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Marginalising women in politics: Recent trends in KwaZulu-Natal

Christopher Isike & Ufo Okeke Uzodike

This paper examines trends in the political marginalisation of women in KwaZulu-Natal between 1994 and 2004. South Africa’s political representation of women has been increasing significantly since 1994. KwaZulu-Natal has just over 25% female representation in provincial governance, an enviable percentage compared to world figures. This paper examines the quality of that representation to discover how effectively this 25% has addressed the concerns of the region’s women, especially rural African women, and what sociocultural notions have hampered their political participation and thus escalated their socioeconomic marginalisation. Looking at primary and secondary data from interviews with women in rural KwaZulu-Natal and in public decision-making structures, and with female and male political science students at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, the paper finds that politics is still masculinised, and poverty by implication remains feminised.

Keywords: women; political representation; marginalisation; patriarchy; KwaZulu-Natal

1. Introduction

Women are in the majority in most countries, yet throughout the world they have minority status, being socially, economically and politically excluded from the public space and remaining traditionally confined to the private space defined by motherhood. Africa is no exception to the masculinisation of society. Here, despite the roles they assume during and after conflict, women are conveniently marginalised in post-conflict reconstruction. In addition, they find themselves victims not only of armed conflict but also of its assorted social forms, in the worst cases being considered the spoils of war and as a means of degrading the enemy (Marshall, 2004). Indeed, as Rehn & Sirleaf assert, ‘women and children are the main victims of warfare, and they account for an estimated 80% of refugees and displaced persons worldwide’ (2002:21). Similarly, in social conflict arising from the state’s inability to guard its citizens against poverty and similar human insecurities, many women become the sole support of their families because male breadwinners are unable or unwilling to provide.

This trend is worse in Africa, ravaged in the last decades of the twentieth century by war and its associated effects, including poverty occasioned by state weakness. African women (over 50% of the continent’s population), even among the poor, earn lower wages than men and have lower literacy rates and limited access to social services.
(see Rehn & Sirleaf, 2002), and have greater difficulty obtaining employment. These disadvantages make them a minority group despite being in the majority.

The economic marginalisation of African women carries over to the political superstructure level, where their participation is restricted and sometimes nonexistent. Since the end of the colonial era in the 1960s, Coquery-Vidrovitch argues, ‘except for a few women who manage to come forward in national struggles and a few flamboyant individuals, participation by women is still the exception’. She contends that ‘women’s participation in politics often seems marginal and a very dependent extension of men’s, making it doubtful if African independence has necessarily brought improvement in status for most African women’ (1997:232, 233).

This seems to be the case in South Africa, after 16 years of popular democracy. The country has the second-best record of female representation in governance in Africa after Rwanda, but there are questions about the quality of that representation. This paper therefore examines the deep-seated political marginalisation of women in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) Province in South Africa in the 10 years since the start of the new democratic dispensation in 1994. It questions the equity of women’s approximately 25% representation in provincial government (21 out of 80 members) against the backdrop of their 53.1% stake in the population and the quality of this representation in terms of the kind or class of women appointed and the way they are appointed, and it examines the impact such appointees have on the socioeconomic well-being of women in KZN, especially previously disadvantaged African women.

We contend that the masculinisation of the political space is an economically constructed patriarchy which is alien to the African, and that the patriarchy that African societies now use to legitimise the marginalisation of women in the public spaces of post-colonial Africa is ‘neo-patriarchy’ and, as such, different from the old patriarchies of pre-colonial African societies, which regarded women more highly and provided for their involvement in politics. This argument is relevant in the quest to deconstruct the patriarchal basis of the masculinisation of politics in Africa. Despite the removal of formal barriers to women’s participation in politics in South Africa there are still informal barriers to their effective participation, and this blurs the gains from increased political representation. A better understanding of these informal barriers, which are largely social and rooted in a culture of neo-patriarchy, will help to remove them.

To examine the situation, we conducted interviews and held focus group discussions with women in rural KZN and in public decision-making structures, and held a focus group discussion with female and male political science students at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN).

