



PRESENTATION
by Veronica De Klerk - WAD Executive Director
on
“Women’s Role and Challenges in Politics”
during
A One-Day Seminar for Journalists
Tuesday, 29 September 2009 - Thüringer Hof Hotel

Madam Director of Ceremonies;
Honourable McHenry Venaani - Member of Parliament;
Mr Moses Ndjarakana - Director of the Electoral Commission of Namibia;
Ms Elizabeth /Khaxas - Director of the “Women’s Leadership Centre”;
Members of the Media; and
Ladies and Gentlemen:

Please allow me to thank the facilitators of this important one-day seminar for journalists, for the invitation to address members of the Namibian Chapter of the “Media Institute of Southern Africa - MISA”, on ***“The Role of Women and Challenges in Politics”***, on the eve of Namibia’s 2009 Presidential and Parliamentary elections. It is a pleasure for me to join you today.

Twenty years after Independence, Namibia, as one of the youngest democracies in the world, is slowly - albeit all too slowly - moving towards an equitable dispensation for the genders at decision-making level.

The slow pace at which it is happening, however, belies all the good intentions and promises of Governments and Rulers - not only in Namibia, but across the

African Continent, to establish equal representation of men and women in decision-making positions.

As we are aware, Namibia and Africa are still ruled by men, although in all fairness, it should be mentioned - and Government should indeed be congratulated - that Namibia never, in its history, had so many women at decision-making levels of Government.

The elusive ideal of gender parity in Government has a very long history. Politics have always been seen as the domain of men while the role allocation for women would confine them to chores pertaining to caring for the family, producing and preparing food and being in close contact with the family.

The maintenance of these role allocations, through generations, gave rise to the widely-held view that women are not suitable to occupy political office because of a lack of intellectual capacities that would equip them for decision-making at Government level.

Since such myths have been proven invalid in modern times, with the exposure of more women to higher and tertiary education; as well as training by NGO's in the socio-economic and socio-political fields of development, etc, movement towards equal representation of the genders has become a serious point of discussion.

Having said that, the first challenge for women is to keep that debate alive and to lobby among their own ranks for women leaders to come to the fore and to be available for nomination on party lists.

The stereotyped defence of men for the disparity of the genders on political party lists, is that not enough women were available for nomination.

This indisputably points a finger at women who largely still suffer from the "hide-in-the-shadows"-syndrome, while accusing men of securing all positions for themselves.

Because of the long-standing tradition of male domination in decision-making positions, all too many women unfortunately developed a preference for men in politics and would thus, not readily vote for a fellow-woman to occupy such positions.

Destructive characteristics, in addition, such as jealousy, slandering and gossiping about women who excel, are unfortunately rife among women and that merely discourages and impedes the progress of women.

It should thus, be said, that unless women from grassroots level up, rally behind one of their ranks who aspires to take up a leadership role, the goal of equal representation of men and women in Government, will never be achieved.

However, I am proud to say, that women have undoubtedly proven to bring unique qualities to leadership positions across the world. They often view matters with a different perspective which addresses the **essence of the problem head-on!**

I cannot recall having listened to a female politician who uses her time for debate on idle babble about insignificant matters, although some may not always succeed in bringing their point across adequately, due to an inability to express themselves clearly.

It is my opinion that women politicians speak from their hearts! They speak with conviction; and they speak from the perspective that, what they say, would have in some way or other, a bearing on their Families; a bearing on their Well-being, on Peace and Stability.

...And because female politicians are mothers who are closest to raising their children, they tend to be more serious in addressing social challenges, such as health, education, domestic violence, HIV/AIDS etc more readily, in an attempt to find solutions to the problems.

It is further my conviction that female politicians continuously face the challenge of being weighed up against their male compatriots, and as such, they usually do their homework on points of debate thoroughly, in order to avoid ridicule.

A particular challenge which faces women in politics, is to continuously and actively widen their horizons of knowledge and information, and to broaden their scope of topics on which they can express an authoritative opinion.

Women would therefore, have to work particularly hard and smart - and act in a meticulous manner on accessing information and other views on matters.

This will equip them to widely participate in debates in Parliament or elsewhere, and it provides an opportunity to add a female perspective to opinions expressed.

Ladies and Gentlemen: It would be totally unrealistic to expect from any politician to be an expert on all subjects on which he or she is often invited to speak. Be it as it may - the public expects such a politician to speak authoritatively and to give directives for a future course of action.

