



Taming Women in National Elective Leadership Positions-The case of Abagusii of Western Kenya

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received: 4 February 2019;

Received in revised form:
25 March 2019;

Accepted: 5 April 2019;

Keywords

Culture,
Discursive Effect,
Identity,
Sexuality,
Tactics,
Two-thirds Gender Rule.

ABSTRACT

This study investigated the tactics used to curtail women participation in national elective leadership positions among the Abagusii of Western Kenya. Data for this study was collected from 15 Gusii women who were purposively selected because of their participation in the 2013 and 2017 national elections as contestants. The study found that women were unable to win any national elective seats which they competed with men. Their failure was attributed to the tactics male contestants used against them. These tactics were mostly based on moralistic codes of gender and sexuality. This study argues that policies that aim at enhancing women participation in elective leadership positions must first address the social construction of women sexuality in each community.

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Introduction

Background Information

Since Kenya gained self-rule in 1963, the Abagusii of Western Kenya have never elected a woman into the National Assembly. This is not because the Abagusii women are passive participants in the issue of politics or leadership. In 1905 Moraa Ng'iti, a Gusii medicine woman led an anti-British movement in Gusiiland. Ng'iti possessed medicinal powers that she had previously employed to aid the Gusii in their battles against the neighboring Luo and Kipsigis before the arrival of the British. Once the British made their debut in Gusiiland, Ng'iti used her medicinal powers and influence to mobilize the Gusii to fight the new enemy and his equally new weaponry (guns and bullets). However, she was arrested, tortured and imprisoned (Ochieng, 1974).

At the same period, Otenyo Nyamaterere, a Gusii man, killed a colonial administrator, Northcote as part of resistance to colonial rule. After this killing, Otenyo was arrested, tortured and beheaded by the colonial government. His head was then shipped to England where it's kept up to date.

Despite the fact that these two incidents aimed at resisting colonialism, it's the role of Otenyo that is mostly recognized and eulogized. In June 2013 the Abagusii Culture and Development Council, for example, demanded an apology and compensation from Britain for the killing of Otenyo, (Ochoro, 2013). However, there was silence on the role played by Moraa Ng'iti. This raises the question of the role of women leadership in the community.

In 1930s, when bride wealth had increased drastically beyond the reach of many young men, most of them opted not to marry. This led to a high number of single women of marriageable age than any other time in the living history of the Abagusii. The immediate response to high bride wealth was that many fathers started forcing their daughters to get

married to rich old men in order to get enough cattle to enable their sons to marry.

However, many young women defied their fathers on the issue of whom to marry. As a result, most young women ran away from the forced marriages and returned to their natal homes while others eloped with the men of their choice. Those who eloped hoped that with time their fathers would accept a more reasonable bride wealth. This active role of young women drastically changed the Gusii marriage system to the advantage of both young men and women.

This role played by women in transforming the Abagusii marriage system was, however, not appreciated or recognized as it was labeled as a form of deviant behavior (Shadle, 2006). Instead the role played by male traditional leaders which was mostly reactionary in stabilizing payment of dowry was recognized and given prominence, (Masese, 2011).

These examples, indeed, demonstrate that during the colonial period the Abagusii women were actively involved in determining the destiny of the community through their active role in leadership. However, either by omission or commission (tactical) their role in leadership in most Gusii discourses is rarely acknowledged.

In postcolonial period, very few women among the Abagusii have participated in elective leadership. For example, the first woman to contest for parliamentary position was Hon. Catherine Nyamato in 1992 in West Mugirango constituency where she lost to Hon. Henry Obwocha. Though Nyamato lost in this election, the Kenya African National Union (KANU) party nominated her to parliament making her the first woman from the community to go to parliament. In 1997, a second woman, Esther Nyang'ate contested the South Mugirango parliamentary seat through the Kenya National Congress party (KNC) where she

Garnered only 31 out of the 22,604 casted votes. In the 2013 National elections, only three women were cleared to contest for parliamentary seats. These women were Rebecca Kwamboka Otachi who contested the Kitutu Chache North constituency through the Farmers Party of Kenya, Beatrice Nyakambi of PICK (North Mugirango constituency) and Naomi Bosire of RBK (Bomachoge constituency). None of these women was elected to parliament, (Ndubi, 2014).

