

## Women and Politics: Prospects for the 1988 General Elections

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*This article traces the history of women's participation in national politics in Lesotho's young and fragile democracy. It notes the trend of their under-representation and therefore attempts to give the possible reasons for such a situation. It looks at the validity of common myths about women's fear of politics as well the practicalities of women's lives which hinder such participation. It concludes by highlighting some of the possible strategies that can be followed to increase women's participation, such as the quota system, and political parties making conscious efforts to adopt policies that encourage women's participation.*

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One of the most glaring features of national politics in Lesotho is the under-representation of women in the national decision making machinery and state structures. This is marked by their low representation in the legislature, judiciary, executive membership in political parties, and even senior positions in the civil service. One historical trademark of the wave of democracy that has been said to have swept into Lesotho, was shown by the landslide overall majority win of the of the 1993 general elections by the Basotho Congress Party (BCP). There was an exuberant expectation of increased overall participation in decision-making as a result of a new political dispensation wrought about by the 1993 election. Women were expected to be some of the new beneficiaries and participants of the new democracy. Such participation would have been manifested through, among others, increased representation in Parliament, the supreme decision making structure. However, some may argue that such expectations are false given that even in one of the oldest and first democratic counties in the world, Finland,

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which gave women the right to vote in 1906, women only comprise a third of the members of Parliament. (Awepa Bulletin, 1997).

On the whole, worldwide, women's representation in Parliament and party politics remains low. Their representation in most countries is less than 10 per cent with the exception of the Scandinavian countries. Ochwada (1997) argues that "even some of the world's largest democracies at the end of 1991 such as the United States (USA) and the United Kingdom (UK), could only boast 5.8 per cent and 6.4 per cent of the women's participation in political decision-making." (p.124) In Africa, there has been no woman head of state, despite the fact that women and men have full political rights- the right to vote and to hold offices at all levels in the decision-making process.

Many traditional reasons are often advanced to explain women's absence or under-representation in party politics. These range from women's illiteracy, lack of economic resources (meanwhile these deficiencies have not hampered men from participating in and benefiting from politics), lack of time, few role models, socialisation and culture, and the most dangerous of all "women's reluctance to vote for other women" or lack of confidence in other women as leaders. In this scenario women are depicted as being their own worst enemy, thus giving the impression that women are to blame, therefore, not much can be done. Yes, it is true that women represent more than fifty percent of the voters therefore, we can safely argue that the men who are in the positions of power were voted in by women. I refer to this as being the most dangerous explanation because women themselves are beginning to believe and use it. This explanation obscures all the other conditions which make women reluctant to vote for other women.

The reasons for women's low participation in politics are many and one will not attempt to debate their validity at this stage. The main concern of this article is to look back into the history of women's participation in party politics in Lesotho, with the aim of providing the reasons for the highs and lows of their participation, but ultimately dispelling the myth that women do not vote for other women because of petty personal squabbles. The assertion here is that there is a link between the degree of political repression and or lack of democracy and women's

low participation in party politics. Whenever there is much violence or threat of violence, women's participation declines. There is also a link between the degree of political parties' commitment to the "women's question" and the level of participation by women. Another explanation is that the patriarchal nature of the state excludes women from the public sphere. To quote Williams (1997) "African states cannot behave in a manner different from the general characteristics of their society steeped in patriarchy and in a patrilineal stance despite the noises they make about democratising their societies." (p. 143) African states have not yet opened up the public sphere because it remains exclusive, under the domain of male members of the society. Having examined the extent to which the above thesis applies to Lesotho a conclusion will be made through which one will also try to make a prediction as to likely trend that will emerge in the 1998 general elections.

### Historical Background

Historically, women's participation in any public sphere has to be traced back to the role of the chieftainship in shaping the political process in Lesotho. Lesotho has a history of a male dominated chieftainship which for the longest time was the most powerful traditional institution and authority, whose power was consolidated by the laws of succession based on the system of primogeniture.

The most traditional form of democratic public decision making body was the pitso which was chaired by chiefs and which for the longest time remained a male preserve par excellence. The system, barring its patriarchal content, was relatively democratic in that decisions could only be made through consensus. However, women's concerns were subsumed under those of their fathers, or husbands, or brothers and or sons who were family heads. Hoene (1984) argues that the strengthening of the chieftainship by the British Colonial powers led to the further exclusion of women from the public sphere. The chiefs became less accountable to their subjects and less democratic. The British colonial rule was influenced by a patriarchal belief system whose culture was imbued with Victorian assumptions about the women's role which was perceived to be in the home. Although Basotho women were excluded from the general pitso they had their own gatherings which

were chaired by a chief's wife or elderly women. These gatherings were mainly intended to give hearings to women's domestic or petty personal grievances.

