

Role Of Women In Local Governance In Malawi: Challenges And Prospects

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Abstract

The demand for gender equality and the UN Sustainable Development Goal Agenda 2030 is an indication of the urgency across the globe to fight against the surge of discrimination. Although there has been some increase in the representation of women in decision-making processes, the barriers to their entry in local governance persists. The fight for political space has been a global one for women and is associated with lots of challenges. It requires a consented effort of well – meaningful people including International and Non-International Organisations, Local and International Non-Governmental Organisations, Civil Society Organisations, Scholars and Advocates for Women’s Rights, as well as governmental efforts to make it everlasting. There is a great response that seeking women’s representation on various social and public policy issues is important to enhance their confidence in governing institutions. As exclusion of women from decision-making bodies has adverse consequences for development, the study aims to highlight the challenges and ground reality of the women’s and focus on providing suggestions to the way forward regarding the struggle for women rights and gender equality.

Key words: Local Governance, Women’s role, Challenges, Prospects, Participation, Malawi

Introduction

The last three decades has witnessed a significant change in women's share of representation and in political, social and economic spheres. The role of women has now become apparent in every sphere of life. The level of development of countries are now measured by the level of women's representation and participation in local governance. Women's representation at the local government level is a key driver for their empowerment. The concept of local government was adopted by the Malawian Government to encourage local participation in governance and also to bring government closer to its people. Thus, it is observed to be a means through which government renders services to the people.

According to the World Bank (1992), the term governance is defined "as how power is exercised in management of a country's economic and social resources for development". Governance therefore requires that the resources of the State are harnessed for the benefit of the people. United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 1997) in its Policy Paper also defined the term 'governance' as "the exercise of economic, political and administrative authority to manage a country's affairs at all levels. It comprises of mechanisms, processes, institutions through which citizens and groups articulate their interest, exercise their legal rights, meet their obligations and mediate their differences".

Local Governance therefore can be interpreted as an activity which brings both the government and the people at the grassroots together towards the realization of providing essential services to improve their social well – being. Government's preoccupation is to provide solutions to the teeming challenges that confront the people such as poverty, unemployment, poor sanitation, etc. Social services must address the interest of the vulnerable groups in society i.e. women, children, the aged, the disable and the sick, etc. Social services also include the provision of social security services and implementing social service schemes to improve the socio-economic lives of the vulnerable. All the stakeholders – individuals, interest groups, pressure groups, media, chiefs and opinion leaders need to join hands in the governance process.

The issue of women participation is of age and still looks like a permanent one. After the Beijing – China Conference when women came out boldly and made a strong case for their place in men dominated areas, one would have thought that significant progress would have been made by

now, to see more women running shoulder to shoulder with their male counterparts. Sadly, this has not been the case.

The United Nations has from time and again all highlighted the importance of women participation on issues that concern humankind. In 1975, in Mexico in conjunction with International Women's year, the first World Women Conference was held. This was under the theme "Equality of women and their contributions to Development and Peace". The Copenhagen Conference in 1980 was the second World Women Conference. This time around, the focus was on elimination of all forms of discrimination against women. This Conference among other things was concerned about the gap between the rights that have been secured through various legal regimes and women ability to exercise or access those rights.

Equality in social participation, political participation and decision making was the consensus reached by Nairobi - Kenya's Third World Women Conference. It was agreed by participants that women needed to participate in all areas of life and not restricted to only gender related issues. This was then followed by the Beijing Conference in 1995. All these efforts by stakeholders are geared towards raising women to the level where their knowledge, skills, talents, expertise would be harnessed for the benefit of the society. This is also borne out of the fact that more women are today educated than in the time past. To have more women educated means more women are now empowered to contribute meaningfully to the development of society. We cannot encourage women to be educated only to continue to play their traditional roles as housewives. This would be a major de-service to society. If the statement from the Beijing Conference "What men can do women can also do and even do it better" is anything to go by, then more work needs to be done to ensure that women in Malawi take their rightful place in society.

Research Gap

Research works in this area have focused mainly on the importance of women participation in the areas of politics. However, governance is quite a broader term than politics and for that matter government; and as such, its scope encompasses wide range of areas including individuals, organisations, institutions and other stakeholders. This research looks at the various dimensions related to the execution of governance and the impediments that disallow women's

active involvement in the local governance process. The study also makes some recommendations to ameliorate the challenges that confront women in this direction to empower them to play a more active role in society.

