used as an ideological tool by patriarchy to confine women within the private arena of home as mothers and wives and men in the public sphere.¹³

Time is a major constraint which makes it almost impossible for women to participate. The excessive domestic chores performed by women are a clear illustration. Women leaders and professionals are still faced with traditional roles and also have to meet work/professional expectations. Due to our cultural setting, the women are still pre-occupied with domestic and family obligations that take up a large portion of their time. Women continue to play the triple role of producers, maintainers and reproducers. To be able to cope with all these responsibilities, women are expected to have and operate on an elastic concept of time. Sometimes, this elasticity is not high enough to allow them to participate in public activities.

2.1.3 Cultural Factors

⁹ S Longwe and R Clarke, ‘Africa Leadership Forum: Towards Improved Leadership for Women's Empowerment in Africa: Measuring Progress and Improving Strategy’ (1999) 55

¹⁰ Report of Online discussion on Women, political participation and decision-making in Africa Organized by the Division for the Advancement of Women of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs

¹¹ Post-Conflict Reconstruction Task Framework. 3.

¹² (n above 10) 16

¹³ (n above 10)

Closely related to this, are cultural inhibitions that limit their experience or exposure outside the private sphere. These limitations can be found in various cultural and religious taboos. For example, in Nigeria, even the few women that are educated find it difficult to join politics, due to the fact that most men will not allow their wives to join politics. Women in politics are considered to be free or loose.¹⁴ Campaigning and being a leader often involves travel, spending nights away from home, going to bars to meet people, and meeting men, all of which put women politicians at risk of being thought of as loose.¹⁵ Neither their husbands nor their male relatives have succumbed to the changes ushered in by the era of gender equality promotion. An advocate commenting said ‘...unless people start to realize that culture is dynamic, women will always be the voters not the elected candidates.’¹⁶

As Inglehart and Norris defined, cultural factors are those that affect an individual’s “motivation and interest to become active in public affairs.”¹⁷ Not surprisingly, this definition encompasses a diverse range of possible factors that can have profound influences on women’s political participation. It permits ‘insidious malignant sexism’ against women.¹⁸

2.1.4 Religion

Religion remains an integral part of African society. It subordinates women and makes men ‘heads’ of all institutions.¹⁹ In The Gambia for instance, and other countries where Islam is prominent, men use religion to argue that in Islam women cannot be leaders of men. An-Na’im further notes that the Islam based *Shari’a* law disqualifies women from holding high-ranking public office.²⁰

The domain of politics has been associated with attributes such as physical strength, power, thuggery, autonomy, independence and rationality, which are all typically associated with masculinity

¹⁴ “Women in Parliaments 2003: Nordic and Post-Conflict Countries in the Lead.” Inter-Parliamentary Union, March 2004. 15 June 2005 <http://www.ipu.org/press-e/gen183.htm>.

¹⁵ (n above 1)

¹⁶ (n above 10) 16

¹⁷ Inglehart, Ronald and Pippa Norris. 2003. *Rising Tide: Gender Equality and Cultural Change Around the World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

¹⁸ CE Ukhun & NA Inegbedion ‘Cultural authoritarianism, women and human rights issues among the Esan people of Nigeria’ (2005) 5 *African Human Rights Law Journal* 129, 133.

¹⁹ See B Gallaway & L Creevey ‘The Heritage of Islam: Women, religion, and politics in West Africa’ in CG Bowman & A Kuenyehia (eds) *Women and law in Sub-Sahara Africa* (2003) 592. See also M Afkhami ‘Gender apartheid, cultural relativism, and women’s human rights in Muslim societies’ in M Agosin (ed) *Women, gender, and human rights: A global perspective* (2002) 234.

²⁰ A An-Na’im ‘The rights of women and international law in the Muslim context’ (1987) 9 *Whittier Law Review* 491, 493. He notes that the sources of disqualification are Qur’anic and Sunna statements 2:282 & 4:34.

which tends to disfavor women.²¹ We interpret these gaps to mean that many Africans continue to see politics as a male sphere of endeavor.

2.1.5 Education

The lack of skills, education and experience serve as formidable obstacles to women's political participation and representation. Lack of the requisite quality skills and education naturally affects the self-confidence and esteem of women, hence their inferiority complex. The advantages that men enjoy in access to both education and the print media (and to a lesser extent to news on the radio) go part way toward explaining why they are cognitively better prepared to engage in political life.

In countries like Ghana, men and women have attained nearly equal access to the critical resource of education, as it has one of the smallest gender gaps in participation.²² This offers further support for the hypothesis that education in fact plays a major role in explaining the gender gap in political activism. Unfortunately, educational equality remains a distant objective for most of the other West African states.