In the early 1940s there was a shift towards more centralisation of power by the colonial administration. A National Council comprising 100 members, 95 of whom were appointed by the Paramount Chief, was created. Most of the members were royal and women were not represented. The shift of power moved from the local to the central level, and women became more marginalised. In the history of Lesotho there has only been one woman Paramount Chief 'Mantšebo Seeiso. This was made possible by the laws of succession which stipulate that if a chief dies, his eldest son should succeed him. When Paramount Chief Seeiso Griffith died in 1939, his heir, Bereng Seeiso was still an infant so 'Mantšebo as the first wife of the Chief Griffith became the regent. Ironically, it was during her reign that a Council of advisors to the monarch was appointed. One is inclined to believe this was an indication that 'Mantšebo's ability to rule on her own was underestimated, as a result a Council of male advisors was proper. Conversely, although women could become stand-in chiefs for their errant husbands or sons, it was unheard of for women to be advisors to male chiefs. Since the 1960s more women have become chiefs but Gay (1982) argues that this has occurred mainly because the rewards for chieftainship are so little that male heirs prefer to take better jobs elsewhere, either in the mines in South Africa or even in the civil service.

With the advent of the modern political parties in the 1950s, hopes for women's participation were raised. The two main parties, the Basutoland Congress Party (BCP) and the Basutoland National Party (BiNP), sought to reform the undemocratic colonial system and to ensure popular participation for all citizens. Basotho were to exercise the right to vote for the first time. The 1958 Electoral Law proclaimed that all sexes, races, religions were eligible to vote but only if they have been tax payers in Lesotho in the last five years and were over the age of 21. (Voting age has been lowered to 18 for the 1998 elections).

Whatever the arguments for the low participation in politics, one thing is abundantly clear: Basotho women progressed from almost no participation of

representation before the advent of modern political parties, to being voters, and even political party candidates, but the level of their participation in terms of representation in decision making bodies still remains low.

### **The Influence of the Political Climate**

Hoeane (1984) argues that the political climate of most of the post independence era which was dominated by physical violence prompted most women to retreat into the domestic sphere. Whatever little women's participation there had been, was severely reduced after the declaration of the state of emergency in 1970.

An example of the above can be that of women's participation in local structures of governance; the case in point being that of Development Councils (DCs), namely, Village Development Councils (VDCs) and District Development Councils (DDCs). Between 1968 to 1986 various attempts were made to make these structures more participatory but these Councils have usually been used by villagers as alternative arena for party politics whenever there was a restriction on party politics. This can be seen by their tendency to have members of the opposition party in higher numbers whenever the opposition is being frustrated from being openly active. (Motebang, 1992). Women's participation in these Councils has been as high as 75 per cent. (Thoahlane, 1984) However, it has been found that this participation declined especially after the Military regime came into power in 1986. In the absence of an arena for party politics, more men began to participate in them, further marginalising women. In a survey conducted by Motebang (1992) women said they were afraid of the "politicking" that used to go on in these Councils.

Women also gave the following reasons for their low participation. Time was mentioned as a main constraint. Women were only able to participate in higher numbers in the DCs at the village level since these did not entail any movement of the Councillors outside the village. For one to participate in the Ward or District level, meetings were held at the Principal Chief's office and the District Secretary's office, respectively. This location was not convenient for many women. To attend such meetings sometimes Councillors would have to spend the

night away from home. This presented a two-fold problem for married women with young children. Firstly, they would have to seek their husband's permission to travel, and secondly, they would have to make arrangements for someone to look after their families. At times the husbands would refuse to give permission. Those women who participated in the Ward and District Councils tended to be older (over forty) or were widows. Some women said they elected men to represent them at the higher levels because they would not have many constraints. They would also have the time to attend meetings. The main point here is that women did not doubt the ability of other women in being leaders, but rather were being realistic about the limitations which they knew that most women would have. Some women who were in the Councils also pointed out that some male members deliberately intimidated them by using vulgar language in their presence. As a result the women felt uncomfortable in meetings (Motebang, 1992). The above statements show that women had reasons for electing men, and these should not be misconstrued as being a result of their dislike for other women.

It is not quite clear what the forthcoming elections holds in store for women's participation in politics. The alleged hijacking of the democratic government by the Lesotho Congress for Democracy (LCD) has led to among others, the formation of a women's political caucus group, among which its objectives was to ensure the return of democratic rule. The group comprised women from nine political parties, excluding the LCD. The group also intended to organise women to make a more concerted and strong effort to get "women's issues" on the agenda in the next general elections. Among their strategies was to invite members of the Women's Caucus in South Africa and women members of the opposition parties in Botswana to share their experiences with Basotho women.