Objectives

The objectives of the study is:

1. To find out the role of women in local governance in Malawi.
2. To determine the factors which hinder women participation in local governance in Malawi
3. To identify the prospects of women inclusiveness in the administration of development.
4. To suggests ways of improving women participation in local governance in Malawi.

Research Questions

The study aims to define the following questions:

1. What are some of the benefits of women involvement in local governance in Malawi?
2. To what extent do women participate in local governance administration?
3. What challenges do women face in local governance in Malawi?
4. What are some of the measures Policy Makers can put in place to improve women participation in local governance?

Review of Literature

Women issue is a global issue as the world seems to fight an endless war of discrimination, abuse, harassment and violence against women. Many believe that most of the problems women face have a lot to do with culture and tradition. In many cultures, the traditional role of the women has always been taking care of the home. Thus, marrying, taking care of children, keeping the home and making sure there is food on the table for the family to enjoy. In typical African home like Malawi this has always been the situation and it therefore appears though that no level of education of the girl – child can change the status quo. This situation may have contributed significantly to the unwillingness of women to take up leadership roles in local governance.

Tiessen, R. (2008). An Examination of Women Politics in Malawi- The study highlights the increasing role of women in parliament than ever before in Malawi's history. This phenomenon is not deemed to be an exciting one. However, for some, it has been an improved situation. For example, since 2014 the strength of women in parliament has been appreciating. After dropping from 32 in 2014, it went up again to 44 in 2019. It is therefore important perhaps to consolidate these gains while looking at strategy to replicate this in other areas of interest. These women should also justify their inclusion and live on enviable mark worthy of emulation by other women. They must do well to convince the public especially their male counterparts that their role as far as decision making is concerned is crucial and that they have a lot to offer.

Godwin's (2013) research on participation of women in the local government level in Nigeria shows that males dominate in local governance. This was attributed to lack of political consciousness, poor attitude and lack of financial support. The question here is how their male counterparts fund their campaigns. Is it the case that men can raise enough funds more than women or men who indulge in politics are rich and financially sound than women who are interested in politics? These are relevant questions because women advocacy groups claim that women are capable of doing what their male counterparts do and even do it better (in some cases). Women therefore need to exhibit the ability to raise funds which should be enough to support their bit to assume into political office.

Chaweza A. L (2016). Women in Local Government. A Potential Arena for Women's Substantive Representation. This research work highlights that the motivation for contesting for local councilor's position was about the development of their locality but not fighting for women's interest or gender balance which has been a major concern in Malawi. This brings to fore the need to have more vigorous and intense discourse about equity in governance. The few women who are fortunate to be offered the opportunity to serve the people should also use their platforms to champion the course of women and encourage more of their folks to join them. This is also part of development.

Hussein K.H (2017). Local Governance in Malawi: Sighs and Sobs in District Councils? Out of 464 wards in Malawi, 405 were occupied by male counterparts while only 55 were occupied by women and 4 vacant. The research revealed that most of the respondents were abreast with

the fact that the Councillors were in a better position to represent the interest of the local people since they live closer to them and as such have fair knowledge about their concerns. With this knowledge, the opportunity to champion the impact of women inclusion in governance process should dawn on us as well. This is because the more women rise up to the top, the more the society gets better.

Mirya R. Holman (2017) Women are underrepresented in most elected and appointed positions in local government in the United States of America. This clearly shows that the situation is a global phenomenon. In Africa where there is evergreen perception attributing low women involvement in politics and other leadership positions to culture and tradition, may only be one of the contributing factors of the major issue. This is because there is more awareness about the rights and remedies for abuse and discrimination of women in the developed world and yet there seems to be no significant difference compared to Africa and for that matter Malawi.

Aboobaker Romeez (2018). Political Participation of Women in Local Governance. Sri Lanka has 51% of its entire population representing women. Among this figure only 5% participate in local governance as well as Parliament. However, women are very much effective only in the areas such as social welfare, livelihood and social security. If reason attributed to this is lack of space then the question is whose responsibility is it to create that space for women. In a democratic dispensation, people fight for their rights in accordance with the dictates of the Constitution. This research however, fails to point out measures taken by political leaders and the legal regime to address the issue especially in male dominated fields.

Nancy G. (2018). Role of Women in Local Governance. Only a quarter of positions in national governments are held by women, according to the World's Women 2015 UN Report. The above statistics is quite worrying and one could not help but lament on the trend. But here again, another question is what if women are being unnecessarily pressurized into the realm of unreasonability? This question may be relevant when the issue is subjected to critical analysis. For instance, if the problem is cultural then civilization, technology and education in general terms have caused the lost and breakdowns of several cultures, especially in Africa and for that matter Malawi. Certain beliefs, customs and traditions of old, are a thing of the past today. This in my opinion should have made up for the gap.

