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Review Article

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Gender Sensitization for Electoral Processes in African Countries II: A Need for Paradigm Shift

Phakamile Thwala^{1*} and Bilkisu Gana²

¹Student, College of Economic and Management Sciences (CEMS), University of South Africa (UNISA), Republic of South Africa. E-mail: noqhakat@gmail.com

²Department of Public administration, Faculty of Management Sciences, University of Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria. E-mail: bilkisugana04@gmail.com

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Abstract

Electoral process is an aspect of democratic system that advocates free and fair election devoid of arbitral limitation of any sort including gender discrimination in politics. The sensitization drive aims at promoting the equal and fair gender representation in the decision-making processes across African states for societal development. The paper reviews the electoral process at various levels of political practices to sensitize African states, and emphasized the necessary mechanisms required for achieving gender equality in political affairs in the continent. This paper provides a useful tool for electoral progress as a motivation for creating gender sensitive electoral and political processes. Notably, the paper found that the status quo in most African state is under-representation of women in the political space across the board. The sensitization drive is an insight to formally recognize the existing gender disparities in the power equation of African states. This serves the basis for introducing measures towards realization of the 35% affirmative actions for women active political participation. The scenery will remain so unless we enact laws that encourage and guarantee greater women participation. Furthermore, most African states largely practices gender stereotyping that are socially backed by religion and culture; in which men fold enjoys greater advantages against women. Moreover, African women do not have the financial resources to withstands their male dominated political and electoral process. It is imperative to advocate civic education to sensitize the citizenry on the need to undo women stereotyping and to take gender equality as a democratic value for societal advancement and electoral development. Thus, this paper will serve as cardinal tool for the policymakers, political parties, electoral bodies, election observers, civil activists, students and researchers who are primarily concern with free, fair and credible electoral process; to embrace women active participation and gender balance political space.

Keywords: Gender equality, Political process, Women representation, Electoral sensitizations, African States

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1. Introduction

A free and fair election is an important aspect of democratic settings, devoid of arbitrary limitations to rights of men and women to truly express their political will to vote or to be voted for in elections. According to

* Corresponding author: Phakamile Thwala, Student, College of Economic and Management Sciences(CEMS), University of South Africa (UNISA), Republic of South Africa. E-mail: noqhakat@gmail.com

Thwala (2022), the election of women into electoral office does not immediately translate to gender sensitivity in country and more needs to be done to achieve increased women representation into electoral office. Indeed, men are said to be more active in political life of most African states; where women are underrepresented. Put differently, women in most African countries hold fewer decision-making positions; a scenario that makes the political space a men-dominated till date. On this note, it is imperative to taking extract from Thwala (2022) whose recommendations include but not limited to: (i) the adoption of special measures to protect women candidate from harassment during constituency elections; (ii) the institutionalisation quotas for women representation across all the states; and (iii) the reduction of exorbitant electoral fees charged by electoral management bodies for candidates' registration. These are some of the indicators of multiple barriers that limits the participation of women electoral processes in Africa. Gender sensitization.

2. Objective of the Study

This study investigates the challenges affecting women in the electoral processes in Africa, and it sought to present recommendations that African countries must implement to ensure that electoral processes including elections provide a favorable environment for women electoral participation and as elected public representatives. Put differently, this electoral sensitization paper advocates for equal gender representations in the decision-making at various level of political structure across the continent. The realization of the 35% affirmative action will guarantee the chance of women to take active participation in political offices for effective decision and actions.

3. Research Questions

This paper posed the following questions: (i) Is our electoral management and institution favorable to women participation in the electoral processes? (ii) Are our electoral processes and procedures favorable for the participation of women? (iii) What should be done to ensure that electoral management and business processes are favorable for women participation?

4. Methodology

This is a conceptual review paper on women's participation in the electoral processes in the African States. The paper adopted discursive taxonomy of content analysis of documented narratives from the available humanity literature. Specifically, a lot of literature was consulted on the internet and other library resources, whereas twenty-seven contents were screened from the existent literature and those found suitable to meet the outlined study objectives were adequately referenced.

5. Conceptual Issues

The United Nations (UN) sustainable development goal number 5 (United Nations) calls for the promotion of peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provision of access to justice for all and the construction of effective accountable, and inclusive institutions across all levels (UN, 2005). Therefore, electoral institutions as public institutions are also required to be inclusive in their design and the in the business of election management within the UN member states. A gender sensitive approach is according to the International Labor Organization (ILO, 2013) is considerate of the different physiological needs of men women presented by the work they perform, risk assessment, societal roles and expectations thus ensuring a gender specific response work extremity.