In The Gambia, women are underrepresented in the top hierarchy of decision making positions, despite the fact that they constitute 58% of voters and they exercise their franchise during elections.²³ In the 2006 elections for the National Assembly of 54 members, only 1 woman was elected through the ballot box, 1 was returned unopposed and 3 were nominated (Electoral Report 2006). Female representation in the National Assembly is 13 % and falls far below that recommended by the Inter Parliamentary Union and the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). There are no women Commissioners at the Divisional Level, no women Chiefs at the District Level and there are only three women alkalos in the Ward Level. This absence of representation at this critical grassroots level is what is reflected in the National Assembly.²⁴

The factors that hinder women's advancement and leadership are identified as low levels of education and training. This results to women not meeting the constitutional requirement to be voted for. However, of the 53 members of parliament, there are only four women - two elected and two nominated - including deputy speaker.²⁵

²¹ Governance: Women and the democratization process' Statement by the Vice President of The Gambia and Minister of Women's Affairs, HE Isatou Njie-Saidy '<http://www.statehouse.gm/vp-speeches/women-democracy.html>

²² Mo Ibrahim Index (2011) 26.

²³ 'Female Lawyers Sensitize Political Parties' *Foroyaa* 26 August 2011

²⁴ (n above 21)

²⁵ (n above 23)

2.2 Economic Factors

Governance is increasingly becoming commercialised and costly. Money is needed to participate in politics. However, lack of education and access to resources by women serve as great hindrances. In this situation, it must be recognized that it is difficult for women to participate in political life when their major concern is survival and they have no choice but to spend much of their time trying to fulfill the basic needs of families.²⁶ In the light of conflict and HIV pandemic, they become the primary care givers for their children, the elderly and the extended family. This phenomenon is confirmed by research showing that educated and economically independent women are more likely to enter politics than other women.²⁷ The financial burden of being a candidate entails a lot of financial obligations that they cannot afford. One scholar referred to this phenomenon as, ‘the feminization of poverty and unemployment’

Even when women are affiliated with political parties, they are often responsible for their own transportation and the production and dissemination of campaign materials. In contrast with women, often male candidates might have already been employed in official positions, maintain networks of potential funders and business associates, and are accustomed to raising and spending money for their own use.²⁸

Therefore, the laws, customs, religions, political parties, the ideology of patriarchy, and the gendered public/private dichotomy all play a role in keeping women out of politics thus making it difficult for their *de jure* right to representation to translate into *de facto*.

3 Best Practices

Despite political, societal, cultural, economic, and psychological barriers, women are finding ways to overcome challenges and participate in the political life of their societies in record numbers. From the field of politics, there are major success stories from ECOWAS countries. Interestingly, many of the countries with the highest proportion of women in decision-making structures have recently emerged from armed conflict. As noted by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), “the last five years have seen

²⁶ (n above 11) 3

²⁷ J Kareen. ‘Enhancing the Role of Women in Electoral Processes in Post-Conflict Countries: Post-Election support’ (EGM/Elec/2004/EP.3). United Nations Office of the Special Adviser on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women (OSAGI); See also L Powell *et al* ‘Male and female differences in elite political participation: An examination of the effects of socio-economic and familial variables’ (1981) 34 *Western Political Quarterly* 31, 33. The authors argue that women with high levels of income have increased opportunities in political participation.

²⁸ N Shvedova ‘Obstacles to women’s participation in parliaments’ in J Ballington *et al* (eds) *Women in parliament: Beyond numbers* (2005) 42.

post-conflict countries feature prominently in the top 30 of the IPU's world ranking of women in national parliaments."²⁹

Sierra Leone and Liberia continue to demonstrate statistically significant improvement in overall governance quality over the past five years.³⁰ The successful candidacy of Africa's first female elected president, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, who won with 59 percent of the vote and was sworn into office in January 2006 is the best example in the West African sub-region. Liberian women represented 50 percent of registered voters, and in seven out of 15 counties, they actually made up the majority of registered voters.³¹ A woman chaired the National Electoral Commission (NEC), and two of the five appointed commissioners were women.³² Ellen Johnson Sirleaf was reelected for a second term of office in 2011 and also became a Nobel prize winner.