Role of Malawian Women In Governance

Dr James Kwegyir Aggrey (eminent scholar of Ghana) once said in one of his quotes that ‘if you educate a man you educate an individual but if you educate a woman you educate a whole nation’. This statement indicates the importance of women in society and the need for them to be empowered to enable them to discharge their duties in society in the most effective manner. It is disheartening, therefore, that women’s role in governance generally has still not seen any significant improvement in Malawi. There are probably a few women taking up positions of influence today than in the time past. Generally, women participation in politics is still not encouraging here in Malawi. Dr Aggrey undoubtedly emphasizes the greatness of the task of a woman and contends that building her capacity and empowering her would go a long way to impact positively on society. The traditional Malawian woman when empowered would play a major role in politics and other fields, not only to advance the course of women but also children, men and the disadvantaged.

In Malawi, many responsible and influential positions are the reserve of men. After several years of crusades in favour of women participation in governance not much has been achieved in this direction. The Malawian woman is either not prepared to avail herself to take up leadership position / roles or get involved in the administration of governance. One may not be wrong to attribute the situation to the fact that front roles are still considered men’s zone and that women are therefore not encouraged or motivated to indulge therein. Other reasons are that there are still certain artificial barriers such as inadequate conducive environment where women can comfortably operate. These barriers have been created to serve as impediment for women. Malawian women are therefore demotivated to participate in major decisions in local government.

It is believed that women are naturally versatile and possess a strong and unquenchable ability to perform diverse tasks concurrently. Some of the traditional roles they are undertaking includes caretaking, farming, trading, nursing and several others. Women have been very instrumental in building our society through various means to ensure progress and development in their families and nations in general.

In spite of the challenges that impede women's progress in an area of politics and other leadership areas, the role of Malawian women in terms of working either in the formal or informal areas has seen rapid growth as more women are receiving formal education. Increasingly, the call for the world to recognize the need to give equal rights to women is being intensified. However, there is a need to devise new strategies and techniques to champion and advance this course if the world is to achieve any meaningful headway. This is inconsistent with the UN Sustainable Development Goal (UN – SDG) Agenda 2030.

Women's role in politics, business and civic arena is an investment in a more equitable, just and peaceful society. This is also in agreement with the fact that women, children, the aged, and the disabled are the most vulnerable whenever there is war and disturbances. Women volunteers have also impacted substantially in community development across the world. The difference between men and women is only in physical appearance according to Kartini and not mental. Our mental abilities, research have shown that they are the same and therefore present no justification for inability of a woman to assume position of influence. Of course the former President of Indonesia, Surkano rightly suggested in 1963 that the quality of female's brains is not less than that of their male counterparts (Lantara, 2015). Women in Malawi therefore need to prove with relevance and fortitude to their male counterparts that they may not be physically as strong as them but can match them when it comes to intellectual abilities.

Women especially those in Africa who often exhibit strong resistance to 'intrude' into what men call their area are often mocked and called names such as 'man-woman', witch and so on. What makes the fight more cumbersome is not only the display of strength in the area of resource mobilization but more importantly the lack of support from their female colleagues. Till to date, some women have not come to terms with the fact that women's place is not only in the kitchen. Some of these unfortunate conceptions can only require commitment and determination on the side of those who are in this fight. Rwanda has shown it is 'doerble' and Malawi should follow suit. In 2016, Rwanda had the highest proportion of female politicians in the world with 64% of females in the Lower House (Bawens 2016).

Some women activists attribute the peace and political stability the country is currently enjoying this feat. Women in Politics have also been identified to possess the qualities of fairness,

inclusion, flexibility, collaboration, persuasiveness and empathy as against that of men such as focus, competitiveness drive and assertiveness which often result in corruption, domination and greed. This is against the backdrop of the fact that women participation in politics will not only achieve gender equality, but also result in tangible gains for democracy such as greater responsiveness to citizen needs, increased cooperation across party and ethnic lines and a more sustainable future, research has indicated.

