Crossing to the mainstream:
An exploration of information implications and possibilities for female legislators in the Ugandan Parliament

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Abstract
The study sought to explore whether there are information issues/challenges that could be encountered by women in the legislative context. The choice to focus the investigation on the experiences of women, was mainly influenced by their relatively novice experiences in the legislative context, having transcended from their socially constructed private life into a more public and visible domain. Women, in this research, are conceptualized as having occupied a less dominant and in particular, a marginal and obscured position in public life and I attempted to find out what happens when they leave these restricted domains and become part of the mainstream, what challenges do they face and what are the information implications and consequences within the new terrain? The study was carried out on the Ugandan Parliament and a total of thirty five (35) legislators participated, out of which twenty two (22) were women and thirteen (13) men. There were also other respondents (non legislators) interviewed and included, who were found to be connected to the issues under investigation. Several techniques have been utilized to gather pertinent data, and they mainly include observations, in-depth interviews, and documentary sources. The findings indicate that there are still some impediments within the organizational framework that impacts on women’s information choices and possibilities. Women are also able to fight back and exert some influence in their main network of the Women’s Parliamentary Association, UWOPA.

Introduction
Women had occupied a marginal status in history worldwide due to various reasons, but in Africa, scholars have attempted to attribute this situation to several political processes. Some of them include the effects of European imperialism and the scramble for Africa which brought about new forms of domination and then followed by the subsequent brutality of postcolonial Governments, which further built on the colonial stratification. Colonialism is blamed for having caused the collapse of the ‘small-scale personal structures’ of Ugandan states, allegedly leaving women very disempowered. The assumption in these assertions is that within the pre-colonial era, women would exert some form of power. Byanyima claims that colonial rulers favoured a more centralized power structure through a British governor, leading to the collapse and eventual usurping of the political and judicial powers of former clan elders and kings of the pre-colonial phase. The British structures and policies also reflected a clear ideology that perceived men as public actors and women as private performers (Tamale, 2000, cited in Byanyima, 2000, pg.9). Thus the western conceptions of gender relations as perpetuated by colonialism, are alleged to have apportioned only the most restricted public role for women (Muhumuza 2004; Cammack, Pool & Tordoff, 1993; Byanyima 1992).

In 1962, Uganda was granted political self governance, but then went through a series of political upheavals that further diminished the status of women. In 1986, another Government set in and offset major transformations, amongst which was the policy of affirmative action, which has subsequently brought in women and contributed to their increased numbers in mainstream politics. The policy of affirmative action has also been extended to other categories as listed and within which women positions too are mandated;

- Youth (5 seats – 1 woman)
- Workers (5 seats – 1 woman)
- Persons with Disabilities (PWD) (5 seats – 1 woman)
- Army (10 seats – 2 women)
For women as a special group, a seat is reserved at every district, so the number of women district representatives corresponds with the number of prevailing districts.

These provisions are enshrined in the national constitution, Article 32 (1) which states that

The state shall take affirmative action in favour of groups marginalized on the basis of gender, age, disability or any other reason created by history, tradition or custom for the purpose of addressing imbalances which exist against them.

And in Article 33 (5) women are specifically pointed out as one of the groups with an automatic right to affirmative action.

The table below shows the remarked increase in the number of women legislators.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parliament</th>
<th>Years</th>
<th>No. of Members</th>
<th>Male MPs</th>
<th>Male Ex Officios</th>
<th>Female Mps</th>
<th>Female Ex Officios</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st</td>
<td>1962-1966</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>1967-1971</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1971-1979</td>
<td>Parliament suspended</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>1979-1980</td>
<td>156</td>
<td>154</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4th</td>
<td>1980-1985</td>
<td>126</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5th</td>
<td>1986-1996</td>
<td>260</td>
<td>206</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>34</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6th</td>
<td>1996-2001</td>
<td>281</td>
<td>229</td>
<td>52</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7th</td>
<td>2001-2006</td>
<td>305</td>
<td>231</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>74</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8th</td>
<td>2006-2011</td>
<td>333</td>
<td>219</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Issues of inquiry (Research questions) and conceptual framework
The Library and Information Science (LIS) conceptual framework within which I situate this study borders on Merton/Chatman’s Insider/Outsider approach. Within the historical background, women were gradually and progressively relegated to private and invisible roles,

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1 Ex-Officio members are people selected from the general public by the President to occupy Cabinet positions and by virtue of their appointment to the Cabinet, they become Members of Parliament but without voting rights – they are not allowed to vote on any Parliamentary issue requiring a vote. (Article 78 1d of the Constitution)

2 The reign of Idi Amin, Parliament was suspended but two women served in his cabinet
while men took on the more public duties. Women were thus consigned to the status of being outsiders, which also bears the connotations of marginality, while men remained insiders to mainstream politics, through socialization. However, in the Ugandan situation, this situation has been reversed to some extent through the policy of affirmative action or positive discrimination, but the issues that are worth investigating are what happens when this previously marginalized group becomes part of the mainstream? The main research questions are thus outlined below;

- Are there any information challenges that are likely to be experienced by women as they get acclimatized within the new operational [political] environment of mainstream politics?