Gender sensitivity is according Bibler *et al.* (2014) an approach to planning and implementation that identifies gender differences between women's and men's priorities, interests and challenges, and what impact these have on gender equality. Therefore, a gender sensitised Electoral Management Body (EMB) and business process ensures equal participation of women and men in the electoral process and further address the needs of women and equally through the regulatory framework, policies, business process, provision of facilities, work streams and client services at all levels.

A case for gender sensitization of the electoral process in Africa is made from observations made by Thwala (2022), in this paper the author calls for a review of the electoral process including reduction of candidates' fees. The need for change was also raised by Bibler *et al.* (2014) who stated that major steps still need to be taken before true gender equality is achieved in the leadership of EMBs. More so, Gana (2022) in the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA) on Africa regional sensitization workshop in Daar Es

Salaam, Tanzania, identified the barriers to women ascendance to public or electoral office as Societal male dominance, ideological and psychological beliefs, Weak financial muscles, culture and traditional beliefs, ethnic differences, and, religious beliefs. In addition, the UNDP, and UN Women (2015) identifies the distance from areas of residence to polling station as one barrier is less considerate of the needs of women including safer walking distance as a barrier to women participation in electoral process.

The UNDP and UN Women (2015) further identify the high costs of candidate registration charged by electoral management bodies which limit the participation of women in the electoral process. According to the UN Women (2020), women are in danger of exposure to physical violence and psychological abuse as they contest elections in Africa. Again, the United Nations (2005) identifies (i) gender stereotypes, (ii) psychological barriers, (iii) traditional barriers, (iv) educational imbalances, (v) ethnicity, (vi) cult leadership, (vii) male dominance, (viii) minimum education requirements, (ix) post-election terror by the militia groups, (x) inadequate security for women candidates, (xi) displacement due to violence and intimidation, gender-based violence, (x) and inadequate financial resources as some of the barriers to women participation in the electoral process.

Gender sensitization measures would be a direct response and elimination of all these obstacles thus creating a favorable ground for women participation in the electoral process. Article 25 (b) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966) states that every citizen shall have the right and the opportunity to vote and to be elected at genuine periodic elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret ballot, guaranteeing the free expression of the will of the voter. It does not place any recognition or restriction based on gender but recognizes women as part of the citizenry. This reality does not find true meaning on the ground. Women has been through many ways disbarred from the electoral process.

Traditionally, women's political representation is measured in terms of descriptive representation (numbers) and substantive representation (policies) and often women's descriptive representation is expected to bring about changes in women's substantive representation and bring about change in a more women/gender friendly direction (Madsen, 2021). As a result, this study presents a unique opportunity to measure the creation of fertile ground for women participation by evaluation the extent to which our electoral management bodies, regulations, policies, systems, tools and processes are gender sensitized.

There is a greater need to refocus on the nature of electoral management bodies, regulation, policies, systems, structures and bodies because the extent to which they get gender sensitised have a bearing on the participation and election of women to public office or electoral office. This background and many other unstated hindrances to the participation and election of woman into electoral office justifies the need for this review.

5.1. Electoral Management Process in Africa and Gender Sensitization

The UNDP (2015) note that a significant attention has been paid to women's political participation in the electoral process, but less focus has been put on the EMBs as administrators of the election processes and their role in encouragement and facilitation of women's participation in the elections. We therefore identified a number of areas that EMBs can focus on and raise challenges and recommendations. These areas may not be conclusive but can go along way insuring that EMBs are gender sensitized.

5.2. Candidate Registration and Election for Women

The primary challenge to the registration of women candidates during election is raised by The UNDP and UN Women (2015) who are concerned about the exorbitance of the candidate registration fees. The high fees are not considerate of the financial state of rural and economically inactive women in Africa and the world at large. Thus, women find it difficult to contest elections as independent candidate because they do not have the financial muscle to compete against affluent men and the financially strong political parties. As a result, Bibler *et al.* (2014) identifies limited access to campaign finance, which undermines their ability to effectively campaign and run for electoral office.

Ohman and Lintari (2015) acknowledges the contribution of finances to the unequal participation of men and women in the electoral process and its impact on the equitable gender representation in the electoral office and politics in general. There is a need for deliberate financial programs to support women contesting electoral office prior and during elections through political parties and EMBs as a mechanism to level the playing field between men and women.

