



By Oyunga Pala



The Churchill Show that airs on NTV network is the biggest comedy stage in Kenya. The comedy format show has performed consistently as the highest viewed TV show on Sundays on GeoPoll ratings across the networks, with estimates of 2 million viewers. On the evening of 16th April 2017, the affable host Daniel Ndambuki, known by his moniker Churchill, had special guests. A series of high chairs were arranged on the front stage and strobe lights lit up the background. An excited crowd ushered in the four guests who were aspiring for the women's representative position in Nairobi County.

The aspirants were led by the incumbent women's representative for Nairobi County, Rachel Shebesh, and included contenders Esther Passaris, Karen Nyamu and Millicent Omanga. They took their positions on the high stools that mimicked an American town hall TV debate format to the loud cheers of the rival supporters. The Churchill show is an entertainment show that does not take itself too seriously, so no one was expecting a serious gender policy discussion. The first question was a soft ball thrown to the aspirants:

*"What was your most memorable Easter holiday?"*

Churchill tried to get serious with questions on the policy priorities in the first 100 days upon election and the challenges female politicians encounter on the campaign trail. Eventually he rounded it off with the burning question of the night:

*"Do women love each other? Do guys love each other?"*

It was play on an old stereotype: women are their own worst enemies. But the aspirants challenged the sexist context of the question. Shebesh's response was sharp and quick.

*"Yes we do and we are tired of this old line that women do not support each other".*

Ever since it was enacted in the new 2010 Constitution, the women's representative position in the National Assembly has been marked by tired old stereotypes.

The women's rep position was introduced to address the underrepresentation of Kenyan women in politics. It was enshrined with a two-third gender rule aimed at ensuring women would have a legally mandated say in the country's political affairs through affirmative action. The membership of the Kenyan National Assembly now consists of forty-seven women, each elected by the registered voters of the counties.

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But despite the new political dispensation, media coverage of women politicians has been slow to adjust. The media has prioritised their looks over their policies and put immense pressure on female candidates to be seen as likable. The run-up to the political party nomination provided a good indicator of the attitudes held by Kenyans on social media. Campaign billboards were deemed too sexy or cheesy, depending on who you talked to. The gossip sites played up the physical appearances of women's reps by lining them up on a beauty comparison ladder. Campaign slogans that would have passed as a cool identity reference for Nairobi's urban youth swag, came under sharp criticism. Aspirants were accused of glamming up to draw voter attention instead of selling their policies.

Not that any of the male politicians were reading out their manifestos. Parody campaign posters of sexualised models began doing the social media comedic rounds. Sex appeal became a hot topic of fluff content sites and the tag flower girls turned into a euphemism for the women's position.

Political campaigns are all about swaying public perceptions but those perceptions are constantly shifting. A good example was the flak that met the campaign slogans. Adopting Sheng, Nairobi's urban youth language of choice, and appealing to their touch points is a standard political branding strategy. Rachel Shebesh upped her street credentials in 2013 claiming the title *"Manzi wa Nai"* (*Girl from Nairobi*) and she won the vote. For the 2017 election, she toned it down to *"Mama Nai, Jenga Nai"* (*Nairobi Mother, Build Nairobi*), perhaps cognisant of her seniority when compared to the younger aspirants. Millicent Omanga went for the slogan *Supa na Works"* (*Beautiful Woman who Works*). Bernadette Wangui Ng'ang'a, the nominated member of Nairobi County Assembly, hit the campaign trail with the slogan, *"Ms B Tasha"* (*Miss B is enough*). Nairobi County Assembly member Beatrice Kwamboka, formerly of the Mountain View Ward in Westlands constituency, went by the slogan *"Mrembo wa Jiji"* (*The Beauty of the City*). Karen Nyamu was labelled *"Bae wa Nairobi"* (*Babe of Nairobi*) by her admirers and she suffered image nightmares before her campaign strategists put forward the more kosher *"Wakili na Mahustler"* (*Lawyer for the Hustlers*), playing up her professional credentials as a lawyer. The message of the critics seemed clear: to be a women's representative you have to play the femininity card.

It did not escape keen observers that male candidates are expected to play up their masculinity attributes without the consequences that face female candidates. Every woman entering politics braces for gender bias and stereotypes that are deeply steeped in Kenya's male-dominated political tradition. The entertainment media storylines and the social media reaction perpetually reduce the

women's rep to a beauty parade, and the level of scrutiny of a female candidates' moral character is harsher. The female politician would be crucified for the slightest social transgressions where men get away with a slap on the wrist.

The objectification of the female candidate in public office is an occupational hazard, especially when one is perceived as good looking. It is what women's rep Wambui Nganga termed as having to endure the stereotype of *beauty without brains*.

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All of Nairobi's women's reps were drawn into defensive positions battling against character perceptions that were based on their appearances and rumours. Rachel Shebesh's marriage was subject of running gossip mills. Esther Passaris's battles with her estranged husband have been played out in the public court. Karen Nyamu endured repeated sexual innuendo and at one point had to defend herself against a cheeky mistaken identity clip of a Rwandese video vixen whose sole focus was a prominent derriere.