- How do they manifest and what are the consequences for information access and utilization and are there any attempts to counter these challenges?

The objectives of the study are:

a) To explore the challenges in information access and use, that women Parliamentarians face while undertaking their legislative responsibilities.

b) To find out how these limitations may impact on their legislative roles and careers and suggest mitigation measures.

Chatman carried out her studies on populations on the margin, which included prisoners, the elderly, the janitors, and she observed, ethnographically, how these social contexts influence information behaviour and also provides some instances where individuals could maintain an insider or outsider outlook and the ensuing information implications. Although I am adopting Chatman’s approach, this attempt is rather new and exploratory, since the framework has not been applied to a mainstream situation. Previous studies on Ugandan female legislators argue that even though affirmative action brought women onboard, they were simply added on to an existing structure of patriarchy, when the rules had long been established by those who had been there, the men, the insiders. Other arguments disadvantaging women also contend that the social structure still assigns sex roles to women, even within the highest decision making body. In addition, since they were initially absent, the affirmative action has tended to impose some form of control over them through the euphemized coercion of ‘eternal gratitude’ imposed by their ‘savior’, the regime that instituted it. Other challenges with the affirmative action include the burden of a larger constituency and the ambiguity surrounding whom they actually represent. With regards to the larger constituency, it is difficult for women to navigate and control and in information terms, they are never able to access information from all corners of their constituency. The ambiguity surrounding their representation too, tends to send varying signals to different categories, for example women often think that the woman Mp is supposed to represent only women interests. The conclusion that can be drawn from these studies is that even though women legislators constitute an elite class, they could still find themselves in a marginal situation due to the structure of the mainstream and the general society.

Methods
The methodological techniques have been partly inspired by the theoretical framework and they consisted of in-depth interviews and several observations in contexts that had been identified as pertinent to legislators’ activities. Like Chatman, I spent long hours within the
Parliamentary structures, most especially inside the Library. Chatman employed a technique of ‘participant observation’ and immersed herself in activities of her respondents that she presumed relevant to her data collection. This was done partly as a double check with the intention of taking note of the subtle motivational forces that could be contributory in influencing the phenomenon she was observing (Chatman, 1992, pg 3) and which she followed up with interviews. However, this technique posed some challenges for my study in two ways. One of them was expounded by the Parliamentary structure itself, which tended to reinforce some hierarchical boundaries and often set limits on the possibilities of interaction and participation. Secondly, members’ schedules exhibited a degree of volatility and unpredictability, so I opted to posit myself as a complete observer, while noting down any pertinent detail which I could follow up with an interview. Thus the main data collection tool for this study was in-depth interviews and these were supplemented by observational data and analyzing documents. I carried out extensive in-depth interviews with legislators to gather data on almost their entire legislative experience in their various contexts, their self organization, information options and choices and information challenges. Other interviews included contacts from their constituency offices, as well as the Local council leaders to find out information issues within the interaction with constituents.

Interviews with the Parliamentary library and research officials were also geared at uncovering information seeking and use by Mps from the perspective of the intermediaries. From the Parliament’s administrative services, I carried out two interviews, and one was to collect data on the overall organizational structure of Parliament, which also included the structure of the 8th Multiparty Parliament. Two interviews were held with Parliamentary staff members in charge of hierarchically situated legislators, to examine what I presumed to be information advantages/privileges embedded in particular offices and positions within the legislature. Basically, I was trying to find out the role of those administrators in those offices and what kind of information issues the officers handle. I also interviewed an official from the Women Parliamentary Association to find out its administrative and organizational structure and the general operational environment of this association. Other interviews were held with officials from the women councils and these were intended to gather data on how Women Mps interacted with these organizations, since they were supposedly indicated as both information sources and channels for women legislators on the district seats, so I wanted to find out how this relationship functions. I also carried out observations in the Plenary, in the library, in the Women’s caucus (UWOPA), during elections, in committee meetings and press conferences. A lot of data was generated through these sources and this was mostly unstructured data and I initially constructed categories from the contextual data that reflected any information practice, which were later refined in reflection of my theoretical tool.