2. ‘African patriarchy’ and the masculinisation of the public space in KwaZulu-Natal

A pertinent question is whether the political marginalisation of women is really rooted in cultural marginalisation. It is important to understand the workings of patriarchy, especially at the informal level, and why it is prevalent despite a deliberate decision at the formal, i.e. political, level to erode its influence in the relations between men and women in KZN and South Africa. It has been suggested that indigenous tradition and an oppressive culture of patriarchy have been mainly responsible for the masculinisation of African societies (see Leach, 1961; Gluckman, 1963; Tyler, 1971; Wright, 1981).
Describing gender relations among the Zulus, Tyler contends that ‘in intellect, African women are inferior to the men, but this is doubtless attributable to the drudgery imposed on them’. He claims that Zulu women are strangers ‘to feelings of self-respect and sensitiveness under wrongs, characteristic of their more highly favoured Christian sisters in Christian lands’, and posits that ‘as a rule, African women patiently submit to their lot, unless tortured beyond endurance by despotic husbands; but their life is at best a hard one’ (Tyler 1971:119). Sweeping propositions like these and the scholarship they produce are what create and nurture popular notions of Zulu culture as deeply patriarchal, with women seen as subhuman, commodified and subordinated.

Hassim’s notion that pre-colonial African traditional culture is inherently oppressive of women supports this stereotypical view of African masculinities. For example, in conceptualising the notion of motherhood and how it relates to women’s political rights among the Zulus in the context of the liberation struggles in South Africa, she contends that:

> Although Inkatha appears to construct the notion of mother of the nation within a revolutionary nationalist discourse, its content is conservative. It is a notion which reinforces women’s subordination within the family by focusing on propping up existing relationships, and within political organisations by marginalising them from decision-making as they are defined out of the mainstream of politics. (Hassim, 1993:18)

She goes on to juxtapose this ‘African patriarchal’ notion of motherhood with an Afrikaner notion:

> In terms of the volksmoeder concept, the Afrikaner woman is depicted not only as a cornerstone of the household, but also as a central unifying force within Afrikanerdom and, as such, is expected to fulfil a political role as well. The function which women are expected to fulfil as mothers within a society is idealised into an image of Afrikaner womanhood containing a spectrum of reproductive and nurturing characteristics. (Brink, 1990:273, in Hassim, 1993:19)

Although here Hassim was discussing African patriarchy within the context of the liberation struggle, we take issue with her assertion that Inkatha’s notion of ‘mother of the nation’ was conservative, even though it was within a revolutionary nationalist discourse. The question is, conserving what? In asserting that ‘it is a notion which reinforces women’s subordination within the family’, she appears to be assuming that this subordination already exists. Generalisations like this do not take cognisance of the evolution of African patriarchies over time, or of the capitalist influence in transforming patriarchies and constructing masculinities in the continent, but assume that the patriarchy that marginalises women in politics is characteristic of pre-colonial African societies, in this case the Zulu Kingdom.

This is a false assumption, which fails to take into consideration not only Africa’s pre-colonial social history but also the cultural, economic and ideological evidence of matriarchy as a distinct social system (Diop, 1989; Amadiume, 1997). It ignores a social history that presents facts on the matri-centric unit as the basic structure of African matriarchy dating back 2000 years before Africa’s modern contact with Europe (Diop, 1989). Before this contact, ‘this non-confirmatory form of patriarchy, the modern patriarchy, had taken firm root in the European ideation system’ (Williams, 1997:238). This inspired the myth of the rational man versus emotional woman and the
ideas of pacification that justified slavery and the colonisation of Africa (McClintock, 1995; Campbell, 2003). Contradicting this myth are the strong political roles that women such as Mnkabayi, Mawa and ordinary women in the army played before, during and after the reign of King Shaka, especially in the formative years of the Zulu Kingdom. Indeed, contrary to widely held beliefs that only affluent female chiefs or regents played an active role in pre-colonial African societies, ordinary rural women organised themselves politically and responded adequately to the socioeconomic, religious and military imperatives of their time, and this continued into the colonial and post-colonial eras (Nzeogwu, 2000; Weir, 2007). Sadly, this notion of Afro-pessimism about African patriarchies is bought and resold by many Africans, with the result that men have become resistant, and women themselves indifferent, to gender mainstreaming based on a Eurocentric historical view of African gender relations.