Previously in 2000, the women of Niger succeeded in having voted a law setting quotas for political representation which seems to be inspiring women in other countries in the region. As a result, the number of women in parliament has risen from 1 to 14 in only a few years. In May 2011, President Thomas Boni Yayi appointed eight women as cabinet ministers out of the total number of 27 ministers.³³

Impressively, Cape Verde is in the top 5 of the Mo Ibrahim Index and 7th position under gender which is encapsulated in the participation and human rights component.³⁴ Presidential elections took place on the 7th August 2011 showing that the number of women elected to the national assembly is gradually rising with 15.3% in 2006 and 20.80% in 2011.³⁵

Gender quotas are an effective tool in addressing women's exclusion and ensuring their presence and participation in formal structure. However, as noted by Ria, while quotas are important in addressing the exclusion of women from the political sphere, they can only form one part of a multi-faceted strategy for empowering women.³⁶ In the absence of a legislative mechanism, ECOWAS countries, have mainly concentrated on working with political parties and political actors generally, through initiatives to raise awareness, advocacy campaigns, and the holding of training workshops.

²⁹ Inter-Parliamentary Union, Report n° 54, 'Equality in Politics: A Survey of Women and Men in Parliaments Reports' (2008)

³⁰ (n above 14)

³¹ 2005 Voter Registration Statistics. Monrovia:

http://www.necliberia.org/Statistics_Maps/dstatistics10september2005.pdf.

³² "Commissioners of the National Elections Commission, NEC." Monrovia: National Elections Commission, 2005
<http://www.necliberia.org/links/commissioners.shtml>

³³ Benin President Appoints Scaled-Back Cabinet With More New Comers, Women, Serge- David Zoueme, May 29,2011
<http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2011-05-29/Benin/41>.

³⁴ (n above 22)

³⁵ Make Every Woman Count, 'Women's participation in election across Africa' 2011. See also <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm>

³⁶ (n above 6)

Finally, as rightly posited, the equal participation of men and women at all levels of governance and decision-making structures advances peace, stability, gender equity, human rights and good governance for development on the continent.

4 Recommendations

4.1 State

- The state should introduce gender quotas at political party, local and national representative bodies to allocate a percentage of seats to women.
- The state should review existing laws, policies and institutions to align them with the concept of equality between men and women.
- Encourage women’s activism and leadership on “hard” issues, such as defense or finance, as well as “soft” issues such as healthcare or education.
- Introduce measures such as gender sensitive budgets and inclusion of women in structures for civilian oversight of military, and ensure women’s presence in previously male-dominated government ministries and activities.
- Create a conducive environment to ensure that women are not discouraged, disadvantaged or discriminated upon both de jure and de facto, whilst claiming their rights to be part and parcel of the decision making process of their country.
- Clear code of ethics for election and campaigning that, inter alia, prohibits any discriminatory or derogatory attack on female candidates that deprives them of the right to contest election and to be voted into decision making positions.

4.2 Religious actors

- Religious leaders should reinterpret religious teachings and paradigms making them more inclusive of women and women’s interests that encourage female leadership.
- Create inter-faith networks or cadre of influential leaders to educate the followers in a bid to promote, encourage, and endorse women politicians.
- Use individual and family counselling, religious sermons, and public meetings to advocate for legal change and to ensure better representation of women in government.
- Allow more women to seek more knowledge in religion and theology

4.3 Political actors

- Politicians should establish cross-party caucuses to promote networking, strengthen women's voices, and raise the profile of women's agendas and priorities.
- Undertake temporary special measures to ensure women's representation at the political level such as inter-party committees.
- Political parties, being 'gatekeepers' of parliaments in that they decide who makes it into their party lists or who becomes a candidate must be required by law to adopt gender quotas noncompliance of which must attract sanctions. This has to be buttressed by strong institutional frameworks that will ensure compliance.
- Create a gender-sensitive environment in the public sphere e.g., accessible language, session meeting hours, childcare facilities

4.4 Women and girls

- Greater emphasis should be put on the education of young boys and girls as a means of teaching them about their rights and the legal instruments available to them.
- Better account must be taken about the preoccupations of today's young women, which are different from those of their mothers. Target young women whose participation in politics can be important markers of inclusive peace building and good governance.
- Programs should be established to encourage women and the youth to partake in the political realm and vote.
- Literature review of young women's political participation must be done. This is to highlight the important distinction between generational and life-cycle effects. A generation effect means that even as the young become older, their generation possesses certain characteristics and historical experiences that determine their political behaviors and preferences (see Dalton 1988).³⁷
- Women need to transform their numerical power into real power through collaboration among themselves to achieve a common purpose, given that in almost every society they are the majority.
- Research, documentation and dissemination of best practices and experiences in ECOWAS is needed to promote women's participation in politics and serve as a source of inspiration for younger women.

³⁷ Dalton, R. J. (1988). *Citizen Politics in Western Democracies*. New Jersey: Chatham House.

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