Therefore, to avoid embarrassment, or to reveal a lack of information and insights in such situations, it would be strongly advisable for female politicians to co-opt the assistance of a number of supportive and informed advisors in various fields, who could be easily consulted for advice and inputs for Parliamentary debate, speeches, or for ideas on fresh initiatives to keep them active.

This of course, applies to ALL politicians, to be surrounded by a host of knowledgeable Advisors on various subjects.

It is important though, that such advisors be trustworthy and informed people, on whose advice can be counted!

Women should also be the challengers of the views of other contributors to debate. This enhances in-depth contemplation of views; it reduces the possibilities of over-looking pitfalls; and it leads to the frugal use of resources and therefore, serves the nation well.

Women in politics within male dominated societies usually face the challenges of prejudice and scepticism about their abilities from their male compatriots and from the general public. This challenge should be faced head-on as the only way to wipe it out.

Prejudice and scepticism against women regarding their competence, can only be neutralized by peak performance and productivity, because action speaks louder than words and women are no strangers to action.

However, since most female politicians usually have families to care for and attend to, they are often exposed to time constraints to perform the demanding duties of public office as adequately as required.

Although this requires a careful balancing act, it is of paramount importance that the duties of public office not be neglected since it can easily revive prejudice and judgments of incompetence.

However, for a mother who doubles as politician, it would be fair to rely on the support of her spouse with regard to domestic chores, based on the stipulations of the "*Married Person's Equality Law*" which was passed already 12 years ago.

It is unfortunately the case, that the public tongue is a harsh judge that would not spare women its undiluted wrath if they fail to perform or misjudge issues.

Now - Focusing on women's visibility in the media: An area which women often shy away from, is the scrutinizing spotlight which the media exposes public figures to.

Female politicians should challenge any inhibitions which they may have and use the media as a tool to source information, and in so doing, to continuously communicate with the electorate. This would be an excellent way to market themselves with the electorate.

Media bashfulness will not serve their cause as female politicians well, and will not boost their image within their party ranks, nor in the eyes of their voters.

To deal with the media in a way that ensures regular coverage of the performance of women politicians, through correct reporting, is an art that a female politician should soon master after being elected to hold public office.

The media can make or break politicians depending on their performance and the relationship and trust they build up with the media.

On the other hand, the media will do well if they would boost the image of women politicians to assist with the unfairness of the inequality of the genders!

Another challenge which has to be dealt with by female politicians in particular, is to speak in public in a manner that commands the respect and even admiration of the nation.

A well prepared speech, which means correct facts, clear and correct use of the official language, as well as boldness and good articulation while presenting, will go a long way in securing the attention and appreciation of their audiences.

Few things are as frustrating as to listen to a speaker, and even more so, politicians, who cannot pronounce the words in their written speeches correctly and who stumble and fumble in reading as if it is the first time that they set eyes on the speech.

Women politicians should spare themselves bad critique or the boredom of their audiences, by preparing well before-hand, and by practising the pronunciation of uncommon words which their speech-writers might have used to express their views.

Women politicians should further guard against compromising their popularity by trying to act like men when entering politics. Women should be comfortable with themselves and be proud of who they are, despite whatever powerful positions they may hold. Women should at all costs, retain their femininity, because this is one of the most powerful attributes **they have and one which is greatly admired by men.**

But Ladies and Gentlemen, all is not doom and gloom for female politicians, since they are generally viewed to be less corrupt and more caring about bread and butter issues.

In view of rampant corruption in Government, not only in Namibia, but indeed across Africa, the perception of women politicians as less corrupt, should be seized by them to firmly establish themselves in politics.

The Women's Parliamentary Caucus, for instance, can use this selling point of being less corrupt, to boost their image. This body should be particularly active regarding all female politicians to inform and groom them for convincing performance in Parliament and in the execution of their mandates.

I am not convinced that the “Women’s Parliamentary Caucus” in Namibia, which cuts across party-political lines, is active and well-known enough. But if they are to empower female politicians, they certainly do not use the media to inform the public and to boost the general perception of women in politics.

But the question is: Is the media fully aware of the purpose and performance of the “Women’s Parliamentary Caucus” to determine whether this body is truly fulfilling its mandate? It would stand the media in good stead to follow up on this issue, as the body is relatively unknown among the electorate.