2.1 Pre-colonial patriarchy, neo-patriarchy and masculinity in the Zulu Kingdom

Like most states of Europe, Asia and the Americas, most African societies have deep patriarchal roots that predate the capitalist mode of production. However, scholars who have written on pre-colonial African societies have not highlighted how these old patriarchies, oppressive as they sometimes were, nevertheless benefited women in these societies across the continent. As we will show, the old patriarchies were different from the new kind that the forces of imperialism and colonialism wrought in Africa. This ‘neo-patriarchy’ remains dominant in contemporary African societies. By not making the distinction between the old and new, most scholars distort the reality of patriarchy in Africa, setting up a false premise for understanding the phenomenon. This has affected African men’s response to affirmative policies on gender balancing, sometimes leading to dangerous masculine sexual behaviour that makes women more vulnerable to the HIV virus. In some extreme cases they have deliberately infected women (Leclerc-Madladla, 2001) or killed their partner (Sowetan, 2000).

The problem is particularly evident in southern Africa, where men generally oppose gender equity policies and actions because they believe ‘African culture’ does not permit women to be active in the public space, or equal with men. Zulu men, for example, commonly oppose gender equity action by arguing that ‘in Zulu culture women are inferior to men, and must never contest with men in politics’ or that ‘politics is culturally a man’s domain’ (focus group discussion [FGD], 25 October 2006). Of the 15 male students who participated in FGD, 13 felt that being dominant in their relations with females was part of umnunzane (‘real manhood’, isiZulu). However, many Zulu men today are unaware of the way the transformation from agrarian to capitalist patriarchy has affected gender identities and relations. Indeed, across Africa, colonial capitalism and economic exploitation used gender to sustain itself, with concomitant effects for gender relations today (see Gordon, 1996). For instance, as Sadiki (2001) points out, violence against women in the Great Lakes region and elsewhere in Africa is an invention of modernity, ‘a new phenomenon that is both a novelty and serious contradiction of the values linked to respect for human life and for women, who were seen as the provider of life in pre-colonial African societies’ (Sadiki, 2001:445–6).

Among the Zulus, who have been largely portrayed as deeply patriarchal, women were central figures as they held positions of influence and demonstrated leadership in political, religious, economic, and military spheres. According to Weir, ‘this separation
into different spheres is rather artificial because, in reality, the leadership roles involved all these activities in one way or another’ (2007:8). She contends that Zulu royal women such as Mnkabayi, Mawa, Langazana and Nandi exerted enormous political influence, irrespective of how they have been caricatured by Eurocentric writings such as those of Lugg (1978), Fuze (1979) and Hanretta (1998). Mnkabayi played powerful roles at various times in the history of the Zulu Kingdom, and several key women continued to exercise political influence until after King Mpande’s reign, at which time the significance and influence of Zulu women in politics, ritual and religion seems to have started declining. However, Weir points out that throughout the pre-colonial period women’s leadership in Zulu society was closely linked with religion as women participated in and were at the forefront of rituals central to Zulu culture and were seen as having special links with the spirit world that men did not have (2007:9, 10, 17).

Economically, cattle owning was ‘central in economic and ritual life among southern Africa’s pre-industrial farming societies’, and certain categories of women could own them: female chiefs, elder female relations of a chief, a female isanusi (witch doctor) and women who had inherited knowledge about medicinal plants. Owning cattle could give a woman other economic advantages such as a woman-to-woman ‘marriage’, which could be used to advance her economic position (Weir, 2007:5, 6 and 8).

Militarily, Weir reports that women played a considerable part in King Shaka’s day, with influential roles in the amakhanda (Zulu military kraals), and constituted an estimated 40% of the regular armed forces, with some of them, such as Machibise and Ma Nthatis, who were not Shaka’s relatives, emerging as strong army commanders (Weir, 2007:12, 14). Weir (2007) records that, according to an informant called Ngidi, ‘Tshaka used to go out to war with the amakosikazi as well as girls. They cut shields (izihlangu) and carried assegais, and had to fight when required to do so’ and that ‘there were some who fought like men’ and ‘earned and wore the iziqu (medicine worn by warriors who had killed in combat), which was evidence of having killed an opponent’ (Webb & Wright 2001, cited in Weir, 2007:14–15).

