Gender and politics: The Zambia national women’s lobby group in the 2001 tripartite elections

Bizeck J. Phiri

Introduction

It has long been established that at least fifty-two percent of the world’s population is composed of women. What has not been clear is what percentage of the women do participate in the electoral process. As observed by Lise Rakner and Lars Svasand, “the distinction between qualified and registered voters is one of the most problematic issues [...]” in this respect. In the case of Zambia, most political parties tend to appeal to the women electorate for political support and encourage them to register as voters in large numbers. Yet, in reality Zambia has exhibited under registration by qualified voters for a variety of reason. And because one needs to be a registered voter to qualify for nomination to run for political office, women’s movements have taken up the challenge to encourage women to register as voters and therefore qualify to stand for election. Indeed, as Gisela Geisler correctly pointed out “democracy has proven to be no guarantee for a more equal representation of women in government, [...]”. The apparent withdrawal of women from political participation has a long history.

Women in national Zambian politics have long been seen as having played an essential, but largely supportive, role. There is a sense in which the African

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tradition of viewing women as mere supporters of the male-dominated society has permeated the literature on and discussion of the nationalist struggle. Yet on closer examination, and in the context of the twentieth-first century, it is evident that women in Zambia played more than just a supportive role in the nationalist politics of the country. While it is true that, organisationally and from the 1950s, women in Zambian politics were generally confined to the women’s wings of the independence movements, they nonetheless created their own political space within the larger movement of independence politics.

The question that remains unanswered is why women are presented as followers rather than leaders in their own right. Mbuyu Nalumango provides some explanation to this when she observed that “African women were not writers until the last two decades, hence the scanty information available about their past”.³ It is in this context that “history” is projected as “his-story” and therefore largely projects male dominance in the governance of society. Yet, as Nalimango has demonstrated, Zambian pre-colonial history has several examples of women leaders. In fact, the chapters in their edited volume has persuasively demonstrated the role that women have been playing in politics through the “three phases political environment-pre-colonial, colonial and post independence”.⁴ Arguably, therefore, when the Zambia National Women’s Lobby Group (ZNWLG) and the Zambia Women Writers Association (ZAWWA) decided to collaborate on the project they were embarking on a project that would highlight the important role that women play in politics and governance.

The ZNWLG decision to lobby for women’s participation in post colonial political processes was informed by the concept of power, which “denotes the control over material asserts, intellectual resources and ideology”.⁵ The Women’s Manifesto sought to redress an imbalance in the distribution of power between men and women. In the pursuit of this agenda, the ZNWLG held a National Conference to establish the Women in Politics Forum and to adopt the Zambia Women’s Manifesto between 26 and 27 March 2001 at the Mulungushi International Conference Centre. Of the several objectives of the conference, one is most relevant to this discussion and it was to “make women in politics visible and acceptable”⁶. Undoubtedly, this was an attempt to address the gender

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⁴  Nalumango, “Women in governance in pre-colonial Zambia”, 16,
⁵  ZNWLG and Women in Politics, Zambia women’s manifesto, (March 2000), 7.