5.3. Female Leadership in Election Management Bodies in Africa

According to Bicu (2022), Electoral Management Bodies (EMBs) are charged with the responsibility of ensuring a level playing field for political representation and meaningful participation across the entire electoral cycle, only 22% of EMBs themselves are chaired by women across the globe. EMSs are according to the international foundation for electoral systems Bibler *et al.* (2014) the extent to which women are able to participate in elections can be strongly influenced by the policies and programs of the EMBs. In Africa only 19% of EMBs are led by women. Even where they are appointed women leaders of EMBs experiences harassments and threats of violence plus cyber bullying. Similarly, Bibler *et al.* (2014) suggest that that EMBs deliberately and proactively take gender into account in the analysis, planning and implementation of all their activities including electoral processes and voting facilities.

Women are according to Bibler *et al.* (2014) continuing to be marginalised and underrepresented in political and electoral processes of many countries. There is very little protection deliberately biased to the protection of women candidate from any form of victimization during the electoral process despite the known challenges that affect them prior, during and after the elections.

5.4. Regulatory or Policy Environment for Elections

The participation of women in the electoral process is not optional but a matter of enforcement and compliance. According to Bibler *et al.* (2014), a number of international instruments and treaties has been ratified by international bodies to guarantee women participation in the electoral process. These include namely:

- (i) Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR);
- (ii) The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR);
- (iii) The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW);
- (iv) United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security (UNSC 1325);
- (v) The African Charter on Human and People's Rights; and
- (vi) The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CPRD). Each country has also adopted specific regulations to manage the electoral process. EMBs should draw on human rights legislation to develop regulations that foster non-discrimination and gender equality (Bibler, 2014). There are numerous regional treaties by bodies like SADAC and ECOWAS. Yet, there is still a gap on women specific regulations to ensure that the ground is favorable for their participation to be voted and to manage the elections themselves.

In the regulatory space, Ohman and Lintari (2015) decries the prevalent disconnect between the political finance regulations and the extent to which gender equality is advanced. Clearly, electoral finance regulations are favorable for increased women participation in the electoral process. This state of affairs demands gender sensitization of electoral finance management legislation across the board.

The Development of gender-sensitive electoral laws and regulations specifically for voter registration, the electoral campaign, campaign finance, polling and counting and dispute resolution is thus recommended by Bibler *et al.* Yet, Ohman and Lintari (2015) ironically conclude that the prevalence of gender sensitive election finance regulation does not equate to increase women participation if other hindrances like cultural and religious stereotypes are not eliminated.

5.5. Provision for Quarters and Affirmative Action

It is important that the composition of personnel at EMBs be reflective of the gender in the society. The cohort of women in the personnel should be equal or more than the men in the administration thus representing the societal demographics. Bibler *et al.* (2014) suggest that EMBs should set positions for the minimum or targeted percentage of women at different levels of administration within the EMBs including the decision-making levels and formalize this through a gender sensitive recruitment policy. Indeed, EMBs should have recruitment policies that are gender sensitive.

Vetten (2016) identifies women representation quotas as the most effective method to increase the margins of women representation. The IPU (2021) observed that where quotas are done away with, the representation of women declines immediately. In Kenya, Ohman and Lintari (2015) report that the introduction of the

women county representation (WCR) seats which are preserved for contestation by women only through the party system. As a result, the WRC seats are accredited by for the rise in women representation to 63 in the Kenyan Constituent Assembly and the National Assembly combined.

5.6. Electoral Campaigns in African States

Election campaign management and campaigns themselves are the most challenging processes for women. At this stage the candidate is required to be more accessible and closer to the voters. At times the candidate or the campaign team is required to enter households and canvass support from the potential voters. The campaign stage is therefore a high-risk stage within the electoral process and makes women vulnerable.

As a result, a Kenyan candidate reported that during the 2017 general elections she was sexually harassed on more than one occasion as she would feel her breasts being touched by the potential voters (Ongaro *et al.*, 2019). This would be a very difficult situation as any hard-line reaction would project her as an arrogant candidate, yet she was taken advantage of. The key question arising from the above observation would be the extent to which security or protection for women candidate is provided during election campaigns?

5.7. Violence, Terror, Safety and Security of Women and Voters in General

Elections in many African countries are always exposed to high risk of violence and intolerance amongst contesting parties. This poses and increased risk to female contenders at all levels as their safety becomes at risk due to the threat. "The absence of female security personnel at polling stations, insecure travel routes and poor infrastructure undermine women's ability to participate in voter outreach and electoral campaigns, as well as simply vote themselves" (Bibler *et al.*, 2014). In addition, the UN Women (2020) observes that women in particular are exposed to both physical and psychological form of violence during elections. However, the EMBs and election observer mission reports hardly produce post-election reports that focuses on the forms of harassment meted to women during the electoral.