Underlying women’s power and participation in public life was the idea that they were paragons of morality and sacredness, and of goodness and tenderness based on the ethic of care that was rooted in their motherhood and nature as women. Their femininity was the basis of their recognition and automatic participation in public affairs. What then is responsible for the decline in women’s power in the public space? Nzeogwu (2000) contends that the answer lies substantially in the colonial interregnum during which Africa’s pre-colonial sociocultural order was disrupted. The capitalist mode of production and colonial ideology brought about a new order of gender relations. For example, in the late twentieth century South Africa’s migrant labour system was an important factor in shaping gender relations, political resistance and the struggle for nations, and consequently men’s perceptions of and attitudes towards women. Another factor was that the modern state system that replaced the pre-colonial system did not have any express provisions for women’s participation in politics. When the pre-colonial order, which allowed for women’s political input, was replaced, women simply lost out to the new economy-driven imperatives of the colonising powers. Colonisation, along with which came the Western version of Christianity, eroded the village community system as ‘elite African men manipulated the new and borrowed patriarchies to forge a most formidable “masculine imperialism”, yet unknown in the history of Africa’ (Amadiume, 1989, cited in Campbell, 2003:283).
In KZN, ‘the entrenching of the tradition of male authority and female dependence is even now potentially a stumbling block to efforts by both feminists and democrats to transform the state, especially at the local level and in the rural areas where traditional (male) leadership is still strong’ (Robinson, 1995:9, cited in Bentley, 2004). These new patriarchal power relations often play out at informal levels of interaction between men and women in KZN and they resonate in the sexist attitudes that underlie the labelling and stigmatisation of active women politicians as ‘rebels’. It is perhaps this kind of mindset that informs the popular description of Patricia de Lille, the leader of the Independent Democrats party, as ‘a woman with balls’. Such attitudes have a negative effect on women’s performance in parliament, as they strive to conform to the expected societal norms that reinforce their dependence.

3. Women and political representation in KwaZulu-Natal

Since 1994 the South African Government has made concerted efforts to incorporate women into its governance structures. These efforts have been driven by various national institutional mechanisms such as constitutional guarantees on gender equality, the Commission on Gender Equality, and gender-friendly legislation such as the Employment Equity Act, the Basic Conditions of Employment Act, the Domestic Violence Act and the Maintenance Act. At the provincial level in 2005, KZN had surpassed the 25% mark set for female participation in provincial governance. According to the provincial Office for the Status of Women, there had been considerable effort by the Premier since 1999 to increase the provincial benchmark for female participation in political governance from 25% to 30% (interview, N Mkhize, Director, Office for the Status of Women, 20 July 2005).

At the national level in 2006 there were 19 women in the 54-member National Council of Provinces (about 35%), and 50% of the KZN members were women (each province elects six members to the NCOP, and three of KZN’s six were women). There were 147 women in the 400-member National Assembly (36.7%), and 23 of the 75 members from KZN were women (about 30%). Overall, women constituted 36.5% of members in the National Parliament (Parliament of RSA, 2006). However, beyond these commendable figures, more remains to be done because many women have yet to taste the fruits of democracy (FGDs with Richmond and Shobashobane women, 3 and 6 September 2006).

As Table 1 shows, despite its efforts since 1994, in 2004 KZN had not attained the 30% ‘critical mass’ stipulated by Resolution 1325 of the United Nations, passed in 2000. Although it passed the 30% threshold in the 2009 elections, as women made up 38% of the legislature, numbers alone do not automatically translate into qualitative change and development for women and society. Apart from the feminisation of poverty and disease in the province, patriarchy is still institutionalised and patriarchal attitudes and stereotypes remain dominant at the informal levels of gender relations. Outspoken women politicians are still ridiculed and taunted and their ability to cope with their combined role as politicians, wives and mothers is constantly called into question (interview, Ms L Johnson, Minister, Public Works, KZN Provincial Government, 2 October 2007). This evidence of deep-seated political marginalisation needs to be addressed, as it has far-reaching implications for women’s peace-building potential and agency. Indeed, beyond numbers, there is a need to assess the quality of women’s representation in the
provincial government, and to ask how effective a representation just over 25% has been in addressing rural women’s material concerns in matters such as land reform, discrimination against female pupils, access to justice, access to capital, housing, health care, education, employment, and poverty and inequality. Abject poverty persists in rural KZN, which houses 21% of South Africa’s poor, and this poverty is disproportionately experienced by women (Ndimande, 2001). Women’s representation in politics has not made the expected impact on their economic condition, judging from the panel data generated from the KZN Income Dynamics Study (KIDS) (UKZN, 2004). To make matters worse, most women in rural areas are unaware of the rights and privileges that the government’s gender main-streaming efforts bestow on them, and do not understand how government works.

4. Assessing the sociopolitical marginalisation of women in KwaZulu-Natal

Some of Africa’s women politicians also have to deal with political systems that promote patronage by making politicians beholden to the party hierarchy rather than to their constituents, which renders appointed officials less effective in policy making (Mutume, 2006:8).

