“Strengthening Women’s Leadership in Local Government for Effective Decentralized Governance and Poverty Reduction in Africa: Roles, Challenges And Strategies.”

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CHALLENGES CONFRONTING WOMEN LEADERS IN LOCAL GOVERNMENTS – THE UGANDA EXPERIENCE

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1.0  Introduction

A number of countries in Africa and beyond embrace the policy of decentralization, the question of women participation in Local Government decision making becomes central to the governance debate and discourse. Governments and women themselves are increasingly making the separation between activism and the real need for participation in the running of the affairs of their localities. This is premised on the realization that women roles and needs differ from those of men and as such a blanket representation approach may not always address the real felt needs of the women. Coupled with this is the fact that women form a large constituency in development and public affairs management that warrant direct representation.

1.1  The Context

Decentralised Policy in Uganda has a strong Local Government System buttressed by regular bottom up elections, planning and budgeting processes. Local Governments are also a key mechanism for operationalizing the PRSP - the Poverty Eradication Action Plan (PEAP). The PEAP is Uganda’s national planning framework which domesticates international commitments and undertakings such as the Millennium Development Goals. The PEAP is currently under review to transform it into a more precise 5 year National Development Plan (NDP) that will be based on national priorities and concise budgets.

2.0  Women Leadership in Local Governments in Uganda

Uganda has a total of 93 and 1135 Higher and Lower Local Governments (LG) units, respectively. A constitutionally embedded affirmative action provides for a 33% composition of women for all local governance structures. As a result of applying this constitutional obligation, the total women representation in the Local Governance structures which include the main councils, the youth and persons with disabilities, currently stands at 6916¹ out of a total of 14'446 local councilors (48 percent).

Chairpersons of districts – the immediate sub national unit - are only one woman and 78 men. Women are 1.3% while Deputy Chairpersons are 56 women and 23 men. Women are 71%. These policy provisions are equally legislated in subsidiary laws, national and sector policies such as the PEAP, the National Gender Policy (NGP) and Local Governments Act (LGA). Women inclusion also forms part of the criteria for Local Governments to access development grants.

2.1 Achievements in promoting women leadership

Uganda has made commendable strides in promoting and strengthening women leadership at the various national and sub-national levels of governance. These include among others;

- **The creation of a stand alone Ministry of Women Development in 1998**
  This has since become the Ministry of Gender Labour and Social Development but with two departments dealing with Women and Gender Affairs.

- **The establishment of an affirmative action policy**
  This is clearly entrenched in the constitution and the Local Governments Act in 1995 and 1997 respectively to provide legislative backup for the enhanced women’s leadership. The policy provides for a 33% quota system of representation for women in all political leadership organs.

- The Constitution also provided for the establishment of an equal opportunities Commission which finally commenced initial operation in 2007.

The 1995 Constitution of Uganda provides the institutional and legal framework for women’s participation in all areas including governance and human rights. This is reflected in: The chapter on the national objectives:

VI). The state shall ensure gender balance and fair representation of marginalized groups on all the constitutional and other bodies

XV). The state shall recognize the significant role that women play in society.

Fundamental Human Rights and Freedoms:

33. (1) Women shall be accorded full and equal dignity of the person with men.
(2) The state shall provide the facilities and opportunities necessary to enhance the welfare of women to enable them to realize their full potential and advancement.
(3) The state shall protect women and their rights, taking into account their unique status and natural maternal functions in society.
(4) Women shall have the right to affirmative action for the purpose of redressing the imbalances created by history, tradition or custom.
(5) Laws, cultures, customs or traditions which are against the dignity, welfare or interest of women or which undermine their status are prohibited by this Constitution.
(6) The employer of every woman shall accord her protection during pregnancy and after birth, in accordance with the law. Local Government:180 (l) (b) One third of the membership of each local government council shall be reserved for women.
2.2 *Taking strides in promoting women leadership in Uganda*

These political actions and achievements have been made possible through a number of systemic processes as discussed below:

2.2.1 *Harmonisation*

a) *Using existing institutions and systems:* Uganda has promoted women leadership as part of mainstream rights, equity, governance and development processes but with mechanism for fast tracking the initiative e.g. 1.5 point credit to female entrants at University.

b) *Identifying a strategic entry point* for gender mainstreaming in an institution with direct horizontal and vertical reach: The promotion of women leadership concerns was made part and parcel of the Ministry of Local Government with the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development. The ministry has a direct political and technical structure to the population - participation, accountability and governance structures, as well as the management of public resources.

c) *Visibility at implementation levels:* where the function for gender equity is played and required as a pre-requisite for gender equity promotion. Local Governments are assessed on this issue.

