

Perils and Promises; Living Feminist Politics in Uganda

African Gender Institute Panel Discussion

On International Women's Day, 8th March 2004

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This panel has been organized by the African Gender Institute (UCT) to mark International Women's Day. Why should there be an International Women's Day? That is the first question I would like to address.

All over the world, communities of people interpret biological differences between women and men to create a set of social expectations that define the behaviors that are appropriate for women and men and that determine women's and men's differential access to rights, resources, and power in society. Although the specific nature and degree of these differences vary from one society to the next, they typically favor men, creating an imbalance in power and gender inequalities in all countries.

There are some instances in which boys and men, because of the influence of existing gender norms, have less access than women to certain resources. For example, in Lesotho the current gender gap in secondary school enrollment rates is because there are fewer boys than girls at that level of education. This reverse gender gap is attributed to the apartheid system of exploiting cheap male labour from the region to the South African minerals sector. Despite such examples of reverse gender gaps, overall, the evidence shows that women and girls still continue to suffer a greater disadvantage in access to resources and power than men and boys.

The international community has on numerous occasions affirmed that women have a right to equality. Over the past two decades, governments have made commitments towards achieving gender equality and women's empowerment at UN conferences, such as the World Conference on Human Rights held in Vienna in 1993, the International Conference on Population and Development held in

Cairo in 1994, and the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing and the World Summit on Social Development held in Copenhagen, both of which occurred in 1995. More recently, gender equality and women's empowerment was included as Goal 3 of the MDGs at the UN Millennium Summit to remind the world that many of the promises in international instruments have not been kept, while also offering yet another international policy opportunity to implement them.

At each of these international conferences, governments agreed to a number of time-bound targets, with 1990 as the base year, to serve as benchmarks of progress. While most of these targets focus on education and health, the Beijing Platform for Action includes a target for increasing the representation of women in positions of power and decision-making.

On International Women's Day we recognize the contributions that women make to all aspects of development and the costs to societies of persistent inequalities between women and men. We recognize that inequalities compromise women's human rights and disadvantage women from fully developing their potential. We assess the progress made in our countries towards achieving the goal of gender equality and women's empowerment and take stock of the challenges ahead. It is a privilege to share a platform today with a distinguished African feminist activist, a friend who has been a great inspiration to me, Pregs Govender, and share my perspective on the perils and promises, challenges and prospects for advancing a feminist agenda in politics on our continent. My presentation is based on my experience and observation of the Ugandan political context.

In the majority of countries in Sub-Saharan Africa women hold fewer than 20 percent of seats in their national parliaments. However, women in seven countries; Rwanda, South Africa, Mozambique, Namibia, Seychelles, Tanzania and Uganda have made major political gains. Currently, women in Uganda hold about 25% of the total seats in parliament, more than 33% of local government seats and about 30% of cabinet positions. Ours is one of the first countries on the continent to use quotas and constitutional reservations to increase the number of women in politics. In fact, the affirmative action provision is a widely debated subject in the on-going

constitutional review process. The debate is about whether or not reserving seats for women in parliament and local governments has had any positive impact on the lives of women and society in general. Those who think it has had no effect conclude that the provision should be deleted from the constitution. This is in spite of the fact that the constitution clearly and explicitly states that “women have a right to affirmative action” as a means of redressing historical imbalances. The constitution does not condition affirmative action to the performance of women politicians. In other words, the only situation envisaged by the constitution for removing the provision is when there is a clear possibility of achieving gender parity without affirmative action. Despite more than 17 years of promoting women in politics through affirmative action policies, there is still broad resistance in society against women in politics.

This then is the background against which women in politics have to operate. On the one hand, a “progressive” leadership has responded to women’s demands and created a space in the political process thus providing a powerful opportunity for challenging patriarchy and women’s subordination and oppression, but on the other hand a predominantly rural and patriarchal society resists change and creates ambivalence among the “progressive” leaders. The result is that women are able to take their place in the representative bodies but they receive little support from “progressive” male colleagues and meet societal resistance in gender equality advocacy. Many women politicians choose the easier way out of moving with the majority and sticking to the safer issues that do not rock the boat. But feminists want to change the world. They therefore have to hold hands and navigate a political terrain, where opportunity and constraint, promise and peril are never far from each other. I have found this struggle challenging, risky but greatly fulfilling. The bonds I have built with other feminists have enriched my life and shaped me to be the person that I am, warts and all!