Women politicians in KZN are not exempt from the challenges African women politicians face, as described by Mutume (2006). South Africa’s Independent Electoral Commission Chair, Dr Brigalia Bam, gave credence to the reality of women’s political marginalisation despite government efforts to increase their participation, saying that ‘while women are in the majority on the voters’ roll, they are left behind in public office representation, making them still overlooked’. She argued that this trend ‘[left] much to be desired’, considering that nationally 55% of registered voters were women (Helfrich, 2005:3). In KZN in 2004, women constituted 56.89% of the registered voters and the province had the second highest number of registered voters in the country after Gauteng, which underscores the significance of women’s votes (Bentley, 2004). Unfortunately, this voter power, which is a reflection of the province’s population demographics, does not translate into a commensurate political and socioeconomic power for women. Despite formal legislation to curb discrimination and empower them politically, women remain dependent on men for their political fortunes – a situation which effectively marginalises them and denies them quality representation. Significant prevailing modes of marginalising women in KZN politics, much of which occurs in informal spaces, are described in the following sections.

Table 1: KwaZulu-Natal Provincial Assembly election results by gender and party, 2004

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Total seats</th>
<th>Approximate % of women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ANC</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IFP</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DA</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACDP</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MF</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UDM</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.1 Mode of entry: Who gets what and how?

Evidence from interviews conducted in Richmond (Midlands area) in September 2006 as part of this study indicates that women still feel largely marginalised in politics despite the strides taken by the ruling ANC at both national and the provincial level to increase the number of women in politics. This sentiment also came out strongly in Shobashobane and Nongoma in FGDs with 50 women in the former and 100 women in the latter on 6 September and 7 November 2006 respectively (see Figure 1).

Apart from dealing with issues such as inadequate service delivery, the women were concerned that their participation in politics at all government levels was still at the discretion of men who, they claimed, decide which women get what positions. Women in Shobashobane and Nongoma, southern and northern KZN respectively, overwhelmingly agreed that they were disconnected from their female representatives in government, most of them highly educated, socially sophisticated and politically connected women who mainly served the interests of their appointees rather than those of rural women. In the same study, 25 of the 30 women surveyed in Richmond, a semi-urban settlement, complained that they did not know who represented them at either municipal or provincial level and how. According to them, if they had a say, they would choose better representatives.

Because the political party quota system is controlled by men, it is the instrument of gender mainstreaming across South Africa, making women dependent on specific men or male-controlled organisations for their political upliftment. This reveals the fragility of the political gains made by women so far in South Africa and is cause for concern. For example, general disapproval was expressed, mostly by men, over the appointment of large numbers of women into positions of authority, especially that of Mrs Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka as Deputy President, which provoked debate about the possibility and appropriateness of a woman succeeding the president. It is problematic that the Premier of KZN (in collaboration with a group of men and

Figure 1: Levels of women’s participation in community decision-making in Shobashobane and Nongoma
women) decides for Richmond, Shobashobane or Nongoma women who should be their councillors, municipal managers, and legislative representatives. Given the incidence of political patronage and clientele politics, this arrangement may compromise not only the women’s choices of good quality or appropriate representation but also their right to self-determination.

4.2 Womanhood, motherhood and sex role spillover

The neo-patriarchal ideology that creates the expectation that non-assertiveness and docility are the hallmarks of the ‘good’ Zulu woman remains dominant in KZN. It carries over to the work place, governmental and non-governmental alike, obliging women to perform tasks other those their job requires. For example, men expect their female colleagues to perform the same duties they would at home. As Devi Rajab puts it, ‘women colleagues are expected to pour tea, organise lunch or serve as helpers in a work situation while conversely, men are expected to behave in a stereotypical manner; namely to automatically assume leadership roles in a mixed group, pay for the business lunch, sit in the front seat of the car or handle serious management issues’ (personal communication, Devi Rajab, leading South African journalist, Women’s Day lecture at UKZN, 9 August 2008). These role expectations undermine the authority of women in the political and administrative leadership, as they expend useful energy fulfilling them (interview, four officials in Community Safety & Liaison, Local Government & Traditional Affairs, Housing and Works Departments, 2 October 2007).