**Assessing Progress in Gender Performance in LGs**

*Comparison of the Local Government Gender Performance Assessment, Uganda: A case Study on Promoting Women Leadership in Local Governance.*

The PEAP identifies gender inequality as a major cause and consequence of poverty, and calls for mainstreaming gender in key development issues and processes as a measure to reverse the situation. On the other hand, Uganda’s very strong gender policy framework has not always been translated into actions at the LG level.

To promote gender equality, gender mainstreaming was strategically made part of the incentive framework to tap into its broad nature policy mandate. The Gender Mainstreaming Performance Measure was piloted under the UNCDF/UNDP supported District Development Programme (DDP) 1998-2000 and scaled up under the Local Government Development Programme (LGDP 2000 – 2007). The LGDP was funded by the World Bank and the Bilateral Donors – DANIDA, Netherlands, Austria and Ireland. It further tested and refined the incentive-based grants transfer systems to the Local Governments through Development and Capacity Building Grants.
2.2.2 Engendering a Budget:
The promotion of women leadership very much depends on back-up financing for the various activities and structures. Civil Society has aggressively taken up the role of sensitizing government on gender budgeting and training local government technical staff and decision makers in gender budgeting.

2.2.3 Building Leadership Capacity:
Training of women and men councilors in governance and leadership in order to strengthen their grasp of their roles and responsibilities has been undertaken.

2.2.4 Monitoring of Expenditures and Performance of Local Government:
Women Leaders have been part of a progressive effort together with Civil Society organizations, to monitor local government sectoral expenditures and performance for the Poverty Action Fund.

3.0 Operational Challenges
Women leaders should look beyond numbers and move towards transforming these numbers into effective and efficient leadership for tangible benefits.

3.1 Challenges to women's participation in leadership

1) The negative cultural attitudes and beliefs
Women are perceived as possessions and known to be wives/mothers/caretakers and Uganda being one of a patriarchal society, men are dominant in decision making. Women who strive to take part in leadership are ridiculed as wanting to be “men”, money minded, ambitious, immoral and unruly; women are shy, lack confidence and have a low self-esteem. Men do not allow their wives to attend meetings as they fear that women are being lured into relationships with other male leaders.

2) Women’s workload at home

3) Low Education Levels
The literacy level of councillors particularly women councillors affects their capacity to comprehend and engage in technical processes which the council engages in. In spite of good government policies to promote education for all and UPE and USE, a good number of women of leadership age are still of low education.

4) Inadequate Resources
Women do not have ownership of productive resources e.g. land and property. In a bid to meet the household responsibilities, women are engaged in food supply with agricultural labour, informal employment and all these are characterised by high workload and unpaid labour. This leaves them with no funds and time for politics or any other leadership position.
5) **Skills**

Most women leaders lack negotiation and lobbying skills. This undermines their capacity to compete favorably with their male counterparts. They lack confidence.

6) **Women’s biological roles and responsibilities**

Some men feel that women may not serve well when they are engaged in child bearing. Some women risk loosing their jobs. As a result of their domestic roles, some women leaders always find it hard to keep time or hit deadlines at the workplace and this results in poor participation in the decision making process. Girls cannot hold positions of leadership in a community because they sooner or later get married and go to another community, so they are not elected to leadership positions.

7) **Women lack enough exposure and networking**

4.0 **Way forward**

1) Capacity development for women leaders. Most capacity development interventions are generic in nature and target leaders in local governments as if they are on the same footing. There is need to have a specific capacity development intervention targeting women leaders so that they are able to articulate issues in Council.

2) Review legislation to facilitate the participation of women leaders in council and address issues that undermine the effective participation of women in leadership positions e.g. there should be a deliberate quota in local government budget to address women issues.

3) Sensitisation of men so that they can allow their wives to participate in leadership;

4) Change of attitude by men and women towards women's leadership. Women need to learn to support each other more;

5) Organising adult literacy classes for women;

6) Family planning; having fewer children will create more time for women;

7) Emphasis should be put on girl-child education as they are the future women leaders;

8) Deliberate programmes should be designed to address issues of income.

9) Strict attention to human rights and gender equality.
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