**Methods of collecting data**
The main data collection technique was the In-depth interviews and this generated most of the data for the analysis.

Others included:
- Radio
- E-mails
- Telephone

Observations:
- In the plenary sessions
- Committee meetings
• Press conferences by MPs
• UWOPA sponsored workshops
• Public election campaign rallies
• Library (continuous through the research process)

Documents:
• Records from the Hansard
• Parliamentary reports
• UWOPA reports
• Research Notes (continuous)

Constituency visits: Three (3) contacts from constituency offices and one (1) from a non constituency office of a respondent.

• Two (2) leaders at Local Council I level at the village level
• Three (3) officials from the Parliamentary Library and Research section
• Three (3) officials from the Parliamentary administrative services
• An official from the Women Parliamentary Association

Segregation of Legislators interviewed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Ascension</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Affirmative</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Army</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PWD</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workers</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ordinary Constituency</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grand Total</td>
<td>35</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Findings of the study
Results show that when outsiders become part of the mainstream, they do attempt to fit in the structures, but however, there are several handicaps that they face that impinge on their possibilities to acquire and utilize information in some contexts, but perhaps first are some of the benefits of experience exemplified by insiders. Experience presents some advantages, especially familiarity with the structure and procedures, confidence and information skills pertinent to be functional and effective within the institution, and these characteristics have been displayed by some of the most outstanding long-term legislators. Access to information, especially in documentary form for national legislative tasks, in terms of bills, reports, petitions, government documents appears equal for both insiders and outsiders and legislators rather complain about the information burdens. However, there are other aspects like the sexual division of labour and the management challenges of large constituencies that threaten access and optimal utilization of information, and I will briefly highlight some of these issues.
Gender roles:
Women tend to be bogged down by gender roles which manifest at several levels; for example in missing out on some legislative contexts, networking opportunities, especially operating after hours in favour of carrying on with domestic responsibilities. There are also indications of inadequate utilization of information. Some women are however able to break through and fairly integrate within the institution and access information at various levels, including late night meetings and caucusing. Some of these women also indicate having ‘cooperative spouses’ or no spouse at all.

Constituency level:
Large constituency: Women legislators on the district seats are also bogged with large constituencies, in comparison with the ordinary constituencies occupied by men. The organization, gathering and dissemination of information, in the district, are heavily dependant on financial resources. The alternative government information structures, the women councils, that are supposed to alleviate part of the burden, by facilitating information acquisition and dissemination conduits are not prioritized in the Government budget, thus minimally funded, and therefore not very functional. There are also instances of attendant strained interpersonal relations within these women councils, which hinder information flows. This in turn impacts on their overall visibility and performance.

There is also no evidence of information sharing at constituency level to enable at least pulling resources together and share the burden with other constituency MPs within the district.

Male representatives: While both men and women face huge information burdens especially at national level, men on the other hand appeared less constrained by gender roles. The success of a men’s legislative career seemed dependant on a ‘cooperative spouse’, which is largely culturally expected, who is supposed to be ‘understanding’ when his schedules are delayed, for example in cases of late night meetings, caucusing and in accessing informal information networks.

The spouse is also supposed to pay homage to constituents in their residence (the MP’s residence) so as not to cut off information flows.

There are also indications of more vigorous information seeking processes amongst some of the male legislators to advance their political careers, both at national level and at constituency level

Changing the game:
The findings reveal that women have tried to fight back on their outsider status, change the organization and advance within the structure as well as improving on their information access possibilities. This has been mostly accomplished through their women only network and lobby, the Women’s Parliamentary association, UWOPA. One example for the women on districts seats successfully advocated for extra funds for fuel in order to be able to traverse their large constituencies and improve on their capabilities in gathering and disseminating information in their constituencies.
They have also pursued leadership positions on Parliamentary committees, which would accord them more power and leverage in the organizational management, visibility and also privileges in information access.

Although women are reluctant to push for an equal hand in the domestic responsibilities, perhaps for fear of political reprisals, they have at least agitated for crèches (day care centers) to be introduced within Parliament so that they can cater for their children, while also attending Parliamentary duties so as not to miss out on crucial information access opportunities, especially committee meetings and the plenary (public debates).

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, some of the findings indicate that when outsiders join the mainstream, some aspects of the private and the marginal sphere are not shed off, but rather are added on to their public roles, which creates more burdens and challenging information possibilities. The marginalization is transmitted to a new level. However, women who have ‘cooperative spouses’ or no spouse could be able to traverse all information contexts, with some degree of independence.

**References**