The general mood was that women had had enough and they should be represented in higher numbers in the next elections. Some members were a bit discouraged that the newly elected executive committees of their parties did not have women. A top woman parliamentarian had this to say about the situation of women in politics in Lesotho, at the launching of the Commission of Women and Children of the Lesotho Council of NGOs: 'Democracy without gender parity is not democracy. Leaders need to show a firm commitment and pay lip service to

these issues. Women's style of work and negotiation skills are different and they bring into politics a sense of participatory politics' (LCN, 1997 p.3). Nonetheless one can say that the change of government from the BCP to the LCD has led to some degree of apprehension and uncertainty as to the outcome of the elections. One can only hazard a guess that such a climate may once more have a negative effect on women's participation. Yet again one may perceive this situation as both a challenge and an opportunity to make their impact felt in national politics.

### **Political Parties and their commitment to the "Women's Question"**

From the grim background of the 1970s and 80s of political repression, the late 1980s and early 1990s have witnessed an increase in the number of women involved in political parties. Women have progressed from the 1965 general election in which less than five women stood for elections, to the 1993 elections in which 23 women contested. The numbers are still negligible compared to the number of men who took part. Most of the political parties which took part in the elections mentioned women's issues as being an important part of the country's development and they pledged commitment to them. Some parties even listed the need to eliminate all laws which discriminate women. One political party was led by a woman. However, the two main political parties had very few women as candidates.

All the women who stood for elections enjoyed a lot of support from women country wide. The symbolism and importance of their participation cut across political and ideological differences. An example of this was the successful rally for all women candidates which was organised by the Lesotho National Council for Women in 1993. For most women, these candidates represented their hope that their voices would be heard. It was disappointing to notice that their campaigns were not awarded equal media coverage with men's (Molapo, 1993). It is equally disappointing to note that the three women who were elected to parliament were rather silent on women's issues. Women's organisations have had to lobby male MPs to have their motions passed in government. This has been much to such men's embarrassment whenever they were faced with a barrage of questions which they were not quite competent to answer.

**Table 1****Women's Participation in the 1993 General Elections**

Political Party	Female	Male
Basutoland Congress Party	3	62
Basotho National Party	2	63
Marematlou Freedom Party	15	50
Kopanang Basotho	1	-
Lesotho Labour Party	1	-
Progressive Democratic party	1	-
TOTAL	23	

(Molapo, 1993)

There are some sectors of the decision making process which have witnessed an increase in women as members, for example in political parties, and more civil servants being appointed at the middle management level. However, the increase in such structures needs to be scrutinised. Very few political parties in Lesotho have women in their executive committees. In the new executive committees of the four major political parties, the BCP does not have any women; the Marematlou Freedom Party (MFP) has always had more women than any other party, and it has two; the BNP has one; and the Lesotho Congress for Democracy (LCD) has two women as ordinary members of the executive.

For most of the parties, women who are in senior positions are usually in the universally controversial "women's wing" which radical feminists regard as being equivalent to those of "cheerleaders". This gives the impression that women's representation remains marginal in political parties.

One should not only stop at looking at the composition of the party executive committees, but also at the manifestos of these parties with regard to the "women's question". This would entail the extent to which a democratising state



"articulates the position/role of women both within itself and the civil society. Thus both the laws and the norms of the land and society must be geared towards the elimination of the subordinate status of the female;... A democratic government and society must be able and willing to identify the contributions of both sexes to the development of the society and equitably and adequately reward them" (Williams, 1997 p.175).

Although the parties in question are not government, with the exception of the LCD and by previous association, the BCP, their manifestos often contain statements of intents as future government's and opposition. In the majority of such manifestos, women's issues are usually included in no more than one paragraph. The BCP manifesto talks about striving for a gender equal society, while making no clear statements as to how this will be achieved. In fact, it was during the BCP government that reference was made to a policy of "not favouring anyone between men and women, rather, treating them equally".

Soon after assuming state power, the BCP abolished the Women's Bureau. The explanation was that it was not necessary because it favoured women, and the government was concerned with equal treatment of men and women. This begs the question, how does one treat those who were previously disadvantaged by virtue of their sex equally with those who are given more rights through culture and the law? Such an attitude clearly showed either, a misunderstanding of the "woman question" or a lack of commitment towards it. However, the BCP government appointed one woman minister, in the typically female post of the Ministry of Health. Three women ambassadors and two principal secretaries were also appointed.