Initiatives by the Malawi Government To Enhance / Promote Women Participation in Local Governance

To address women issues regarding abuse, discrimination and inequality would require government intervention. In the case of gender equality, the institutionalisation of gender machinery with the Ministry of Gender at the level of executive government has been the game-changer (Chasukwa, 2016). This strategy by the Malawian government seeks to break the artificial barriers against women representation in politics. Concerning this, the fee for filing for women was less than that of their male counterparts. For instance, in recent elections (2019 elections), male candidates contesting for a seat in Parliament paid a fee of MK500,000 while that of their female counterparts was pegged at MK250,000. At the local level, the fee for male candidates was MK400, 000 but females paid only half of that amount (MEC, 2019).

Government has also earned yet another Ministry responsible for Gender, Children, Disability and Social Welfare (MoGCDSW). The Ministry with a network of offices spread across all the districts in the country is also charged with the responsibility to ensure policy formulation for the realization of the gender equality, participation, responsiveness, equity and inclusiveness which are also in conformity with good governance practices. Gender Officers have been assigned to every Government Ministry. Gender issue also has a lot to do with the safety of the woman who at times suffers from various forms of abuses. A National Plan of Action on gender-based violence has been developed to end the epidemic, and the he-for –her campaign has led to nationwide sensitization including mobilizing men (UN Women 2019).

Malawi government also recognizes the impact of women empowerment on the national economy. To this end, together with development partners such as United States Agency for International Development (USAID) have worked on tackling some of the issues to do with education which include: worse performance in the primary, secondary and tertiary education as well as low enrolment, drop out of girls in school. There is also salary and wage disparities and inadequate women representation in politics, civil service sector and other areas of influence and these are major sources of concern to government (USAID 2019). However the issue of inadequate infrastructure poses a challenge in addressing these issues. The Government of Malawi has also initiated and implemented several other policies aimed at addressing gender-related issues in an effort to promote women empowerment and gender equality.

Prospects

The issue of women subjugation is perhaps one most important global issue that the world has failed to address. Patriarchal settings are the reasons for women's subjugation in different societies (Mwetulundila, 2019). Perhaps our world will become better off if we are able to secure the right cure for women subjugation and patriarchy. Undermining the effects of perpetuating the patriarchal system in our societies casts a demining consequence that cannot be quantified. But who is listening and who cares about the plight of women and serious impact or repercussions in our world? After all, the beneficiaries are those who are being called upon to find an antidote for the same.

The impact of women participation in governance is perhaps an area that needs critical assessment in order to encourage more women to show interest and also to put up a strong defence in their striving for equality, inclusiveness and incorporation in the developmental process. Women in Malawi should fight on and never look back. Her Excellency Joyce Banda who served for only two years (2012 – 2014) as Africa's second female President (Amundsen & Kayuni, 2016). These can indeed serve as inspirations for Malawian women. The need for women in Malawi to recognize that patriarchal system cannot be overturned and that it would take nothing less than their own maximum effort to make any meaningful progress in this direction will mark a turning point in this struggle.



Seated first row: first from right Her Excellency Dr. Joyce Banda, Former President of the Republic of Malawi, next to her is Sir Ellen Sirleaf Johnson, former President of Liberia

Many women in Malawi are those who may be contented with an appreciable level of education and prefer to live in their comfort zones once they begin to enjoy some reasonable amount of wages or salary. Economic independence and higher social position are believed to be two major motivational factors for the woman to go for gainful employment in our society today (Krupalini & Vighnesh 2003). Malawian women should, therefore, consider (if not anything at all) the pride in being in leadership positions and joining their male counterparts in making decisions that affect them, their husbands, parents, siblings, children, the aged and the vulnerable groups in society. The craving for a voice and to participate in governance in order to present the voiceless should be a motivation. Inequality is not only in gender imbalance but also in decision making. Most women issues are best understood by women. Allowing men alone a platform to address women issues is a recipe of imbalanced decision making. The egoistic tendency in human beings will always desire for self – centeredness which might divert our attention from making reasonable decisions. There is, therefore, the need to strike a balance in the constitution of the decision-making body so as to preempt fairness and justice.

The area of local government is viewed by some researchers as an avenue for women to gain practical experience in politics before participating in national elections (Chiweza, 2016). There should, therefore, be a deliberate policy to encourage more women to participate in local politics to prepare them for higher positions in the future. In as much as the decentralised structure has opened an avenue for women to articulate their interest, it would also boost their morale to

develop themselves and also build their psyche about the concepts of local government, participation and decision making. However, whether or not their impact would be felt at this level would greatly depend on the kind of environment as well as their relationship with their male counterpart there. Advocates for women and decentralisation as local governance tool may have to do an in-depth assessment on this, monitor and evaluate their performance. There is hope, no doubt! People get empowered through education, and today's women more and more are being educated.