Being a feminist in African politics, as elsewhere, requires having a vision of an alternative world, a realistic, doable agenda of issues, a clear plan of how they can be achieved and a good sense of the political environment. It requires forging many alliances, some of them temporary and others more enduring. It is important to understand the extent to which a party in power is ready to prioritise

gender issues and not to underestimate the patriarchal attitudes of individual leaders but which can be camouflaged by politically correct feminist rhetoric. The work of an African feminist politician consists of selecting battles carefully, choosing the right language and tactics to fight and fighting them with just enough force to survive and fight again. It consists of taking some steps forward and painfully holding back one's fire, as some gains are rolled back sometimes by allies. It involves refusing to compromise on a matter of principle and risking being abandoned on the floor of parliament and suffering public humiliation. It is about winning the trust of poor women and men, and other marginalized people being accused by colleagues of being populist. It requires that one knows oneself well enough to withstand the pressure from political opponents as well as party colleagues. A feminist politician has to be ready to pay a high price for being a voice of conscience especially when operating in an environment where politics of defending the status quo are dominant. But a lone voice, or a few voices, if honest, realistic, clear and consistent can be powerful and can drive change. It is important to build and work in coalitions although sometimes one has to stand alone to make an important point. Limited opportunities can be used to achieve unexpected gains. Indeed it is as much a perilous as it is a promising journey.

During Idi Amin's rule, I left Uganda and went to exile in the UK and have since been a political activist - 26 years now. For 19 years, I have been appointed or elected to work in the political arena. It is my mother who first made me a feminist by her own example of how she made her choices and exercised her rights and by taking us, her daughters, to the village women's clubs which she led. This is way back in the 60s. I would like to use a few examples to illustrate the challenges and prospects of taking forward a feminist agenda in Uganda's politics.

Following a controversial election in December 1980, a young radical called Yoweri Museveni declared a protracted people's war on the civilian government of the Uganda People's Congress (UPC), which many viewed as having rigged the election. Being a youth activist in the Democratic Party at that time, I was angry at the regime in power and like many other Ugandans I felt that the option of a peaceful return to democracy after Amin's reign of terror had been lost. Only another war would disarm the group in power and restore the

opportunity for establishing genuine democracy. So, when Museveni contacted me in London in June 1981 and invited me to join the National Resistance Movement (NRM) armed struggle that he had launched in February the same year, I was more than ready for the challenge. For six months, I worked closely with him and a few other NRM cadres and then it was time to return to the bush. Although I was ready to join the guerilla army, Museveni's view was that the conditions at that time were too harsh for a woman to bear. After considering sending me to Zimbabwe, he finally decided to send me back to Uganda to wait for a deployment outside the war zones. We had a long debate about my suitability for the guerilla war or otherwise. His argument was that as an African, he "idolised" (*his word*) women and could not deploy a woman under certain harsh conditions of war if he could avoid it. If the conditions improved he could foresee the need and the possibility of recruiting women in the war zones.

I tried to interrogate this view that he seemed to hold so firmly. I questioned what this implied for equality of women and men in a new Uganda that we were trying to create through the armed struggle. Would women in future be equal to men as citizens if, at this critical stage of deconstructing and constructing new politics, we are not able to contribute as men? He dismissed my misgivings as the result of "Western confusion" in African minds and argued that women and men did not have to engage in the same activities to have equal value. He argued further that Africans considered motherhood sacred (hence idolization of mothers) and that women's value derived mainly from that function. He did not offer any explanation why if women had such high social value bordering on the sacred, the majority of them were subordinate to men and suffered discrimination and oppression. (He did not deny that gender inequalities and women's oppression existed).

I found this explanation inadequate. Surely not all women would want to be defined or valued as mothers, irrespective of whether they had mothered or nurtured children. It is not my intention to discuss the merits and demerits of the motherhood paradigm. My point is that right from the early days of the NRM, there was a willingness to have intellectual discussions about gender issues although the male leadership was initially reluctant to allow women into the bush and there were very few educated women recruited in the struggle. It is

also not by accident that under the NRM, most women politicians have usually used motherhood to claim rights for women. While this instrumentalist approach is a powerful strategy in terms of achieving results in the African context, it is limiting because gender equality is only accepted as a means for achieving other ends but not as a right in itself.

