

## ADVOCACY ISSUES ON PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN AS CANDIDATES AND AS VOTERS DURING UGANDA'S 2021 GENERAL ELECTIONS

The Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) to contain the spread of COVID-19 in Uganda, may have informed the decision by the Electoral Commission to limit almost all electoral process to media. This is away from the normal, where political candidates would organize rallies and meet the prospective voters' one on one.

The now dubbed 'Scientific or Media Based Campaigns' means that campaigns shall be made primarily on, and through the media. This certainly raises the question of equal access to media platforms by those aspiring for political office especially the female candidates and other special interest groups. The full participation of both men and women in electoral processes as well as other vulnerability groups as voters, candidates and observers is crucial to democratic and governance processes.

It is likely that media coverage of women as candidates or as voters will be compromised by different factors including those associated with gender. Currently there are more female (9,279,450) than male (8,503,144) voters registered for the 2021 general elections. Promoting women's political leadership and having women in positions of leadership results in better outcomes for women and girls and society.

The 2021 general elections are an opportunity for women in Uganda to create the change the country needs to see in terms of representation in governance and spaces. It is therefore important that the stakeholders involved in electoral processes put in place measures to mainstream gender in the media during the scientific elections.

Uganda Media Women's Association (UMWA), thus conducted online consultations with selected stakeholders to identify advocacy issues for mainstreaming gender in the media during the scientific elections. Some of the advocacy issues identified in view of access to media platforms for women as candidates and voters include:

## **ELECTORAL COMMISSION AND UGANDA COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION**

The scientific campaign methods are likely to disproportionately affect the participation of women candidates. Many of whom lack access to traditional media and online platforms and cannot afford the cost of radio and TV airtime. Research shows that although radio is the highly listened to media channel (78%)[1] in Uganda, there is a gender divide in access and control of radio and other mediums among Ugandans, for example the same study shows that radio listenership among males is 90.5% compared to 68.7% of females and is likely to be worse for elderly persons, and persons with disability. The situation is worse for women in the rural setting who do not own and have access to electronic gadgets and suffer from limited information access. If not mitigated, these challenges will discourage aspiring women candidates from running for office. [1]National Information Technology Survey 2017/18. The situation is worse for women in the rural setting who do not own and have access to electronic gadgets and suffer from limited information access. If not mitigated, these challenges will discourage aspiring women candidates from running for office.

Accessibility to media platforms could also be limited due political party affiliation, gender and disability. It is important to note that women constitute 51% of Uganda's population and yet have low literacy levels and are not well-versed with the online platforms. They will miss out on campaign messages sent through newspapers and other forms written information. The absence of clear regulations in the country to guide the process and ensure justice and fairness when it comes to media coverage. The male candidates that own media houses are likely to have more media space than their counterparts and yet very few women own media houses. Failure to address these electoral barriers creates an atmosphere that makes women to have a negative attitude towards political activities.

### **WOMEN CSOs**

The women may also be exposed to media related violence against women such as cyber bullying. Cyber space has enabled people to create and share an unlimited amount of information, ideas, create bonds and become popular without ever leaving their geographical boundaries. But, herein lies a problem. The ungoverned space gives individuals extra ordinary power and they make up stories that have potential to damage a political reputation or career while safely hiding behind fake accounts.

Women by nature are very delicate and sensitive. Attacking them in such a public platform only aggravates their sensitivity and can be such a heartbreaking experience. Although Uganda has a legal framework in the fight against cybercrime, it however appears to provide an adequate basis for law enforcement and judicial authorities to investigate and prosecute cybercrimes.

The practicality of hearing from all the candidates in these times of restricted movement, association and assembly. There are several levels of elections; so many candidates even for a single post, the audience is going to be over loaded with different messages/ information from and about different candidates. But will the women who don't own communication gadgets especially in the rural areas make good choices of leaders? The fundamental principle defining credible elections is that they must reflect the free expression of the will of the people, and virtual campaigns undermine that principle.

### **MEDIA HOUSES**

The limited financial resources may as well hinder many journalists from generating and packaging good content about women politicians, which may impact on their politician ambitions and self-esteem. This may bias the electorates and negatively impact on the female politician's career.

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### **CONCLUSION**

Promoting women's political leadership and having women in positions of leadership results in better outcomes for women and girls and society. Including women ensures progress in policy areas vital for economic growth and development, such as health, education, and infrastructure. What is more, democracy in Uganda cannot be said to be living up to its promise if half of the population is not wholly engaged equally in decision making. UMWA therefore calls upon different stakeholders involved in electoral processes to put in place measures to mainstream gender in the media during the scientific elections and commits to continue taking keen interest in equal participation of women as candidate and the voters during the Uganda 2021 elections.

### **FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT**

Uganda Media Women's Association

Tel: +256 772 469363 Email [info@umwamamafm.co.ug](mailto:info@umwamamafm.co.ug)

Website: <http://www.umwamamafm.co.ug/>

Facebook: @ugmedia Twitter: @UMWAandMamaFM