A critical analysis on women participation in elective leadership among the Abagusii shows that it's only after the introduction of multi-party form of democracy that women started presenting themselves for elective leadership positions. This observation is also reflected at national level. For instance, during the single party era, spanning from 1969 to 1991, only 12 women were elected as members of parliament, while 8 were nominated as compared to 805 and 502 men who were elected and nominated respectively. This represented less than 2% of the 188 elected members of parliament, (Okello, 2010).

During the first election after introduction of multi-party system of governance in 1992, the number of women who participated in elective leadership increased nationally. For example, a total of 50 women sought party nominations in the 1992 National Elections. Out of this 19 succeeded in getting party nominations through various political parties and went through the rigorous political campaign process. After the general election only six were eventually elected to parliament.

In the subsequent general election of 1997, out of the 881 parliamentary candidates who sought nominations through various political parties nationally, only 150 were female. Out of these, only 50 women secured nomination by the various political parties and only a paltry 4 were elected into parliament. In 2002 out of the 200 women who secured nomination only 9 were elected.

The increase of women participation in elective leadership positions since 1992 can be attributed to many factors. Key among them is advocacy by civil society for greater inclusion of women in leadership positions and pressure by International development partners on the government and political parties to reform and open more space for women to conform to the international political climate.

Despite the fact that the number of women seeking nomination for elective leadership positions has steadily increased since independence, the number of elected women members of parliament has remained relatively low (Nyokabi, 2010). Consequently, most governments especially in Sub Saharan Africa have come up with policies that aim at increasing women elective leadership positions. Notable among these policies is the Kenya Constitution that came into effect in August 2010. Article 8(b) of the constitution states that, "not more than two-thirds of the members of elective public positions shall be of the same gender." This means that in every elective leadership position, at least one gender must take a third of the positions. The rationale for this rule was to increase women's participation in politics. Based on the rule, at least 117 members of parliament were to be female (or male if women made the majority in parliament) in the 2013 national general elections.

So far, the principle of two-thirds gender rule has already been implemented in some key appointments made since the new constitution was promulgated. In all the commissions and other constitutional offices that have been formed, the rule has been followed.

However, at the political sphere, the implementation of the two-thirds gender rule has been a hard nut to crack. An attempt by the Kenya National Assembly to come up with a formula on how to achieve this principle became a cropper, (Muiruri, 2012). For example, the suggestion that some electoral units should be reserved strictly for women was rejected as infringing on people's rights to choose their leaders. Yet, there was a bigger danger that if parliament under the new constitution failed to achieve the two-thirds gender rule, it would be declared unconstitutional. The fear of this scenario prompted the Attorney General to seek advisory opinion from the Supreme Court on how this requirement should be implemented.

In December 2012, however, the majority opinion of the Supreme Court advised that the two-thirds gender rule in the constitution must not be fulfilled during 2013 National election. Instead the judges held that article (81b) was to be implemented gradually over a period of time until it is fully achieved by August 2015. This opinion was dismissed by the chief justice who held that the constitutional provision was effective immediately and should be applied during the March, 2013 polls.

Despite this debate surrounding the implementation of the two-thirds gender rule, it is clear that the Kenyan government has resorted to legalism as a way of ensuring women take part in elective leadership positions. The assumption in this approach is that the legal requirement will be a solution to the structural factors that have impeded women participation in politics.

This representation of women participation in elective leadership positions as a legal entity has three interconnected effects: discursive effect (what is discussed and not discussed); the subjectification effect (how people are thought about and how they think about themselves) and the lived effect. For example, the legal requirement of the two-thirds gender rule puts focus on women as the ones who need assistance/help, limiting consideration of socio-cultural context (discursive effect). In effect it creates women as the "problem", affecting how women think about themselves and how others think about them (subjectification effect). As a result, this would affect women participation in elective leadership positions by either encouraging or discouraging them.

Consequently, the way in which the problem of women participation in elective leadership positions is represented or problematized as a legal requirement is so important in understanding the way we live our lives, (Bacchi 2006). This is because this legal requirement is meant to address what has been identified as the problem. Thus, the issue of women participation in elective leadership positions in this context is to be attained through problematization, rather than policies. Therefore, what is critical is to focus on the problematization and the problem the two-thirds gender rule aims to contain.