Yoweri Museveni and his comrades who founded the NRM/NRA were shaped politically by the African liberation Movements while they were university students at the University of Dar es Salaam. They were associated with radical left-wing politics and Museveni had undertaken military training and spent time as a guerilla volunteer with FRELIMO. With such a liberation background, it was not surprising to find that in a very general way there was acceptance of gender equality and women's empowerment as a principle but apart from the appointment of two women to the National Resistance Council (NRC), the supreme decision-making body of the NRM, and two others to the peace negotiations, there was no other specific action to promote women's participation. It was often explained that the struggle for equality and against patriarchy was a secondary one to the one we were directly engaged in and that pushing gender equality very hard would alienate peasants. That was termed 'obscurantism' and was considered a serious political error in struggle. Many years on, sometimes I have heard the same argument being made but using different words to postpone women's rights during debates on vital legislation. The Land Bill is a case in point. In the initial years of the NRM government, the opportunity to discuss and convince some comrades was always inviting but there also always seemed to be a ready excuse for delaying action. This proved to be a perennial problem, working in what appeared to be a democratic and progressive political and policy environment but not being able to change very much in the lives of poor women. Pushing the envelope as far as possible without causing rapture and losing everything. Gradually the progressive trend disappeared and it was replaced by a pro status-quo patronage politics. In this changed context, there is no space for debates on feminism and its place in the main political agenda. Colleagues can only talk about accommodation of this or that issue and senior women in government are often heard cautioning backbenchers to abandon a gender issue because 'it might rock the boat'.

The NRM came to power in 1986 after a five-year civil war. To mobilize the population for development and against existing political forces, grassroots committees called Resistance Committees were formed throughout the country, and these later formed the basis of the local government structure. On these committees of nine, one position Secretary for Women, was reserved for a woman and all others were open to men and women. In 1989, a policy of affirmative action was introduced to bring more women to parliament (NRC). However, unlike the other special interest seats in local governments and parliament that are elected by the organizations of the interest groups, women's seats are not directly elected by women's organisations. Women representatives are elected through special district colleges consisting of mostly male local government officials. Whereas representatives of the youth, workers and people with disabilities are described as representatives 'of' those groups, women MPs are not called representatives 'of' women. The constitution describes them as 'district women representatives'. On numerous occasions it has officially been explained that affirmative action women MPs do not represent women but everybody in the district. The purpose of the measure is explained as "to increase the woman's voice" in Parliament but not to create special representation for them. This has meant that women elected through affirmative action do not see themselves as representatives of women's interests and are not accountable to women. Indeed sometimes, being feminist can be politically costly since these colleges are made up of conservative pro-establishment men and women. To strengthen the gender accountability link, we successfully moved an amendment introducing universal adult suffrage for women's seats. The President, realizing that women representatives would find a new political independence and switch loyalty from the colleges of NRM officials to grassroots women and men, rejected the amendment and used his powers to send the bill back to parliament for re-consideration. This happened just before elections and not many MPs were eager to earn the wrath of the most powerful politician. So the amendment was dropped.

The method of creating seats for women and reserving them constitutionally has increased the numbers of women in parliament and local councils. This has made women more visible at the decision-making level and given them a chance to learn how to work

in the political arena. However, the possibilities of pushing for gender equality legislation are limited by the allegiance women have to show to the narrow constituencies of mostly male officials that vote them and by a political environment that is restrictive. No better example can be cited than the fate of the 'spousal co-ownership' clause in the Land Act. After a long and arduous lobbying campaign, women's organizations, pro-poor CSOs and women parliamentarians pushed through a land law that strengthened poor rural women's land rights. One particular clause guaranteed that a woman would own together with her husband the piece of land on which she subsisted. We considered this a landmark in our struggle for property rights. However, soon after the passing of the bill, a Cabinet meeting was called and despite having a 30% representation in Cabinet, we learnt that only two women defended the amendment in that body. Cabinet resolved to oppose the clause on the grounds that it would cause paralysis and tension among peasants. All the research that women's organizations had done showing that food security, children's livelihoods and women's security would improve as a result of the clause was ignored. Women ministers who had earlier expressed support for the clause, either fell silent after that meeting or started to speak against the clause. Eventually the co-ownership clause was knocked out of the law technically and shelved permanently.