There is no doubt that the “Women’s Parliamentary Caucus” should operate for the benefit of all women and it can be exploited by female politicians as a platform to source information on the plight of women, through the views and recommendations of NGO’s; Community Based Organisations; Churches; youth movements, etc - in order to formulate sound proposals for Parliament.

Challenges, such as the lack of assertiveness, lack of self-confidence, failure to use the media as tool, besides a host of other issues on which all female politicians share common ground, can be fruitfully dealt with by that Caucus.

The wide-spread prevalence of violence against women and girls in Namibia, which is epidemic in proportions, denies the nation of equality within marriage and makes a mockery of existing gender-related laws which are either unknown to men, OR not taken seriously, OR not stringently applied.

Since issues such as Poverty; Violence against women and girls; Baby Dumping; the failure of men to pay Maintenance for their children; irresponsible sexual behavior which results in the contraction of HIV/AIDS, etc - affects all across party-political lines - it calls for a united stance of all political parties to eradicate these forms of social evils which are still thriving in our society today.

It would stand the “Women’s Parliamentary Caucus” in good stead if it would give in-depth thought to these serious issues, to dramatically reduce the plight of women and girls.

Female politicians should closely guard against complacency, or getting too comfortable with the men, once they are in Parliament, forgetting about the plight of other vulnerable women out there, who desperately need their assistance and who voted for their party.

Being elected to Parliament brings honour - **YES**, but it also holds an enormous responsibility towards the nation. It puts all female politicians in the spotlight and the focus of public scrutiny - not only in Namibia, but in focus of the world, via modern technology.

With such focus on their activities and on how they deal with their Ministries, I honestly do not see scope and justification for in-fighting and pettiness among female politicians. The communality of problems facing women and women politicians cannot be superseded by party or personal differences.

In this context, it is most unfortunate that male politicians are continuously accusing women that they are not progressing in politics because of in-fighting among themselves.

This, Ladies and Gentlemen - is serious, because if this is happening, women are further weakening themselves when they tend to want to “*deal*” with a woman who have excellent leadership qualities and who aspires to reach greater heights of success, by pulling her down through gossiping or malicious slandering, or by viciously pulling the ladder from under her feet!

WAD therefore, earnestly cautions, that the so-called “*Pull-Her-Down-syndrome*” (*PHD-syndrome*) among women is extremely dangerous for women’s advancement in society, because the more women fight among themselves, the longer men will continue to rule on their own!

Women themselves should be instrumental to identify and vote for fellow-women who are capable to contribute meaningfully in the two Houses of Parliament.

It is imperative that women should stand together; work together; be proud of the achievements of one another and have faith in one another’s abilities. Women should never undo the role which they can and should fulfil in our communities by pulling fellow-women down.

Through my work I have witnessed the sad reality how many women would rather vote for a man, than for a woman because of jealousy or a lack of faith in women's abilities to excel. If this is not true, why then, do we merely have **three** women Governors out of the **13** - 20 years after Independence?

I also wish to mention that most women in Namibia are, to a lesser or greater degree, hamstrung by outdated cultural traditions which inhibit their development and growth, and which slows down the country's economic development.

Female politicians have an ideal opportunity to work in unison for the eradication of such baggage. Our country cannot further allow the injustices suffered by women due to cultural practices, to be practised any longer.

Women politicians should be the catalyst to bring about progress on that front.

Similarly, gender related laws, many of which the content is still unknown, especially in deep rural areas, should be taken to the people more speedily and effectively, because, if the people are not informed about the contents of laws, they will not know their rights!And if people do not know their rights, for all practical purposes, those laws do not exist.

The Women's Parliamentary Caucus should actively discuss ways to be the driving force for the dissemination and explanation of the contents of such laws in far flung rural areas - and I assure you that WAD is doing a lot to assist in this regard.

Another thought about the Women's Parliamentary Caucus is that, **that** body should actively work for the inclusion of more women on party lists.

It would be extremely selfish and not promoting the cause of women, if those who have made it up the ladder do not send the elevator back down for others.

The country will speedily see parity in the representation of the genders in ruling positions if the present generation of women in Parliament start building on the next generation to be worthy successors and able to serve the nation.

Young girls should therefore, be groomed, trained and prepared timeously, for future leadership roles, by women politicians, but the challenge is that more role-models are needed to take young girls to the next level.

