

Foregrounding Women's Agency in Africa's Democratisation Process

The objective of the 1985 Women's Conference in Nairobi was to review the state of gender relations at the end of the United Nations Decade for Women (1975-1985). Looking back, it is clear that much has transpired since then. The initial approach to the conditions of Women in Development (WID) addressed issues such as gender equality, development and peace in ways that favoured women, as evidenced in the adoption of a platform of action for the advancement of women: the Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies. There is however a gap in both this initial approach and subsequent approaches – Women and Development (WAD) and Gender and Development (GAD) – in the sense that women are seen to lack agency in the political process. Viewing the representation of women in the political process from a dialectical perspective might have much to offer in our efforts to understand women's agency in Africa's democratisation process. In this article, democratisation is seen not only in terms of the transferral of public responsibilities to civic groups but also about increasing the capacity of ordinary citizens to understand and decide on the issues affecting them in their daily lives.

The term 'representation' is used in this article in two senses: the first is 'political representation' – how women are represented in the political system in terms of numbers, what Gouws (2004) calls 'descriptive' in her paper 'Women's Representation: The South African Electoral System and the 2004 Election'. The second sense is 'discursive representation' or 'discursive construction', which is concerned with how women are portrayed or constructed. The relation between meaning in the world and its representation is mediated through language. The way we select available options in language constructs one version of reality and not another. In other words, language works to constitute reality (Bourdieu 1991; Van Leeuwen & Wodak 1999). In this sense of representation, the focus is on content and form (lexicalisation, metaphors, euphemism transitivity, mood, prioritisation,

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sequencing of texts) and how through linguistic selection, women's agency is constructed.

This dialectical approach could provide a wider framework for addressing women's issues particularly in view of Gouws's critique of the Gender in Development (GAD) approach, the most widespread approach after the Nairobi Conference. Gouws (2005: 25) points out that the technocratic and reductionist way in which gender is used in this approach is at the expense of women's agency. Additionally, she argues that that this approach focuses not only on including women but also on the relationships of power that generate women's inequality. A shift has occurred from only focusing on women to also focusing on the role of men and thereby making gender relations the prime target of investigation and transformation (Gouws 2005: 25). The term 'agency' is used in this study with reference to Fairclough (2003: 22), who defines it as the capacity of free people to act (borrowing from Giddens 2001), pointing out the limitations of agency thus: 'social agents are not "free" agents, they are socially constrained, but nor are their actions totally socially determined'.

In Wodak's view, many empirical studies have neglected the context of language behaviour and have often analysed gender by merely looking at the speaker's biological sex (1997: 1). As a result, she proposes that a context-sensitive approach, which looks at gender as a social construct would lead to more fruitful results, that is, a look at gender in relation to the socio-cultural and ethnic background of the interlocutors, and in relation to their age, their level of education, their socio-economic status, their emotions and the specific power-dynamics of the discourse

investigated. These factors might be useful in investigating the enhancement of women's construction of their agency.

Amadiume (1987) in her book *Male Daughters, Female Husbands*, drawing from research in her Igbo community, argues that patrilineal and matrilineal practices in traditional African society placed both men and women in relatively equal positions. She views economic changes in colonial times as having undermined the status of women and reduced their political role. These patrilineal tendencies persist up to the present, to the detriment of women. Land ownership in patrilineal societies is subject to the children's identification with the father's family, which means that they adopt his name and inherit his property. Typically, traditional African societies are patriarchal, thus maintaining a culture that is prejudicial towards women. What is important for us is that this system has produced systematic gender inequalities. It is against this background of patriarchy, which condones male supremacy and dominance over women that women operate in the political process.