During debate of the 1995 constitution, the NRM was pre-occupied with entrenching itself in power by restricting the operations of political parties using constitutional limitations on freedom of association and assembly. It was also opposed to federalist demands from the central region of Buganda. The Constituent Assembly Women's Caucus which I led met the Chair of the NRM and promised to support the NRM's positions in exchange for a one third reservation of seats for women on all local government councils. The NRM won on both issues. There were other factors that contributed to the success of NRM in the constitution-making process but the Women's Caucus had a role it played too. History will judge whether this was too high a price to pay for women's local representation. Political parties have continued to challenge the constitution arguing that the rights of assembly and association are like other human rights inherent and inalienable. Without active political parties, women have had to plead with the NRM rather than negotiate for their interests. We are constantly reminded that we were brought to

the decision-making table by the NRM and must first tow the line and consult carefully before making any demands. Women's organizations and other CSOs have learnt the art of self-censorship to be able to exist in the ever-narrowing political space.

Many years of pleading have left the women's movement with a culture of political dependence. Women's organizations and women politicians are finding it difficult to break out of the Movement confines and assert themselves, despite the fact that a consensus has already emerged that Uganda will transit to multipartyism in 2006. An erroneous perception has been created that women's empowerment came from the NRM as a 'gift' and many grassroots women see it as betrayal to oppose the NRM or President Museveni who has, in their opinion, done so much for women. Meanwhile, the NRM projects feminist women as ungrateful, privileged, elite, urban women who are flirting with multipartyism because the risks for them are few, if any. We made our bed and we have to lie in it! This is a challenge feminists must face by going down to the grassroots and explaining ourselves, clarifying the link between full democracy, women's autonomous organizing and women's rights. Multipartyism presents a new opening for negotiation but feminist activists; politicians and feminist women in the academy have to learn new ways of engaging in a changed political process. We have to be ready to learn quickly in order not to lose what we have gained. The most difficult challenge might be that of working together in pursuance of a feminist agenda across party lines.

One morning in 1995 the country was surprised by news on the radio that the relatively powerless Minister of Women in Development had been appointed Vice-president. The Movement political system on the surface appears rather like a feminist structure, horizontal and inclusive. But underneath the surface, it operates like any party. It has its founders, elders (better known as historicals), funders, mobilisers and each activist/functionary has a fair idea where in the hierarchy she/he belongs. By becoming vice-president, Dr Wandira Kazibwe had on the surface become the second most senior politician in the country but she, like most other Ugandans knew that real power lay elsewhere. Her appointment led to what I can only call the "deputy factor". It became a norm for almost every local government to have a male chairperson and a female deputy, most ministries had male

heads and women were appointed junior ministers, Parliament would continue to have a male speaker and a deputy speaker, committees, independent commissions and other state institutions all tended to follow the same pattern. Some researchers found that in local governments women deputies hardly ever chaired sessions as the substantive chair always made sure meetings took place when he was present. They had almost no responsibilities, although later on, they were encouraged to take on children's issues in councils. The post of deputy was like a glorified ghetto for women, a token and nothing more. Despite this general trend, when given a chance, some women deputies have seized the opportunity to demonstrate their capacities, and have moved on to more powerful posts. Some local government deputy speakers moved up to become speakers after one term in office. From a feminist standpoint, tokenism can sometimes be transformed into an empowering opportunity.

In the case of Dr Kazibwe, the gap between her apparent power and the real power she wielded was so great that she was never able to settle down in a political role. She became known for making controversial and usually embarrassing statements and much was made of the fact that she was a woman without the adequate 'preparation' for office. Faced with the possibility of parliamentary censure, she was stripped of her responsibility for the agriculture ministry and remained without any portfolio for the rest of her term as Vice-President. In my opinion, Dr Wandira Kazibwe reacted to her strange and difficult situation in a particular way that is typical of an insecure and isolated person. A gendered interpretation of Kazibwe's weaknesses may have cost women in politics something although it is too early to tell. Eventually, she resigned her post to pursue further studies. There are many women in cabinet but the majority are junior ministers. Their posts were created when we agitated for more cabinet posts for women. They often complain about lack of responsibilities and power. As always peril and promise come together. These relatively powerless positions are exposing women to executive work and in time some of them will be able to wield power and to rise to more powerful posts.