Closely related to this conception of womanhood and the way it affects women’s performance in public decision-making are women’s child-rearing and family responsibilities. Sole responsibility for child-rearing puts women at a disadvantage, and their male colleagues sometimes use motherhood as an excuse to make derogatory remarks like ‘Go home, your baby needs you’, or ask insinuating
questions like ‘Won’t your husband be needing you at this time?’ (interview, Elizabeth Thompson, Manager, Town Hill Hospital, Pietermaritzburg, 3 September 2007). By implication, men do not have to be bogged down in the pressures of home responsibilities, and this gives them more time for their job and thus an edge in productivity while at the same time constraining women’s ability to participate meaningfully in the public sphere.

4.3 Stigmatising women as ‘cultural deviants’

As a consequence of neo-patriarchy in Zulu gender discourses, women today are culturally expected to be non-confrontational, non-assertive and non-expressive in their relations with men both in private and especially in public, where they are expected ideally to be invisible (Wood & Jewkes, 1997; Leclerc-Madladla, 2001). This partly explains the labelling of women who rise above these expectations as ‘cultural deviants’. The popular thinking is that women should not be involved in politics, but if they are they should remain invisible and serve the men to whom they owe their political ascension in the first place. For example, under conditions of anonymity, four of the eight female Heads of Department in the provincial government who agreed to be interviewed for this study conceded that they frequently suffered from being labelled ‘cultural deviants’ by their male colleagues and subordinates, especially when they insisted on standards and deadlines. They were seen as social transgressors who did not know their place, ‘rebellious’, ‘out of control’, and overstepping the boundaries. They said these perceptions and attitudes, and the subtle disregard for women that came with them, frequently affected their productivity on the job. This labelling and its effect was confirmed by the Minister for Works:

> Innuendoes targeted at undermining our morality and self-confidence are usually used by our male colleagues both in parliament and in the cabinet to reinforce their superiority even though on the outside they all tend to express belief in the political empowerment of women as a panacea for poverty alleviation. (Interview, L Johnson, Minister, 2 October 2007)

The UKZN, despite its liberating tendencies as a citadel of learning, reformation and transformation, is not spared the effects of neo-patriarchy in the relations between men and women and this is a cause for serious concern given the role of the educational system in producing the future leaders of South Africa. Female students in the School of Politics say they are made uncomfortable by their male peers, who suggest they should not be studying politics as they are not suited to practise it as women. Over 80% (21) of the 25 female students in a third-year Political Science class of 75 students said they felt intimidated by their 50 male classmates and not confident enough to participate in class discussions, which they allow their male classmates to dominate (FGD, UKZN, 18 September 2007). One said:

> The boys believe that we are overly emotional and as a result we cannot be real leaders. A real concern that a boy once had in class was that girls ‘suffered’ from pre-menstrual stress and, therefore, if a woman ever becomes president, he was sure she might just blow up China if she was ‘going through that time of the month’.

They have also expressed fears of our ability and willingness to bear and rear children if we get too involved in politics. Even when we can, they feel that
we might not be able to give a 100% commitment if we suddenly find ourselves pregnant. (L Vasha, student, 18 September 2007)

Such stereotypes, still accepted by third-year students of political science, are inimical to gender-balancing in politics and the creation of a truly egalitarian society in a previously divided country. The student’s second statement, for example, reinforces the idea of male power over women’s sexuality in determining whether and when their female partners fall pregnant, and the male conception of how womanhood and motherhood affect women’s participation in public decision-making. These are deep-seated, informal level sources of women’s marginalisation in politics that will require more than formal legislation to change. To address them will require substantial reorientation and attitude change on the part of men and women alike.

Clearly, South African women have done reasonably well within the political terrain in the post-apartheid era. Much of that success has been achieved in collaboration with their male counterparts, despite a strong conservative fringe that would have preferred to push women back to their ‘traditional’ roles. Unfortunately, the modes of marginalisation described above have laid bare the superficiality of the political gains made thus far by South African women. It seems that South African society (in all of its facets) has remained deeply patriarchal despite those gains. Notwithstanding their strong and growing political prominence, women remain culturally weak and vulnerable. Given the possibility of a reversal of fortunes under a less committed leadership, it would be in the long-term interest of all (women and men) to deepen those gains by institutionalising them and safeguarding them from the whims of politicians and the dynamics of power struggles. In that way, they would be free not only to make their own choices of leaders but also to push more boldly on matters and agendas that are of most concern to women as a group.