In Mali, there is a high risk of acts of terror and violence. Whilst in Cameroon elections in 2018 there were identified high levels of insecurity and violent extremism in at least three of the country's 10 regions (Mbaku, 2019). The Human Rights Watch (HRW, 2019) reports about widespread acts of violence prior and during the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) especially in Mutongo, Butare, Kashunga, Masisi and Kindu to mention a few. The HRC also reports of 1000 polling stations closed on voting day in Kinsasha alone due to violence in the DRC, the death of 150 people in Maldombe due to ethnic violence and the attack on the National Electoral Commission (CENI) official and damage to CENI office in Kindu and Inongo. The United Nations (UN) also raised concerns about the pre-election violence in the DRC (United Nations, 2018).

Kenyan elections are consistently marred by pre- and post-election violence which was according to the Human Rights Watch (2017) visible in 2007 (allegedly resulting in more than 1100 deaths), 2013 (at least five cases of deaths), 2016 and 2017. Ongaro *et al.* (2019) reports that sexual violence has recurrently dented the Kenyan elections with initial cases being recorded in the early 90s.

Electoral-related sexual violence (ERSV): according to Ongaro *et al.* (2019) includes rape (by individual or gang), sexual assault and defilement intended to gain political outcomes prior, during and after elections. The threat and experience of ERSV can be a key elimination factor. If women are not protected sexual labeling or cyber bullying with sexual undertones it may result in candidates pulling out of the race. The key question to be answered by election regulators and law makers in general is whether the adopted electoral laws, policies and processes are assuming a proactive stance to limit or prohibit ERSV? Ongaro *et al.* (2019) places the responsibility of funding deliberate programs for advocacy, prevention, and reaction to ERSV.

5.8. Capacity Development

The UN Women (2015) Identifies the need for deliberate capacity development initiatives to ensure that the capacity of women is enhanced for better participation in the electoral process namely; (i) Bringing gender equality concerns to political and electoral processes; (ii) Building capacities of women as candidates and/or voters; (iii) Supporting initiatives to increase the proportion of women engaged in electoral mandates and elective positions to impact on legal reform processes, to influence debates about legislative and electoral system reform; and (iv) Assisting women to organize themselves as a political constituency. Training or capacity development is also identified by the African Union (AU) who recommends that member states should be encouraged to develop training programs for security agencies on gender-sensitive electoral security with support from UN Women offices and other partners.

In relation to law enforcement officers and security agencies, Ongaro *et al.* (2019) recommends that all peace officers should be recurrently trained and adequately equipped to prevent and address ERSV with a particular focus on detection of ERSV, prevention of ERSV, emergency response to ERSV and support to victims of ERSV.

6. Findings and Conclusion

Notably from the above conceptual reviews, the paper found that the status quo in most African states is that best describe female under-representation in the political space across the board. The scenery will remain so unless we enact laws that encourage and guarantee greater women participation is made. Furthermore, most African states largely practices gender stereotyping that are socially backed by religion and culture; in which men fold enjoys greater advantages against women.

The women electoral participation is often affected by political, legal, social, economic, and cultural barriers. It is therefore incumbent on EMBs to identify and mitigate these barriers within the particular electoral environment. Moreover, amongst several gender-based limitations against women active participation in the political spaces, African women do not have the financial resources to withstands their male dominated political and electoral process. In this wise, it is imperative to advocate civic education to sensitise the citizenry on the need to undo women stereotyping and to take gender equality as a democratic value for societal advancement and electoral development.

Balanced electoral possesses entail the ability to accord vulnerable and marginalized groups whom were exposed to ethnic, religious, minorities, poor and women marginalization; with the opportunity to fully raise their concerns or matters of interests. This will enable them make part in the national discourse, and possibly have them included in the national agenda of every African country. Their issues become part of the key government priorities before, during and after the election periods.

7. Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusion aforementioned, this paper will serve as cardinal tool for the policymakers, political parties, electoral bodies, election observers, civil activists, students and researchers who are primarily concern with free, fair and credible electoral process; to embrace women active participation and gender balance political space across African States. To achieve this, therefore, all African states must find to the realisation of the 35% affirmative action will guarantee the chance of women to take active participation in political offices for effective decision and actions.

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