Important to note is that this problematization approach to the two-thirds gender rule does not deny existence of contextual factors that must be dealt with. Instead, it argues that by defining this legal requirement as a representation of "the problem" or "social problem" would help in fixing the contextual factors in a way that would aid women participation in elective leadership positions by focusing on everyday discourses that determine their participation.

According to Foucault (1996), the objective of studying forms of rules is to reflect on how specific regulations and practices affect lives, where they came from and how they are justified.

In this case, the best way to understand the two-thirds gender rule is to interrogate the content and the nature of the “problem” it aims to solve. This can be done by uncovering the grounding precepts and assumptions that people take for granted and don’t question and the meanings that drive everyday life in relation to women participation in elective leadership positions. This study thus examined the everyday tactics used to curtail women participation in elective leadership positions in the 2013 and 2017 National General Elections using the case study of the Abagusii in Kenya.

Methodology

Data for this study was collected from women who participated in the 2013 and 2017 general elections in Kisii and Nyamira Counties. These two Counties were purposively selected because since Kenya gained independence, no woman has ever been elected to the National Assembly. Thus, both counties became ideal sites for investigating some of the tactics used by male political rivals to curtail women from participating effectively in elective leadership positions.

Research participants for this study were selected purposively with the inclusion criteria being any woman who participated in the 2013 and 2017 national general elections as a contestant in any elective seat other than the women county representative seat. Through this method fifteen participants were selected. Data was collected using in depth interviews. Other methods of data collection were participant observation and informal discussions with members of the community especially those who were heavily involved in political campaigns. The collected data was qualitatively analyzed.

Findings

Many women vied or showed interest in elective leadership positions in the 2013 and 2017 National Elections. Nationally, only fourteen women were elected as members of parliament, in the 2013 national election, which represented a drop by eight from the twenty-two who were elected in the Tenth parliament despite the significant increase in the number of elective seats by 160 from 224 to 384 slots. Further, no woman was elected for senatorial or gubernatorial positions, in the 2013 national election. In the 2017 general election, 23 women were elected as members of parliament. In addition to this, we had three women senators and three women governors who were also elected.

Research findings showed that women who contested parliamentary seats with men in the national general elections were intimidated by their male competitors to drop out of the race. Kwamboka, a 45-year-old married woman and a university graduate who was contesting a parliamentary seat explains:

As per the new constitution, women were allowed to contest all elective posts, that is, the presidency, parliamentary, women county representative, senator, governor, and county representative. I decided to contest for the parliamentary seat because I had a higher chance of winning it due to my development record in the constituency. However, during the campaigns all male contestants ganged up against me. In meetings, the men argued that the constitution had clearly stated that women should contest for the county women representative seat only and were therefore wondering why women were contesting for the parliamentary seat that was meant for men. By campaigning on this platform, I was depicted as wanting to usurp men’s roles in the community - a thing that made many people to be hostile to me.

Kwamboka’s woes clearly show that some female contestants were forced to withdraw because of oppositional readings of the constitution by male rivals. Oppositional reading occurs when individuals interpret texts/discourses within some alternative frame of reference. This mostly occurs when individuals are aware of the differences between the intended meaning and what they choose to read (construct meaning) in relation to their social environment, (Hall, 2006).

In this study the interpretation of the county women representative seat as contained in the 2010 constitution resonated well with Michel de Certeau’s notion of *détournement*. According to De Certeau (1984), the audience is not shaped by the cultural products imposed on them; instead they conduct “raids” on the sites and structures of coercive institutions and generate their own meaning, which then overthrows the power of hegemony. Thus, through use of “tactics” audiences seek to curtail the “strategies” of structures of coercive institutions by re-inventing new ones that disqualify the disruptive power of those strategies.

In this study the setting aside by the constitution of the women county representative position, was perceived by men as entailing “structures” that restricted them from contesting for such a seat. Therefore, male politicians had to look for ways of overcoming these structures. One way of doing so was by deploying interpretative strategies that generated meaning that was favorable to male leadership. In this case, male politicians decoded the county women representative position as the only elective position which the constitution allowed women to contest. Those women who contested in other elective position other than county women were depicted as not respecting the constitution on elective leadership. This reinterpretation of the constitution “detotalized” the aim and spirit of the constitution in the preferred code in order to “retotalize” the message within some alternative framework of reference which disadvantaged women, Hall (2006).