5. The socioeconomic consequence of women’s political marginalisation

The demographic statistics of KZN since 1994 show an obvious feminisation and ruralisation of poverty. According to Statistics South Africa, 98% of the female non-urban population in KZN are African (Statistics South Africa [StatsSA], 1995; Ndimande, 2001). Of the 75% of KZN’s poor who live in rural areas, 54% are African women, with less than 8% each of white, coloured and Indian women (StatsSA, 1996). On the economic front, the general female unemployment rate was 49.9% in 2003 while that of males was 36.4%, using the expanded definition of unemployment (which includes discouraged work seekers) (StatsSA, 2003). Of the 50.1% of employed women in the province, informal employment such as domestic work alone accounted for an estimated 17.5% (StatsSA, 2005). According to the Department of Economic Development, the province ‘suffers from a particularly high unemployment rate (31.7% in 2005) with more than 50% of the unemployed remaining so for more than three years, suggesting that the bulk of unemployment in the province is of a long-term structural nature rather than seasonal, frictional or cyclical’ (KwaZulu-Natal Department of Economic Development, 2006:5). The report contends further that ‘Labour force participation in the province declined from 57.8% in 2000 to 51.9% in 2005 due largely to decline in the labour force participation rate of the female population’ (2006:5). In the rural areas, of the approximately 53% of the economically active women who were unemployed in 1998, 99.7% were African women, and by 2004 this had not improved much (StatsSA, 2004). These obvious ‘gender and racial biases in poverty indicators
are also reflected in the basic need of housing and access to housing loans in KZN’
(Ndinda, 2004:61). The feminisation of economic inequality, reflected also in the
social sector, especially in residential construction work, poses serious questions about
the representation of women’s views in decision-making (Ndinda, 2002).

To get a clearer picture of the poverty situation in KZN, a reliable database is the KIDS
panel data (UKZN, 2004). Several studies based on KIDS have been carried out on
unemployment trends, income and expenditure, and poverty and inequality patterns in
KZN. Their findings are clear on several fronts: unemployment is on the increase
(Klasen & Woolard, 2000; Bhorat, 2003); more people have moved back and forth
within the poor categories, suggesting an increase in poverty levels (Carter & May,
2001); growth in per capita income levels for both urban and non-urban households
has been very marginal (Lam & Leibbrandt, 2003, cited in Hoogeven & Özler, 2005);
and social inequalities within non-white racial groups have increased, with the Gini coef-
ficient increasing from 0.515 to 0.543 in KZN between 1995 and 2001 (Fields et al.,
2003; May, 2006).

Table 2 shows that there was a small amount of growth in per capita household expen-
ditures between 1995 and 2000 due to marginal improvements in educational attainments
among Africans which yielded some improvements in income levels for this class. However, this was for a very small percentage of the African population and it was
urban biased. Further, it was at the bottom end of the expenditure distribution and this
increased the depth and severity of poverty. For any poverty line below R322 per
capita per month, the poverty gap and poverty severity (poverty gap squared) indices
were significantly higher in 2000 than in 1995. This was the case also in 2005 for
most women in rural KZN, many of whom live on government grants of R280 per
month. For example, all the 30 women surveyed in Ndaleni, (Richmond), 27 of the 40
surveyed in Shobashobane and 74 of the 85 surveyed in Dabasi (Nongoma) live on
government grants of R280 per month.

### 6. Conclusion

The post-1994 improvement in the political status of women in South Africa has yet to
be translated into significant human and economic development. Field evidence from
the present study (interviews, FGDs, survey of women in Richmond, Shobashobane
and Nongoma) suggests that women continue to be at the receiving end of abject
rural poverty. This feminisation of poverty is related to the quality of women’s

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Poverty line</th>
<th>$2/day poverty line (R174)</th>
<th>Lower bound poverty line (R322)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Head count index</td>
<td>0.32 (0.02)</td>
<td>0.63 (0.02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poverty gap</td>
<td>0.11 (0.01)</td>
<td>0.28 (0.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poverty gap squared</td>
<td>0.05 (0.01)</td>
<td>0.16 (0.01)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* All figures were weighted using person weights (household weight*household size). The difference in the poverty figures between 1995 and 2000 is statistically significant at the 90% level for both $z = 174$ and $z = 322$.

representation in politics, which is compromised by the fact it is determined by men who still discriminate against women at both formal and informal levels, owing to a perverse understanding of African culture. Therefore if female candidates for political offices have a feminist power base, they will provide more holistic representation of women’s interests, especially at the economic and social levels of society. However, the critical question is how do we create a critical mass of feminist-conscious women leaders who can be effective enough to enable good governance and development for all?

