

Obstacles for Women in Leadership Positions: The Case of South Africa

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One of the findings of a 2007 survey done by the South African Commission on Gender Equality is that more than 30 percent of the respondents are of the opinion that women are too emotional to handle high-level leadership positions (Commission on Gender Equality [2005](#)). It is common for stereotypical ideas to inform perceptions about women's abilities to perform well in leadership positions. In this vein, although 32 percent of South African parliamentarians are women and these women for the most part do their work competently, many respondents think that women cannot handle high-level leadership jobs.

Women political leaders have to cope not only with these stereotypical ideas about themselves but also with very public and visible political incidents that undermine women's authority and a feminist agenda in government. One incident was the firing of the woman deputy minister of health by the president because of what was deemed her insubordination, and another was the rape trial of the former deputy president of South Africa. I will elaborate on these incidents below.

While women political leaders face many obstacles, especially in male-dominated institutional cultures such as parliament, I want to single out four that I consider to be some of the major stumbling blocks at present: lack of support from the women's party auxiliary, despite a women-friendly electoral system; the closing of the political opportunity structure, which makes it difficult to frame issues in a gendered way; the gap between women leaders and women followers; and dysfunctional gender machinery structures and the lack of support from the women's movement.

A women-friendly electoral system but a lack of support from the ANC Women's League

South Africa uses a proportional list system as its electoral structure. This is a system in which each party gets a proportion of seats in parliament in relation to the proportion of the vote it gets during the election. In this system no votes are wasted, but the drawback is that there are no constituencies because voters vote for a party, not for candidates. The African National Congress (ANC) is the only party that has a 30 percent quota for

women on its party lists, which means that at least 30 percent of the people on ANC lists are women (and it used a 50 percent quota in the 2006 local government election). In practice, however, whether women actually hold seats depends on how high up their names are on the list. While most scholarly literature makes it clear that women benefit from proportional list representation (particularly when women's names are high on the list), the proportional representation system in general and the South African electoral system in particular suffer from a lack of accountability to voters (see Dahlerup and Freidenvall [2005](#)). Party leaders have the power to draw up the list and can place names wherever they want or leave them off altogether. This creates a situation in which members of parliament are accountable to the party leaders, not to the voters. As a consequence of the ANC's culture of strong discipline, developed while it was a party in exile, members of parliament are expected to toe the party line to an extraordinary extent.

The firing of the deputy minister of health, Nozizwe Madlala-Routledge, is a case in point. The minister of health, Manto Shabalala Msimang, supports the idea of a more nutritious diet for people living with HIV/AIDS and is reluctant to roll out antiretroviral drugs. Madlala-Routledge, however, made a strong case for a comprehensive policy on HIV/AIDS as well as the need for antiretroviral drugs when she dealt with the health portfolio during the minister of health's absence due to illness. Madlala-Routledge also called the neglect and death of newborn babies in a certain hospital a national emergency, whereas the minister of health did not think it was anything out of the ordinary. Madlala-Routledge brought civil society on board with the government's new five-year plan for combating HIV/AIDS, which she helped develop, but she was fired because she took an allegedly unauthorized trip (the president did not sign off on the trip) to Spain to speak at an AIDS inoculation conference. The reasons given by the president for her firing were that she was headstrong and was not a team player. Her loyalty to the president and the ANC was doubted, and her firing created the impression that she was penalized for being competent rather than incompetent. No male leader has ever been fired in a similar way, that is, without weeks of deliberation and discussion and with such public humiliation. There was no public outcry from the ANC Women's League, except from the Northern Cape branch.

The closing of the political opportunity structure of the transition

The 1994 transition from apartheid to a liberal rights-based democracy created a political opportunity structure that allowed women to frame certain political issues in gendered terms. As such, the Women's National Coalition (WNC) mobilized women to draw up a women's charter that was handed to parliament in 1994.¹ The opportunity structure created the space for women to articulate their needs through the creation of national gender machinery. Women could also articulate the need to change some aspects of customary law that lead to women's subordination, even in the face of the opposition from the Congress of Traditional Leaders of South Africa, hence, the enactment of, for example, the Recognition of Customary Marriages Act (Act 120 of 1998). This act changed the status of women under customary marriage from minors to majors. Until the enactment of this law women married under customary law could not enter legal contracts or make any important decisions without the permission of their husbands or other male relatives. These changes cause traditional leaders to fear losing their power as sources of authority under customary law and to worry about the disintegration of traditional culture.

Caution needs to be exercised when arguing about the conflict between culture, tradition, and universal human rights as embodied in the South African Constitution. Often, customary law protects the positions of men in traditional communities to the detriment of women. In addition, women experience multilayered forms of oppression, and their realities are often not reflected in mainstream human rights discourses (Ndashe [2005](#), 37). Many violations of women's human rights occur in the domestic sphere, but it is also argued that customary law cannot be rejected without careful consideration of the importance of custom and culture to many women.