Women were also forced to withdraw from participating in elective leadership positions because their male competitors started depicting them as sexually immoral. Kerubo, a 40-year-old married woman and a political activist with four children explains:

My husband gave me an okay to contest for the seat of county representative. My campaign team was mostly men. We used to move from one household to another daily and later converge in one of the hotels to strategize for the next activities. Our strategy meetings would go to late hours of the night. After the meetings, my campaign manager would escort me to my home. With time, however, my political rivals mostly men started spreading propaganda that I was having an affair with my campaign manager. Unfortunately, my husband who was targeted fell for this propaganda and told me I was embarrassing him with my immorality and must withdraw my candidature.

Kerubo’s narrative demonstrates that even where a man was willing to support a wife for an elective leadership position, this support was more likely to be withdrawn when allegations of sexual immorality emerged. This withdrawal of support is motivated more by the desire by the man to maintain his status and identity which depends on how best he controls his wife’s sexuality, (Silberschmidt 1999). These allegations that Kerubo was having an affair with her campaign manager was a tactic meant to injure her husband’s status and identity so that he stops supporting her and pressurize her to withdraw from the race.

Data from informal discussions with some male politicians revealed that they resorted to this tactic of alleged “sexual immorality” when the female candidate had higher chances of winning. This tactic which most male contestants fondly referred to as *kobeka ebureki* (to put some brakes) was solely motivated by the fear of being defeated by a female candidate which was perceived as injurious to a man’s social status and identity. Mr. Onchiri, a chief political campaigner of one of the male contestants elaborates:

When a woman candidate is very popular on the ground, you have no alternative but to resort to defaming her through allegations of sexual immorality. You do this not because she is immoral but because of the fear of being defeated by a woman! If this happens, then that would be the end of your political career because people will be saying that a woman defeated you, which is very demeaning to a man.

Kemunto, a 46-year-old single woman, who was a lawyer by profession, said that she will never contest any elective seat because of what happened to her. She narrates:

Indeed, politics is a dirty game. I had to withdraw my candidature because someone spread photo-shopped images of me in a compromising situation with a man. This was a major blow for me during the campaigns, as many people detested me after this. My distracters further alleged that the money I was using for my campaign was from prostitution given my work station was in Mombasa (a tourist city). When I tried to defend myself, the situation became worse. My political rivals also organized a group of young boys who followed me everywhere in my campaigns and informed people that I was a prostitute who was out to use ill-gotten money to infect people with HIV/AIDS. This was too much for me.

The use of morality as a way of curtailing women participation in elective leadership positions was most effective because among the Abagusii, morality is gendered, that is, what is an appropriate sexual behaviour for men is inappropriate for women. For example, having a sexual relationship with more than one woman was seen as a sign of virility and ability to “manage/leadership” among men. However, among women these attributes are constructed as bad virtues. Consequently, by resorting to morality discourses, male contestants bestowed to female rivals a spoilt identity that disadvantaged them as Kemunto further explains:

After my rivals succeeded to depict me as a prostitute, they further said that according to the new constitution I don’t measure to the set standards of integrity¹. Therefore, it is futile for me to be elected.

The use of spoilt identity tactics to disadvantage women contestants was also found to be more effective because the social value system that governed social behavior is gendered and in favor to men. This was evidenced when Kemunto was asked why she opted to withdraw from contesting when she could defend herself from the sexual immorality allegations. She responded:

When I tried to defend myself from prostitution allegations by male political rivals, I was further accused of being rude and arrogant. It was said that women of good morals don’t respond to men directly. This by implication meant that I was of questionable character making my situation worse.

In any electoral contest, candidates are required to have vast resources for political mobilization and logistics. However, among the Abagusii, men are mostly seen as the custodian of resources. Women in most cases have user rights only (Masese, 2006). For one to participate effectively in the political process substantial amounts of resources is required. Thus, lack of resources works against the aspiration of many women to run for political office.

