

Profile

The Emang Basadi Women's Association

by Onalenna Doo Selolwane

Introduction

The Emang Basadi Women's Association came into formal existence in 1986 to lobby against laws that discriminated against women in Botswana. Its catalyst was the enactment of the 1982 Citizenship Amendment Act, which sought to deny women married to non-citizen men the right to pass their citizenship to their offspring.

The idea of lobbying and organising against this law was the brainchild of Athaliah Lesiba Molokomme. She was then a lecturer in the Department of Law at the University of Botswana, where she taught family law.

Mobilisation against this law grew and grew, and led to Emang Basadi becoming a powerful and transformative national institution at a critical time. The number of educated young Batswana had grown substantially; 20 years of successful post-independence planned development and modernising education were bearing fruit, and a new breed of civil society organisations was emerging as a result. Nevertheless, until the birth of Emang Basadi, most women had silently endured gender-based inequalities, which were being exacerbated by the incorporation of their society into a global capitalist system that had transformed Botswana into a labour reserve economy.

Law Reform and the Formative Years

By questioning the laws of the country and agitating for reform, Emang Basadi departed radically from the traditions of established women's organisations, which were essentially welfare-oriented. But in a largely traditional society, where reverence for authority was the accepted norm, the questioning of laws deemed to resonate with deeply-held values about appropriate relations between men and women [1] and the orderly distribution of power, was initially seen by many as an attack on societal stability. The founding members of the association were accused of being misguided, Western-educated young women who were out of touch with their African culture, and therefore unrepresentative of African womanhood.

Emang Basadi was undeterred by these criticisms. Motivated by the constitutional provisions for building a democratic society founded on the principles of equal human rights and freedoms, it launched a legal education programme aimed at both initiating public debate and sensitising women to the extent to which the laws of the country discriminated against them. [2] This programme assumed that people, women in particular, did not have a full grasp of the consequences of laws enacted on their behalf. And when they did, as evidenced by the numerous cases of domestic violence reported at virtually all meetings convened to examine the status of women, they were not able to link this directly to law-making processes related to their voting activities.

One reason for demystifying the law and making it comprehensible to non-lawyers was to mobilise and widen the circle of potential activists who would lobby their elected leaders for reform. Against this background of legal reform mobilisation, one woman, Unity Dow, took the struggle further. She sought relief from the courts, challenging the constitutionality of her being denied the right to pass her citizenship to her children born from a union with a non-citizen husband. The successful outcome of this court case was an important victory for the women's lobby. It demonstrated to a public which believed in reverence for government authority that, in a liberal democracy, citizens had a legitimate right to challenge their elected rulers if they believed their rights were not adequately protected, as guaranteed by the

constitution. It also demonstrated that the rule of law applied to the government as well as to individuals, and that it was the duty of citizens to protect the values of democratic governance and moral authority.

But the Emang Basadi Women's Association recognised that the process of reform would be piecemeal and protracted unless women also challenged men's monopoly of the legislature. Thus in 1993, given that a number of other women's organizations had emerged to take up the struggle against various areas of discrimination, Emang Basadi officially changed its strategy, and shifted its focus, from championing individual rights, to political empowerment and seeking to increase women's representation in the legislature, political parties and cabinet.

From Law Reform to Political Empowerment

Emang Basadi's shift towards political mobilisation was partly in response to the level of political development current at the time, as well as the reigning political culture, neither of which accorded with substantive liberal democratic participation in accountable, representative governance.

At that time, many voters exercised their franchise without meaningful appreciation of how that vote related to the decisions taken by their elected representatives, and the impact of those decisions on their daily lives. Many voters came from cultures in which the right to govern had been based on birthright. The transition to government by popular mandate had not substantively transformed the underlying values about authority to accord with the new ideals of liberal rights and notions of accountable governance. The voters were generally ignorant of the potential power that the vote conferred upon them in the modern system of processing government power.

In order to bring about transformations that would enable the achievement of gender equity in law reform, Emang Basadi concluded that women could no longer afford simply to lobby men; they had to start pressing for change, both from within the centre of the decision-making arena, and within the electorate majority, which held the power to decide who should occupy parliament. The idea was to catapult a critical mass of women into parliament to represent women's demands from within.

The organisation recognised that the major challenges they faced were: a) a politically ignorant voting public; and b) rigid and undemocratic internal party structures, which did not recognise women as legitimate candidates for political leadership. Emang Basadi thus set for itself the daunting task of educating female voters and mobilising them so that their votes could become a powerful tool through which to assert a coherent set of demands for accountability and representation. At the centre of this strategy was the development of a Women's Manifesto, which spelled out the status of women in Botswana economically, politically, legally and educationally, as well as in terms of security, rights and freedoms. The Manifesto also laid out women's demands for redress, specifically addressed to political parties and government, thus setting an agenda for negotiation during upcoming political campaigns by parties contesting for the mandate to rule.

The Manifesto was timed so that it would be completed before political parties started preparing their campaign materials for the 1994 elections, and was thus meant to impact on the parties' manifestos and challenge their agendas on women. This strategy was particularly potent given that women were a natural majority, a power enhanced by the fact that, historically, they had been more active than men in the electoral process. For instance, in the 1979 elections, they increased their natural majority from 51% to almost 60% of active voters.

