

Proactive approaches required for transformative political participation of refugee women and girls

Historically, there has been limited inclusion of women in leadership and decision making due to the patriarchal nature of society at large. However, women such as Mother Teresa and Marie Curie emerged in humanitarian and scientific spaces. It wasn't until the Civil Rights Movement in the U.S when women were considered as potential leaders in the political arena like Rosa Parks-let alone the British matriarchy era. Today, a number of women all over the world have held important positions in office like Indira Gandhi, Margaret Thatcher, Angela Merkel, Jacinda Ardern, etc. By 2018, over 70 women had served as presidents or prime ministers all over the world.

Over the years, women's rights organisations have proactively pushed humanitarian and development workers to engage women in leadership and political participation through affirmative action including gender mainstreaming, and through deliberate efforts to actively work with women from community level through to national and international level on participation and leadership. Significant successes have been garnered in addressing the challenges that hinder women's participation in politics.

Whereas significant successes have been realized, especially at national level – for example we currently see designated slots for women MPs in every constituency as well as the mainstream contest for positions with men - a lot more is yet to be done at community level including refugee settlements where many of the women are not only illiterate or semi-literate but also mired in derogatory traditional practices and assumptions about women and girls – all of which confine women to domestic spheres.

Until recently, there have been contentious debates as to whether women are doing enough to support fellow women to leap forward in the race to attain their full leadership potential. As such, some ironical statements have prodded through highlighting fellow women's negative energy which hinders their empowerment, and more specifically, their participation in political leadership. This moves me to ponder; to what extent are women contributing to seeing their voices amplified by fellow women?

To delve into this conversation, I use a case study. On 18 July 2019, Refugee Law Project, the organisation with which I am doing internship, supported the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM) in conducting election of representatives of Refugee Welfare Committees (RWC) in Palabek Refugee Settlement, Lamwo District. During the activity, I noticed that women appeared reluctant and lacked interest in contesting for the available positions when candidates were called for.

During the event, one female participant raised her hand and nominated a man in the crowd. “The one in a blue long-sleeved shirt seated over there” she said, pointing in the crowd, describing an absent-minded looking man in a Chelsea jersey. When asked why she didn’t nominate herself rather than nominating someone whose name she barely knew, she comically shied away. Some other women then nominated a couple of women – all of whom turned down the nomination. It took the OPM representative a significant amount of time to encourage and literally ‘beg’ the women therein to stand up and contest for the position. Eventually, two ladies were nominated and then the real challenge begun.

The voting was conducted by lining up behind the candidate of choice. It was at this point that I was struck by the events unfolding which sparked countless questions in my mind. Ironically, the majority of the people who voted for the male candidate were women, granting the male candidate a landslide victory in the election. Even more shocking, a significant number of men voted for the two female candidates. This caught my attention and made me wonder whether women were actually holding themselves back from progressing in the race for their empowerment – political participation which would ideally be demonstrated by showing solidarity to fellow women contesting in a heavily patriarchal environment.

Given the scenario, I pondered – “Why did the women chose the male contestant over their fellow women? Why would women entrust men to effectively represent their voices at settlement level? What happened to the self-efficacy and empowerment mantra inculcated and supported by refugee actors in refugee settlements? Why didn’t the women trust fellow women to lead them efficiently despite the fact that some men perhaps believed and voted for the other two women? Could this be an inferiority complex perpetuated by long held assumptions about women’s capacity in political leadership? Above all, is the struggle for woman empowerment being frustrated by fellow women?”

To explore this dilemma, it's necessary to contextualise and reflect deeply upon the cultural masculinities within the society that cultivated such mentalities all of which have been in existence since time immemorial. Unpacking this requires understanding the social norms and deeply held assumptions about gender and specifically women's participation in community events, let alone political events in neighboring countries including South Sudan – which like many African societies, is predominantly patriarchal.

With several questions unanswered, I interacted with one of my colleagues from South Sudan, Moses (not his real name), a refugee from South Sudan who had a lot to say about his culture back home. After a long conversation, he told me that in Equatorial Province, where he hails from, women are simply a “reproduction tool”; their role revolves around child-bearing, nurturing and ‘pleasing her husband’. He also told me that due to child and forced marriages, girls are brought up with the belief that the only achievement to look up to is being married off and bearing children. Only then can she bring pride to her family. This then imputes an inferiority complex in the girl child where she grows up lacking the confidence to stand up for herself and make her own decisions, believing that she should always be led by the men around her.

What an uncomfortable conversation that was! Women empowerment has been sung over again for ages. What then can be done to advance the struggle and to get women to think perhaps differently and far beyond what they see? Addressing this herculean task requires long-term approaches including the need to promote education for women and girls – first as powerful tool in changing society, but also as one of the means of practically empowering women to challenge injustices. Through encouraging girl-child education, more women could gain the necessary skills and knowledge to contribute to their emancipation and proactive leadership.

Could educational reform be an option? School curriculums need to be designed and or modified to enable boys and girls to explore and come alive to a society that can be led by women through teaching equality and opportunities for all. Herein, efforts need to be directed towards providing conducive environments for girl child education to reduce drop-out levels of girls.

During my internship, I visited Paludaa SS in Palabek Refugee Settlement during one of the human rights monitoring visits. We were told that one of the causes of the

high drop-out rates for girls in the school was the lack of changing rooms with proper sanitation facilities for girls. In my view, this makes it difficult for girls to attend school continuously whenever they get their menstrual period, and this distorts their education, prompting many to drop out.

Male-led activism is another tool that can be used to build confidence in the women to enable them to realise their full leadership potential. Through working with men to advocate for women leaders and rights in general, many women will perceive things differently, gain self-esteem and start believing in their capability since men are doing just that. Prominent male figures in the society may also be involved to achieve this goal and so should the men at the grassroots like religious and local leaders within the society.

My colleague, Moses (not his real name) also notes that there is a progressive realization of leadership potential, particularly among the urban women in South Sudan. This could be evidenced with the peace agreement of the Transitional Government of National Unity with a proposal to increase women leadership in government by 37 percent – applaudable advancement compared to previous statistics standing at 1 percent in the former government. Herein, my colleagues contend that one of the proposed candidates for the Vice President vacancy is a female, one Rebecca Nyandeng. This is a positive step in the empowerment of women to realise their leadership potential. However, the reality from realization remains hazy given the incident at Palabek Refugee Settlement with the election of Refugee Welfare Committees.

In sum, whereas commendable successes have been achieved in women's participation in political leadership, a lot is yet to be done to attain full empowerment of women and to ensure that women and girls actually benefit from the presence of fellow women in essential political positions at national and international level. However, this is not attainable unless backed by a joint effort of all women - including refugee women - who believe in and make concerted efforts towards transforming the lives of women and girls – from which their capabilities and potential towards transformative leadership can be realised from community through to international levels.

Perhaps I raise more questions than answers, but I hope you join me in seeking answers to the questions raised herein.

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