Consequently, women who were contesting in various elective leadership positions and were perceived to have vast resources in their campaigns were either accused of obtaining such resources from questionable sources or wrecking family resources. Mary, a 55-year-old wealthy businesswoman who contested a parliamentary seat in one of the constituencies was accused of being a devil worshipper because of how she was conducting her campaigns. She explained:

I have been in business for over twenty years with investments in many sectors of the economy. Everyone knows how I obtained my wealth. However, during the campaigns I was accused of being a devil worshipper. My political rivals claimed that the money I was using was from devil worshipping. This affected not only my campaigns but also my business.

Similarly, Ms. Nyaboke a wealthy widow aged 52 was accused of killing her husband of over fifteen years and wrecking family resources. Nyaboke elaborates:

My husband died of natural causes. However, during the campaigns it was said I poisoned my husband because I wanted to be in charge of all the investments. My close relatives further accused me of misusing resources that I was holding in trust for my three sons. These allegations were too much for me. I just quit!

In addition, Janet, a 35-year-old university graduate and single woman who contested one of the elective seats was accused of being sponsored by some International Non-Government Organization so that she could propagate some “alien” sexual behaviour in the community once elected. Janet narrated:

There was this organization that was monitoring how women were carrying out their political campaigns. By virtue of my marital status and age, they followed me everywhere during campaigns. They absolutely never gave me any money or logistical support. However, my political rivals ceased this opportunity and said that I was being sponsored by an organization that promotes homosexuality and lesbianism so that I can introduce them to our community once elected.

Among the Abagusii, women continue to be socialized to believe that it is only men who can take up political leadership. According to Moikobu (2012), a woman who takes up such challenges is said to be a bad woman. In fact, most of the women in Gusii who have tried their hand in politics have been branded as divorces and men-bashers. This name calling discourages other women from getting into politics.

Discussion and Conclusion

Since the United Nations’ Decade for women (1975-1985), women issues have gained visibility in international development agenda. Along with other International conferences such as the fourth world conference on women in Beijing (1995), women participation in political decision-making processes has been emphasized as one way of addressing systematic inequities and promotion of equity among women (Nyokabi, 2010)

¹ Refer to Chapter six of 2010 Kenya constitution.

However, findings from this study show that despite the country's efforts to come up with affirmative action at national level, few women are elected to political leadership positions. This is despite the fact there is a steady increase of the number of women expressing interest in seeking elective political leadership. This mismatch can be attributed to gender insensitive male political culture and patriarchal decision-making systems.

As noted in this study, the gender insensitive male political, cultural and patriarchal decision-making systems were evidenced on everyday tactics male politicians used to disadvantage female competitors. These tactics were based on the cultural construction of gender and sexuality which was greatly influenced by the moralistic codes of behaviour that defined the "dos and don'ts of each gender in the public sphere.

Consequently, the moralistic codes of behavior were found to act as "disciplinary measures" which normalized men's participation in elective leadership positions while constructing women's participation as a preserve. For example, women candidates who had a lot of resources for their campaigns had the source of their resources questioned. This questioning bestowed to such candidates a spoilt identity which was later used to curtail their candidature. This curtailment was normalized by the values, norms, taboos, rules and regulations governing gender and sexuality.

In addition, the normalization of women curtailment in elective leadership positions was effective because of different levels of power exercised by both men and women in social interactions. Among the Abagusii, women are ranked lower than men in terms of authority and power. Consequently, as per the moral principles governing social behaviour, women are not allowed to respond directly to men on issues touching on matters of sexuality. This curtailment thus militated against the success of women to resist tactics used by male political rivals against their candidature.

Other findings from the study showed that the moralistic based tactics negatively affected all female contestants equally regardless of their socio-economic status. As noted, most female contestants were well educated and economically empowered. This therefore means that the values, norms and rules that govern everyday interactions are crucial in determining women participation in elective leadership positions since they are gendered in favor of men and also bestow proper social identity and status to individuals. In this regard, the desire for women to conform to the ascribed social identity and status mitigated their desire to continue competing against male competitors.

In conclusion, women participation in elective leadership positions which may look normal or obvious to implementers

of certain policies may not be necessarily so to voters (people) who are supposed to elect them (women). This is because most people are so embedded in their societal belief systems that they neither question the dominant values nor realize how much they themselves are naturalized into them. The tactics used to curtail women from elective leadership positions in this context were perceived as normal and functional. This means efforts aimed at enhancing women participation in elective leadership must first and foremost deal with the issue of women sexuality in each community.

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