For the longest time, the BNP in its time of reign (1966-1986), enjoyed or suffered the nickname of being called the "women's party". (Southall, 1995) Its leadership used to boast about the massive support it enjoyed from women, who voted it into power. Its manifesto remained silent on women's issues for the longest time. It enticed many women by involving them in rural development work, food-for-work schemes; and through the creation of the now defunct Women's Bureau in 1979. A few (two) appointments to ambassadorial positions, directors, and two principal

secretaries were also made. No woman minister was ever appointed until 1986, when a deputy-minister was appointed by the Military Government of Lekhanya. A survey by Southall (1995) showed that even in the 1993 elections 'overall, most candidates found it difficult to differentiate issues in gender terms. However, of those who did so, the fact that women were making some presence felt as candidates (more so than in previous elections) seemed to be the major issue itself. For them this seemed indicative of women's demands for equal rights, and the abolition of discriminatory laws and customs' (p. 73). On the whole there was little recognition of the centrality of 'women's issues' in their campaigns.

### **Conclusion: The Way Forward**

There are many reasons for women's under-representation in party politics. Some are as a result of their own inefficiencies (most of which can equally apply to men). However, the root cause lies in the failure of male dominated state structures including political parties to address the inequalities that women face in politics relative to men. Political violence and instability can also contribute to low level of women's participation in politics.

Even in a situation of stability, for as long as political parties do not place women's issues on their main agenda, and do not nominate more members to stand for elections, women's representation will remain low. Their commitment should be seen in their willingness to "risk" some of the constituencies where they have more assurance of winning, by allowing women to stand. Also for as long as women are under-represented in the executive committees, this can easily be interpreted as being a result of lack of commitment to women. Why should women remain only active in their role as "cheerleaders" to men through the "women's wing"?

Some cultural barriers were also identified as some of the problems that inhibits women from participating in politics. Kimane (1985) argues that women were reluctant to take up roles in public life because of lack of leadership experience. Women have very few role models because they are culturally confined to the domestic sphere. It was in recognition of this factor that the Nairobi Forward

Looking Strategies called for more women leaders to be trained with the endorsement by decision makers (who are mostly male) to encourage women's active involvement in public life.

The last three decades have witnessed an increase in the number of women chiefs. At the highest level of the structure we now have six women (out of 22) Principal and Ward Chiefs, who are automatically members of the upper house of parliament, the Senate. At the lower levels 35% of the chiefs are women, (Mapetla & Petlane, 1993). Regardless of the reasons for the increase, this has to be viewed in a positive light. Such women can be used by Gender Advocacy groups country wide. They can be used for channelling information to rural men and women, and pushing for change in those aspects which discriminate against women. These women chiefs can influence people's attitudes towards women in high decision making positions. The more women chiefs there are the higher the chance that people will become more familiar with women chiefs, and finally accept that women can be as competent as men in running the country.

The next strategy will be for those women who are involved in the various political parties' executive positions as well as other activists, to pressurise their parties to ensure that discriminatory laws and other constraints are eradicated. The problem seems to be that some women who are involved in political parties seem to think that parties which claim to be dedicated to men and women will guarantee the interests of women. We know the fallacy of such gender blind or gender neutral policies. There can be no gender neutrality before gender equality is achieved. Until political parties make a concerted effort to include more women in their structures and include their concerns in their manifestos, candidates for elections will remain predominantly male and political concerns will also remain gender blind.

Some of the examples that can be followed could be that of the South African National Congress (ANC's) quota system, whereby 33% of the candidates had to be female. However, anecdotal evidence shows that this system is not without problems. Women who are elected through this system are often stigmatised for being "affirmative action" nominees. There is also the question of whose servants

are they; the women's or the party's? The debate on abortion in the South African parliament brought this problem to the fore. Some members wanted to vote on their personal conscience, while they were being encouraged to adopt the party's stance.

Another model could be that of some of the Scandinavian countries, like Norway, who have a 40/60 quota system in parliament. This means that the percentage of male and female parliamentarians should never be below 40 or above 60.

Whatever model we chose will depend on the commitment of future governments to the "women's issue". What is clear is that one can not expect on women to "pull themselves up by their already weak bootstraps". There is need for an affirmative action policy. Even the most advanced democracies who rely on the "do it yourself" approach like the USA have shown that women will remain under-represented for as long as nothing is done to aid them.

Lesotho as a member state of the Southern African Development Community has already committed itself to "ensuring the equal representation of women and men in the decision-making of Member States and SADC structures at all level, and the achievement of at least a thirty percent target of women in political and decision-making structures by the year 2005" (AWEPA Bulletin, 1997 p.4). It has also signed and ratified other Conventions like the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1995 and has drafted a gender policy which will address some of the inequalities. The Law Reform Commission has also become operational, to review discriminatory law. What now remains is action.

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