Culture to a large extent determines how the users of a language construct reality. While some scholars argue that language is part of culture, others view language and culture as two distinct phenomena. The view that seems to be generally accepted is that language can be considered as a cultural practice, and that language is both an instrument and a product of culture (Gumperz and Levinson 1996; Duranti 1997). The important thing for us in this paper is that groups express their cultural identities through language, amongst other ways (Gumperz 1982), and most importantly, language reflects the cultural character of people both in their vocabulary and their discourse conventions and ways of speaking. Stereotypes are also important in understanding the cultural activities in a community. For example, most women who contest elections, whether at the parliamentary or civic levels, are often constructed as 'immoral'. This is most likely because such women have managed to resist domination as well

as hegemony in order to access (politics as) a dominant discourse.

The role of women in the political process in Kenya is seen within a context that some scholars have described as problematic (Ndambuki & Kitetu 2004; Webb & Kembo-Sure 2000; Okombo 2001). They argue that less than 25 per cent of African people know the ex-colonial languages such as English and French well enough to develop economically, socially, and politically. Consequently, these languages are barriers to effective access to information and to participation in educational, economic, political and decision-making processes. This is particularly so in the case of women for whom language can act as a tool for disempowerment (Ndambuki 2005). In Kenya, the language of political administration is English. Kiswahili, the national language, is however used in communication between the ruling elite and the majority in the rural areas. Unfortunately, Kiswahili itself is as alien to most rural people as English. The women in the rural areas mainly use their mother tongues and this puts them at a serious disadvantage when it comes to participating in official and public affairs. Additionally, Khasiani (2000) in research comparing women's participation in governance in Kakamega and Makueni Districts in Kenya notes that more than one third of women in Makueni District are unable to read or write in any language. This is an important fact that this article takes into consideration. Khasiani argues that we need to identify and understand the biases and prejudices surrounding women's issues and sensitively repackage information so that it portrays women positively. Literacy is a critical factor for women aspiring to leadership positions as evidenced in the recent election of the Liberian President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf as Africa's first woman president.

In a paper on language as a forgotten parameter in democratisation, Okombo (2001) underscores the greatest weakness of African development discourse: – it ignores the crucial role that language itself plays in bringing about human development in the process of democratisation. Women are portrayed as encountering problems in entering politics or being elected despite the increasing number of educated and talented women in various domains of society (cf. Ghai 2002: 82). Factors leading to this situation have not been fully understood. It is likely that

among other things, derogatory language is tied to the poor representation of women in politics. A case in point is the 1997 elections that are particularly relevant for the women's movement in Kenya. In 1997 Charity Ngilu became the first Kenyan woman to contest the presidential election. What Grignon (1999) calls the 'Ngilu wave' was that Ngilu had a great challenge to face, the most important being the age-old attitude among the men who, in Grignon's words, 'could not imagine being led by a woman' (1999: 116). This represents the kind of challenge women in general face. Derogatory use of language was observed in Ngilu's campaign; for example she was nicknamed 'wiper', a label that was normally transformed to 'wiper'¹ by opponents.

In other words, despite post-Nairobi efforts to work towards fairness to both genders, especially in making leadership opportunities available, scholars continue to note that women's participation in decision-making is mostly peripheral. From the available literature it would appear that women are disadvantaged in the political process though no overt connection is made between the text and talk of politicians (who are usually men) on the one hand and women's construction of their agency and their level of involvement in the political process on the other. Moreover, there are development problems (notably HIV) that affect women differently from the way they affect men. It would therefore appear that there are gender inequalities that cannot be fully addressed by recourse to class differences or even in economic terms. Such inequalities might alternatively be addressed by reference to the socio-cultural differences between men and women.

There is an increasing need to pay attention to action and interaction of women in their organisations such as women's groups as a way of understanding their daily experiences. Issues of power are also important as they help us to position women in the wider context of politics as a dominant discourse. This is especially the case in a paradoxical context when individuals cannot constitute themselves as a group with a voice that is capable of making itself heard unless they dispossess themselves in favour of a spokesperson in whom they vest the power to speak on their behalf. In view of this paradox, it might be logical to adopt a critical approach to the Women, Culture and De-

velopment (WCD) approach proposed by Bhavnani, Foran and Kurian (2003), cited in Gouws (2005: 25). Women's groups for instance might not be the appropriate springboard for women's leadership in the political process due to their structural and historical set-ups.