While women in parliament have supported reforming customary law and aligning it with a human rights discourse, some male political leaders' understanding of the role of traditional culture and the construction of their masculinity within that culture may be different from that of women parliamentarians and may undermine women leaders' attempts to reconcile culture and human rights. A good illustration of the perceived conflict between rights and culture is the trial of the former deputy president of South Africa, Jacob Zuma, for raping a young HIV-positive activist who spent the night at his house. When Zuma went on trial for rape, many women (and men) showed their support for him by dancing and chanting outside the court while wearing T-shirts with the slogan "100% Zulu boy"—a reference to Zulu men's supposed virility and entitlement to sex. The supporters also burned photos of the rape survivor while chanting "burn the

bitch.”² When asked in court why he did not stop when she asked him to stop, Zuma said that in Zulu culture you have to satisfy a sexually aroused woman (Motsei [2007](#), 27). Thus, Zuma’s perceived cultural entitlement was pitted against his accuser’s universal right to bodily integrity and freedom from harm.

When Zuma was acquitted, his accuser had to leave the country for her own safety and now lives abroad. It may be argued, therefore, that Zuma’s accuser was for all intents and purposes stripped of her citizenship and of the rights that citizenship entails, while Zuma is now on the campaign trail to become the next president in 2009.³

While it was clear that individuals within the ANC Women’s League deeply abhorred Zuma’s actions and the court’s ruling, no unified condemnation came from the ANC Women’s League, and the criticism by the Commission on Gender Equality also came belatedly. The rape trial seriously undermined the feminist agenda and rhetoric in government and, because of their silence, implicated women leaders in the incident. While this incident could have been used as a new opportunity structure by women leaders, it was not.

Citizenship without substantive equality

One of the biggest problems women leaders in South Africa face is the gap between women elites and women at the grassroots level. Since the acceptance of the neoliberal macroeconomic framework, Growth, Employment, and Redistribution, the gap between the rich and the poor has increased dramatically. With a 40 percent unemployment rate, women, especially single mothers, are affected disproportionately.⁴ The neoliberal commitment to market solutions leads to women’s disproportionate vulnerability to poverty, given women’s labor market disadvantages and responsibilities for care. In the South African case, many women are further disadvantaged by being poorly educated or illiterate. There is no social safety net for poor women who do not have children, do not look after disabled relatives, or are not old enough to be entitled to an old-age pension. By comparison, single women who are mothers can apply for a Child Support Grant (according to a means test), which is currently R 220 (\$30) per month for children up to age 15. The lack of a comprehensive social protection system aggravates the lives of the poorest of the poor, often leading to conditions of destitution. What is needed from women leaders is “double militancy” (Beckwith [2000](#), 442), whereby women are not only active in the state but also take an active interest in constituencies of women or

groups that represent women so that grassroots-level women may feel that their interests are represented in government.

Dysfunctional gender machinery structures and a demobilized women's movement

The transition to democracy in South Africa saw women engaging in institutional politics. Since 1994 the South African state has embarked on creating one of the most integrated national gender machineries in the world to promote women's equality. It consists of an Office on the Status of Women, a Women's Empowerment Unit, a Women's Caucus in parliament, the Joint Monitoring Committee on the Quality of Life and the Status of Women, gender desks in every state department at the national level with duplicate desks at the provincial level, and an autonomous Commission on Gender Equality.

While feminist scholars were heartened by the integrated nature of these structures, it is exactly this integrated nature that has become one of the biggest drawbacks of the machinery. Overlapping mandates, poor communication, personalized politics, the lack of a feminist agenda, and a reluctance to call the state to account for serious infringements of women's rights have led to perceptions that the national gender machinery is dysfunctional and to mistrust on the part of women in civil society and women's organizations.

Prior to 1994 the WNC, which functioned as the women's movement, represented the voices of women in civil society. Since 1994, however, most of the competent leaders of the women's movement have become members of parliament, while the women's movement itself has become fragmented and demobilized and now organizes sectorally around issues such as violence and poverty. The outcome is that there is no coherent women's movement to mobilize women in support of issues raised by women in government, to keep women in government accountable, or to help set a feminist agenda. While women in South Africa face one of the highest levels of gender-based violence in the world, as well as the highest rate of HIV/AIDS infection in Africa, mobilization on these issues is localized and contained.

Conclusion

A study by Amanda Gouws and Hennie Kotzé (2007) on the values of women political leaders has shown that the values and attitudes of male parliamentarians differ from those of female parliamentarians. Women in general are more progressive in their values around issues pertaining to gender equality such as abortion, birth control, divorce, and homosexuality, while men are less progressive. Women therefore have an important contribution to make to political change for the benefit of women, but the obstacles discussed above prevent women political leaders from making the difference that they can.

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