In a country that had basked in accolades for being one of the few in Africa to have maintained unfettered multi-party contestation for government power, Botswana's political parties suddenly found themselves being challenged for the first time, not only to consider the interests of voters as articulated by the electorate, but also to examine how internally democratic they were. Emang Basadi thus took the lead in transforming Botswana's politics, from one where political parties historically determined the content of election campaigns, to one where the voting public set the agenda. Another milestone achieved by the organisation was in successfully mobilising women across political parties to achieve common political ends. The development of political parties in Botswana had historically been antagonistic, with party members distrusting those in the opposing camp. In particular, those in the ruling party had tended to regard the opposition as an almost illegal institution out to challenge the legitimate authority of government, and thus a threat to the stability of the state and its modernisation agenda! In mobilising the women's vote as a potential bargaining chip for greater representation of women in political parties and the legislature, Emang Basadi helped to increase appreciation of the legitimacy of oppositional politics in the contest for the governing mandate. The immediate results of the campaign were two-fold. First, all political parties made extra efforts to support female candidates, both in party structures and parliament, ushering in an historic and dramatic increase in women's representation (from a previous maximum of 5% to 11%). [3] Secondly, opposition parties won an unprecedented 45% of the votes and 33% of elected parliamentary seats.

Following these dramatic shifts in voter behaviour, Emang Basadi developed a longer term strategy of sustained political mobilisation, involving the following three components: a) a voter education programme to encourage appreciation of the need to both increase support for women and vote wisely; b) training women as potential political candidates to increase the number able to contest elections and represent their parties; c) lobbying for transformation of the internal structures of political parties, particularly the women's wings. The last-mentioned strategy aimed to enhance internal democracy and facilitate increased representation of women's rights. Like most women's wings of political parties throughout the African continent, Botswana's women's wings had historically been dominated by spouses and associates of male politicians, who had tended to see their role as supporting men rather than representing women's interests – the so-called “First Lady” syndrome.

Recognising the limited chances of survival facing newly-created and alternative parties, given the context of weak oppositional politics in Africa, the Emang Basadi programme favoured the transformation of existing institutions over the formation of new political parties. This was debated at the inaugural meeting of the programme's annual National Women's Conference in 1996, when a participant proposed that women should perhaps consider forming their own parties. Meanwhile, the programme of continuous voter education campaigns, regular training workshops, development of manuals and political literature, as well as annual conferences, resulted in significant numbers of women seeking political office within their parties, as well as demanding the right to stand as candidates in the national elections. Thus, in the 1999 party primaries and national elections, there were more women candidates than the total number for all previous elections. The women's wings of all the main political parties had also been transformed, from little more than clubs for male politicians spouses, to organs for intra-party women's political caucusing. Emang Basadi also created an inter-party Women's Caucus that would be run and managed by women politicians themselves, independently from the Association.

Democracy Betrayed

Despite the obvious success of Emang Basadi in transforming Botswana's political landscape and culture, and in increasing the number of women in active politics, the goal of

increasing female representation meaningfully in parliament, political parties and cabinet has failed to materialise; the number of women in political office does not even meet the United Nations minimum of 30%. Botswana's patriarchs have betrayed the struggle in two fundamental ways.

Firstly, the ruling party patriarchs have clung relentlessly to an outmoded "winner-takes-all" electoral system, which meant that in the 1999 general elections, even though 45% of the electorate voted for the opposition, the latter only gained 18% of parliamentary seats. This means that the system is not sensitive enough to changes in voter trends to enable women to bargain effectively with their votes, and thus force parties to respond meaningfully to their demands. Political parties therefore continue to make minimal concessions to women to ensure their continued electoral support while maintaining male domination of the political arena.

The second factor that has undermined women's political agenda is the historical tendency towards splits within the opposition parties. For example, despite the obvious increase in voter support (which yielded a historic 33% of opposition parliamentary seats in 1994), the main opposition party, Botswana National Front, underwent yet another split in the run-up to the 1999 elections, thus segmenting what would have been at least 47% of the mandate into meaningless fragments that ensured the perpetuation of single-party dominance. One effect has been to reduce pressure on the ruling party to accommodate more women in power, to meet stated national commitments. Thus, the 2004 primary elections have seen the ruling party produce a mere 12% of female representation to contest the national elections. In opposition camps, only 7% of the candidates making it through the party primaries were women.

After more than a decade of Emang Basadi's campaigns to propel women into the central arena of political power, an undemocratic electoral system and destructive patriarchal politics have set the clock back, once again reducing women's chief political role to standing by their men.

Footnotes

[1] These were based on the notion of protective husbands and fathers and obedient and subservient wives and daughters. See O. Selolwane, "Civil Society, Citizenship and Women's Rights in Botswana" in Shirin M. Rai (ed), *International Perspectives on Gender and Democratisation*, Basingstoke and London: Macmillan Publishers, 2000.

[2] The assumption was that once ordinary women fully understood the discriminatory provisions of modern law and the implications for themselves and their children, they would rally and provide a groundswell of support for legal reform.

[3] See Selolwane, O. (forthcoming), "Gendered Spaces in Party Politics in Southern Africa: Progress and Regress Since Beijing 1995" UNRISD Beijing Plus Ten Report.

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