Studies on the representation of women in the Kenyan media portray shifting identities for women. Worthington (2001) in a case study explores how a Kenyan-owned news magazine, the Nairobi-based *Weekly Review*, represented female advocacy based on 'combative motherhood', a strategy developed to describe a situation whereby women draw on their moral authority as mothers to assert their legitimacy in a male-dominated political arena. Analysing editorials on the 'Mothers of Political Prisoners'², a hunger strike in 1992 for the release of their sons and against the background of the initial years of the multi-party era, gender was shown to intersect with other categories of identity such as ethnicity, class and region. The importance of Worthington's work for my article is the centrality of the cultural discourses that associate particular meanings with the women portrayed. For example, the mothers who stripped to 'curse' the authority were 'framed' as 'insane'. Nobel Peace prize winner Wangari Maathai, who was then in the opposition, was framed as the leader of these women. Now currently in the ruling party NARC, she is at the moment represented as a 'heroine'.

From a political science perspective, Gouws's (2004) study on women's representation in the South African electoral system in the 2004 elections makes the useful observation that there is a shift from a concern with numbers (descriptive representation) to participatory representation (democracy) where quantitative data must be matched with qualitative data. This shift involves voicing women's interests, experiences and perspectives. Since the 2004 elections, South Africa has had 131 women in parliament, the eleventh highest in the world. Women formed quite a significant constituency, with 1,982,867 more women voters than men. The findings of the study show that voters are not mobilised by their gender identities but by their racial and class identities. The conclusion that 'women need more than the vote, they need a voice in government' (2004: 64), suggests that numerically, more women voters should

translate to more votes and hopefully to foregrounding women's agency.

Tamale's study on Uganda, *When Hens Begin to Crow* (1999) indicates that affirmative action³ has enhanced the participation of women in the electoral process since the late 1980s. Focussing on the parliamentary elections, she concluded that language use plays an important role in the campaign process, especially in the mudslinging by both female and male candidates against each other. Her research shows how women's participation in Ugandan politics has unfolded, and what the implications are of women's parliamentary participation as a result of affirmative action handed down by the state rather than owing to grassroots movements.

In conclusion this article adopts a dialectal approach to explore the concept of representation in addressing women's issues in the political process. The paper has argued that looking at representation in terms of both 'political' and 'discursive representation' might be a more fruitful way of looking at gender relations, and might enhance the construction of women's agency in the political process. On the whole, it is apparent that looking back to Nairobi +20 and Beijing +10, remarkable achievements have been documented in relation to gender awareness. However, the most critical challenge to enhancing women's agency in the process of democracy and democratisation remains *how* to effectively integrate culture in the WCD approach. It is also apparent that women should fight from within the structures, rather than from an isolated position. Such an approach might provide a tool for understanding and enhancing women's ability to see themselves as able to take transformative social action in Africa's democratisation process.

Notes

1. The nickname 'viper' is a derogatory term that was used to portray Ngilu as a 'monster' and an inappropriate choice for a presidential candidate.
2. The 'Mothers of Political Prisoners' had gone on a hunger strike to protest against the arrest of their sons during the Moi regime. In order to assert their authority, they stripped

to curse the prevailing regime – at the time a cultural practice among the Kikuyu people that signifies utmost disregard for the one for whom the curse is intended. While this has cultural significance among Kenyans, as was evident in the way the Kenyan policemen walked away from the naked women, the practice did not seem to affect foreign observers and journalists in a similar way.

3. A possible solution to the small number of women in politics has been proposed to be a constitutional and legal system that is more supportive of women. For example, Uganda's Affirmative Action policy has incorporated the stipulation that a number of parliamentary seats must be reserved for women. At present women must occupy at least 39 seats in the Ugandan parliament.

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