In this context, let us take a look at how women fared in politics, 20 years after Independence:

On the Local Level of Government - it should be clearly stated that the 47% of women's representation on this level, in moving closer towards gender balance, is largely due to an affirmative action provision in the Local Authorities Act, which requires political parties to place a certain minimum number of women on their candidates lists.

Because of this provision in the Local Authorities Act, Namibia can boast today with a large number of women who have successfully taken up positions as Mayors, Deputy-Mayors, Local Councillors, etc, and we are indeed proud to say, that where women are in leadership positions, most of those Town Councils and Municipalities are successful.

But how did women fair on the Regional Level?

Firstly, what does the Constitution say? The Constitution, being the Supreme Law of the country, states in Article 10, that all people are equal before the law and that no one may be discriminated against on the grounds of sex or race.

The Constitution further, in Article 23, allows Parliament to pass Affirmative Action laws that give special assistance to people who have suffered from race or sex discrimination in the past.

It further states that women have suffered special discrimination in the past and that Parliament may need to take special steps to assist women to play an equal role in all areas of life in Namibia.

Secondly, what does the National Gender Policy say?

The National Gender Policy clearly states that "Government shall strive to establish mechanisms for attaining the goal of gender balance in government bodies and committees, public administration, the judiciary and any other decision-making organs."

The National Gender Policy further specifically refers to using affirmative action to achieve gender balance in the Regional Councils and the National Council.

Thus, to achieve gender balance on the Regional Level, WAD supports the following:

Given the fact that Namibia was able to acquire a mere 12% representation of women on the Regional level, 20 years after Independence - to achieve gender balance at this level, Parliament should strive to amend the Regional Councils' Act to ensure that political parties include 50 percent women among their candidates for the constituencies in each region, using the "zebra-crossing" style, because if this does not happen, most women might hit the bottom of the list!

On the National level: To achieve gender balance in the **National Assembly**, WAD encourages Parliament to amend the Electoral Act to ensure that all party lists for the National Assembly elections should be gender balanced. The Act should further require that the names of women and male candidates alternate, using the "zebra crossing" style on the lists.

On the other hand, to achieve gender balance in the **National Council**, WAD encourages Parliament to amend the Regional Councils Act to ensure that each Regional Council appoint one man and one woman as their representatives to the National Council.

In this important process, women should never doubt the profound role which they have to play in society and in politics.

This is crucial, because it is the mothers who lay the educational foundation on which the family, the school, the church and the community, can further build on.

And yet, many women still remain marginalized! They still remain down-trodden and under-developed. It is therefore, imperative that women should emerge as a united force, to take their future into their own hands.

It is indeed time for women to wake up! It is indeed time for women to use their majority numbers to act like a **majority** and not like a minority who beg for favours.

Women are not invitees on this planet! **We belong here and we have a right to be here!**

The time is overdue for women to strengthen their aspirations, to think bigger, to broaden their horizons, by actively running for public office to get into those decision-making positions of power, so as to contribute towards the status and well-being of the nation!

WAD is forging ahead in Namibia, with a bold sense of purpose to make a positive difference in the lives of women. WAD goes everywhere! WAD goes where others fear to tread!

Women who initially would rather have died than stand behind a microphone to address an audience, are today bold performers in front of any audience.

Rural women who feared the crack of dawn if they were expected to enter the hall in which decision-makers gather, today frankly and freely address those decision-makers in their regions to solve their own social problems, or to lobby for a just cause as bold lobbyists for social change.

In conclusion, Ladies & Gentlemen: The successes of projects which women are running, are ample proof that women are the Key to economic prosperity in the country. Their dedication to a cause in which they believe, has often astounded me. I therefore, have all the reason to believe in the great potential which every woman represents.

Our rural sisters out there, are very close to my heart - women who have been down-trodden and who have been subjected to soft slavery for decades, due to demoralising cultural practices. Women politicians dare not forget them. In fact, we all have a moral obligation to train those voiceless women to acquire a "voice".

Yes, Ladies and Gentlemen - all these women have borne and reared our leaders, holding influential positions in the countries of the world today!

....And although they have, for centuries, been the most neglected and most deprived in the countries of the world - and although they have deliberately been kept out of a male-dominated world of decision-making - **they are feeding the world...** and they remain a strong factor to be reckoned with!

I have often expressed my admiration for the mettle of women. I will never be convinced otherwise.

And now - the onus rests upon the men to play fair during this significant election year!

Women do not want to take it all - Women merely want a fair deal! Thank you!