One example I would like to share on the possibilities and constraints for feminist activism concerns my personal experience in the crusade against corruption. We chose to fight corruption as an end in itself but

also as a means of challenging the Movement to democratize internally and to open up the political space for parties to compete with it. In my opinion this was a fundamental battle for feminists to create an open democratic and inclusive space for all. Besides we could not hope to survive as critics of patriarchy in an environment that was dominated by a few men who managed through patronage. Unfortunately feminists in civil society did not see it that way. They wanted us to focus on specific gender issues and could not see the connection between fighting corruption and promoting equality and women's empowerment. So we received little support from the women's movement. There was strong support from the grassroots especially when we exposed and censured corrupt officials. Sometimes it was difficult for some colleagues to carry on against so much pressure from the government. I once challenged a minister accused of corruption to declare his wealth and explain the sources, and to put him on the spot, I took a decision to go it alone and declare my assets before parliament. Following my voluntary declaration, parliament passed a law requiring senior public officials and politicians to publicly declare their assets by submitting their lists to the Inspector general of government annually. I have looked back and felt happy about that achievement even though the period was sometimes very lonely and trying.

Feminist agendas are not constrained by the national context alone. Let me share with you these experiences.

I was walking out of a radio studio after my Saturday chat show when three women of Asian origin approached me. They wanted me to help them stop a cremation of a woman they believed had been murdered by her violent husband on Xmas eve and to cause an enquiry into the cause of her death. To cut a very long story short, I went to a feminist organization I was a member of and we quickly organized a broad coalition of women's organizations. We stopped the cremation and got the enquiry which led to the successful prosecution and sentencing of the husband of Renu Joshi. After that very public, powerful and spontaneous confrontation with violence against women, a UN agency became interested in supporting our coalition. However, it moved in such a way that our initiative was taken out of our hands and brought in to the agency's control. Each organization was assigned a particular role to play for a specific amount of money

and that was the end of our momentum. Today we have a domestic relations bill before parliament that is silent on issues of domestic violence, thanks to an international intervention.

As we struggle to be heard and to be taken seriously by our government on issues of resource allocation and economic policy, we discover that actually our governments have little say on the adopted macro-economic framework and on external issues such as trade policy and debt repayment strategy. The sea of foreign technical advisers who work on PRSP, MTEF, agriculture health education transport and other sectors, are even less sensitive to questions of gender justice than our own government officials. We have found it useful to make alliances with our civil servants and to seek to empower them with gender analytical skills while we also learn from them more about how the economy works and how best to influence economic decision-makers. We are critical of the PRS process and find that it is not what it is claimed to be – broad-based, country-owned, participatory and bringing the voices of the poor themselves in the policy making process. However it has opened up to us opportunities to explore with other pro-poor and pro-human rights groups the links between poverty, globalisation, governance, social justice and women's empowerment and to build synergies for social transformation. We are strengthening our voices through collective action at the local, national, East African and global levels.

In conclusion, to be an African feminist working in the political arena is exciting, risky, problematic, enriching, challenging and fulfilling all at once. In Uganda, a progressive force that led an armed struggle against dictatorship has been in power for 18 years and gradually its political orientation has changed. This has implications for feminist political activism and for individual feminists. We need to be strategic as well as tactical. We must navigate the terrain carefully, looking out for opportunities to exploit and obstacles to avoid. Sometimes we have compromised a lot in order to make some gains. We need to evaluate ourselves critically and learn from the past. We have to work with others, especially pro-poor, pro-democracy and pro-human rights groups, to recover progressive politics, to expand and deepen the democratization process in order to secure safe spaces for feminist struggles. But a single voice of conscience can also trigger positive change. In this respect, a feminist is like a prophet or visionary,

pointing to a future world where there is justice, equality and all people live dignified lives. It requires courage and conviction and willingness to strike out alone, sometimes.

National agendas are not entirely shaped by national leaders. Increasingly feminists have to engage with powerful decision-makers at various levels, local, national, regional and international to have an impact. Neo liberal economics are driven externally. We must understand the decisions of politicians in this context and endeavour to influence what is decided beyond our borders. As we say in my language, you do not kick a man who is already down.

These are some of the lessons we have learnt along the way. Thank you for your attention. I wish all of us a happy day.