Important African women leaders were Queen Yamacouba of Sierra Leone, the Ethiopian empress Menetewab, Mnkabayi the first Shaka Princess in 1780, and Yaa Asantewaa, Queen Mother Ejisu under the Asante Confederacy who mobilised men to fight the British in 1900 in the then Gold Coast (Modern-day Ghana). Latest names include Ms Sirleaf Johnson former President of Liberia, Her Excellency Mrs Joyce Banda former President of the Republic of Malawi (Akuamoah, Brenya Kudjoe, 2015) and many more.

Challenges

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the then Gold Coast (Modern-day Ghana). Latest names include Ms Sirleaf Johnson former President of Liberia, Her Excellency Mrs Joyce Banda former President of the Republic of Malawi (Akuamoah, Brenya Kudjoe, 2015) and many more.

Conclusion

There are several African women role models that aspiring women leaders can look up. In most recent times names such as Ellen Johnson Sirleaf immediate past Liberia President, and also first female President of Africa; and Joyce Banda Malawi second female President of Malawi (2012 – 2014) are all very good examples of women who defied the odds and made a difference in society. These are but a few though. The much talked about space and opportunity that women have been struggling for in society should not come as a gift from men but rather men should see it as an opportunity for women to play their role in society in support and cooperation of that of men.

This is in recognition of the fact that the God-given talent and intelligence of women, just as that of men, should not be restricted to the performance of household chores; and that in conjunction with their male counterparts be used to advance the course of humankind. This is also to intimate that men should not feel threatened by the empowerment of women as the same is for the good of society of which men are a part. According to James Kwegyir Aggrey, the surest way to keep people down is to educate the men and neglect the women. (Jacobs 1996). In the same way, the surest means to perpetuate and institutionalise inequality in our society is to ignore the voice and contribution of women in decision making while focusing on electing only men in positions of influence.

As it stands now, it is regrettable to infer that women participation in local governance in Malawi still has a long way to go, so long as the roles of the so-called gatekeepers remain unchecked. These gatekeepers are largely determining the entry of women into elected offices/positions and positions within the party hierarchy, and for many reasons, they tend to restrict women's participation in politics (Kayuni and Chikadza, 2016). The efforts of the few women who desire to pursue politics may be shuttered by the unscrupulous attitude of some elements such as Chairpersons and Secretaries who are very influential at the grassroots.

Suggestions

In dealing with the issue at stake, one cannot help but agree with the fact that men dominance in areas of politics, social and economic spheres of life will not easily change because women want equality of opportunity in today's world. The fight is on and the struggle continues. One weapon that the women can use in this fight is the weapon of numbers. In most African countries the women population is more than that of men, this can be used to our advantage. I guess this is what democracy is all about. In a democracy, it is the popular decision that wins. With women consisting the majority of the population in Malawi, the same can be used positively when women come together to change the policies of the country to better cater to women (Mkhize 2015). However, it is not going to be easy as more education needs to be done if the status quo is to change. This is because the patriarch system has lived with us since ancient days.

Working on the woman's psyche to view the struggle, not as an affront against men but rather a call to share in the common interest in service to humanity (society) is another dimension to the situation. Already some men feel threatened and strongly oppose women empowerment because they enjoy their dominance on them and so any strategy which would deepen this perception is likely to backfire. This is the reason I do not subscribe to the idea that women in fighting for gender equality should do so to champion women issues devoid of passion and discrimination but rather debate to core ideas about the prospects of inclusion and participation in governance. Women have a lot to offer and that must clearly be articulated.

Women's should promote the course of liberating the woman so that she would be in a position to pursue a career of her choice. In doing so, however, we must take precaution measures in order not to compromise on the quality of capacity our society requires making a positive impact in the lives of the good people we want to serve. There are lots of genuine minds that struggle for space and equal playing field to contribute meaningfully in decisions that affect the entire society. In the spirit of fairness, equality, justice and inclusion, we must apply all the statutes, and tenets of the provisions of our contributions and talents.

Women leaders also have a tremendous role to play in this fight for gender equality. Their actions and decisions should justify the position of trust they occupy on behalf of the general public. Their public utterances, character, behaviour and attitude must serve as a good example for others to emulate. Role models and mentors are very important in every society. Women as mothers and wives and as leaders either in the private or public sector must serve also as role models and mentors to aspiring leaders. The fight may not end now, but it is a worthy course and women must remain resolute, bearing in mind that their impact either in the field of politics, business, civil society or any other would-be judged by the public.

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