While a critical mass of women in political positions is not necessarily conducive to good governance and development, we contend that African women can be more effective in politics, especially riding the current wave of feminising politics, if research and policy efforts are refocused on the intervening variables that produce and sustain women’s political existence. In KZN, these include the mode of women’s entry into politics, men’s social expectations of womanhood, motherhood and sex role spillover for women politicians, and cultural stigmatisation. Pre-colonial African societies had social structures that gave women a powerful role in society, unlike the bland representation they experience today, despite their increased visibility.

We recommend, first, that South Africa amend its constitution to enable constitutional guarantees for a minimum of 30% of women’s political representation in all public decision-making structures in society, to cement the gains that women’s representation has made since 1994. Such a constitutional guarantee of political representation would empower women mentally and significantly reduce the need to defeminise themselves in order to please their male political patrons.

Second, electoral policies should be put in place to enable women to appropriate their own political spaces. Within this framework, the ANC should review its selection process to allow the people to choose their leaders directly. That way women, especially those in the rural areas, can mobilise and choose those they know will best represent their interests. Indeed, beyond the calls for feminising politics based on equity, fairness and justice, there is a need to bring women’s values into politics, especially given the failure of male-dominated politics to guarantee peace and development in post-colonial Africa. Similarly, to maximise women’s political effectiveness, we recommend a dual electoral system for women that will enable them to vote for male and female candidates separately in the same elections. In other words, women can vote for men but they should have reserve powers to vote exclusively for the women who will take up the 30% guaranteed by the Constitution for women.

Third, to break the societal base of patriarchy, co-parenting should be encouraged within families, both formally through policy and informally through gender-sensitivity activism. The origin of patriarchy can be traced to child-rearing practices in various cultural and social contexts. According to Balbus, ‘mother-dominated’ child-rearing predisposes a male child to take an oppositional attitude to his mother and subsequently to women in general – hence his need to exclude them from positions of authority (1987:110–27). Balbus therefore contends that since the mother is the source of both the satisfaction and the frustration of the imperious needs of the infant, ‘co-parenting is the key that can unlock the possibility of a society in which the nurturance and caring that have thus far been largely restricted to the arena of the family come to inform the entire field of human interaction’ (1987:119).
African men should therefore be socialised to get involved in the rearing of their children on an equal basis with women in order to dismantle the basis of patriarchy in society and in the process enthron[e] a new kind of civilisation, one without domination, where the moral imagination that enables *ubuntu*, *ujamaa* or *nmadu*\(^1\) will guide the interaction between men and women, and where men will feel free to discuss their sexuality openly with women and identify with rather than oppose their feminine side as a way of reaffirming their masculinity. This is imperative since gender equality in private and public life is essential for peace-building.

Fourth, to reorient and reinvent African masculinities so as to make them favourable for gender-balancing in politics, it is necessary to deconstruct the sociocultural masculine stereotypes and sexist attitudes that perpetuate the political marginalisation of women. A good starting point will be to teach African men about the distinction between old and new African patriarchies so that those opposed to gender equity in the public space will have no traditional or cultural basis to justify their bigotry. Men in KZN need to understand that political power-sharing between women and men has always been part of the Zulu cultural experience. In these power-sharing arrangements, women brought their femininity, itself the basis of their participation, into politics. Although women and men may have different values and needs (biological and cultural), they can co-exist peaceably with men, without having to behave like men and lose the beauty and strength of their womanhood in the process.

Finally, there is need to facilitate attitude change in youths through curriculum development initiatives that are deliberately designed to reorient knowledge on gender relations. For instance, history and social studies subjects can be redesigned with a gender sensitivity focus that places male and female political heroes of the past side by side. Apart from literature, images of female heroines in history can influence the way both boys and girls think about women in society. If young boys and girls grow up already used to the idea of women and men being equally involved in politics, we will no longer hear the kind of sexist views that were expressed by university students in this study. Similarly, universities across South Africa should look towards having university-wide general studies courses on ‘Africa in the world’ that will instil positive gender consciousness in our students.

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\(^1\)These terms imply the spirit of brotherhood or common humanity in the Zulu, Swahili and Igbo languages, respectively.


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