The online *Nairobi News* had a blazing headline: *Beauties for Women Rep seat who Nairobi men can't stop ogling- Photos!!* Tuko.co.ke went with the click bait: , *"Meet the beautiful women's rep aspirants everyone is talking about (photos)*.

Columnist, Njoki Chege, who pens the popular City Girl column that runs in the *Saturday Nation*, called the women's aspirants pathetic and did not hide her disdain for campaign posters that positioned them for the male gaze.

This mistreatment of women in politics is as old as the republic. A female politician has to fulfil the social requirements of the male gaze to succeed in this dirty game. The picture-perfect female politician has to be modelled in the image of Mother Teresa - known for her compassion and respected for her quiet resilience amidst criticism. The vocal woman who raises her voice immediately earns the masculine tag "Iron Lady" and only earns respect when she has proven to be as "strong as a man".

Women in Kenyan Politics: Running the gauntlet

The women's rep position, seen through the cultural patriarchal lenses and an established male gaze, is deemed a lesser political office solely because the occupant is female. It is not common knowledge that a women's rep has similar functions to an MP and, unlike an MP who only represents a constituency, she represents an entire county. It is obvious that the role of the women's rep is yet to be understood.

In 2013, a record 86 women parliamentarians joined the National Assembly, a historical achievement by any measure, 47 as women representatives from every county, 16 elected as Members of the National Assembly (MNA), 5 nominated MNAs and 18 nominated Senators. They were not just filling the numbers; many these women had taken up leadership roles and asserted their influence on state affairs. The most prominent was Joyce Laboso, who rose to the rank of Deputy Speaker, the first female deputy speaker in Kenya's parliament. In her wake are the Senate Majority Chief Whip, Beatrice Elachi of the Jubilee party and the Minority Deputy Chief Whip Janet Ongera of CORD on the opposition's side. Not to forget the 8 women listed as committee chairwomen.

The Mzalendo website that tallies parliamentary participation, places women's representation in parliament at 21%, which though short of the constitutional threshold of 33%, is an incredible testament to work of the pioneering African feminists who fought for the right to representation and equal treatment of women in all sectors of society.

There is more to be celebrated than denigrated but only if one remains aware of the history of the women's movement and the sacrifices of the pioneers. The pioneer leaders of the feminist movement in Kenya bore a heavy cross in their individual attempts to pave the way for numerical presence of women in the National Assembly.

Between 1963 and 1969, there were no women representatives in the Kenyan parliament. The first woman to be elected as MP was Grace Onyango of Kisumu Town, who was a member of the second Parliament in 1969. In the last ten Parliaments, Kenya has had a total of 75 women, 50 of whom were elected while the other 25 were nominated. Therefore, the leap in representation spurred by the new constitution cannot be underscored enough. It is a testament to the steady work of various actors in the progressive feminist movement whose contributions never made the front pages.

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The history of women agitating for political leadership is a lost chapter in Kenya's democratic evolution and shift towards inclusivity for marginalised groups. The contribution of women parliamentarians, whether elected or nominated, has a long historical precedence and we have to look back to understand the distance that been covered. For women in leadership, it has never been a question of competence but rather gender prejudice.

Nairobi's most glamorous years, the Golden Age, when it was known as the Green City in the Sun and the safari capital of the world, was under Margaret Kenyatta, the daughter of the first president Jomo Kenyatta. Nairobi in the 1970s was hailed as a modern and efficient cosmopolitan African city, one that Julius Nyerere of Tanzania described as "*good as going to London*". Margaret Kenyatta served as Mayor of Nairobi from 1970 to 1976. Before that she was elected as Councillor for Dagoretti Ward in Nairobi in 1963 where she served for four consecutive terms.

She was the first African woman to become the mayor of Kenya's capital city but she was not the first woman to be elected mayor in Kenya. That honour is reserved for Grace Onyango, a school teacher at Kisumu Union Primary. Grace Onyango was the first woman councillor of Kisumu Central ward before she become Kisumu Mayor following the death of the incumbent Mathias Ondiek in 1965. She was elected mayor of Kisumu in 1967 and as Kisumu Town MP in 1969, making her the first woman elected to the Kenyan parliament - the single woman in a club of 158 male parliamentarians. Grace Onyango also served as the first woman Secretary General of the Luo Union (East Africa).

The 1970s saw the emergence of Dr. Julia Ojiambo, who became MP for Busia South in 1974. It was also the decade of a phenomenal force in the name of Chelagat Mutai who got elected in 1973 as the youngest Member of Parliament in Kenya's history at 24 years of age. Mutai, a two-term MP, was a fierce critic of the Jomo Kenyatta and Daniel arap Moi regimes; she embodied integrity in a corrupted system.

The 1980s would see the rise of Hon. Phoebe Asiyoy and Grace Ogot. Phoebe Asiyoy, who also held the distinction as the first African Chairperson of the Maendeleo Ya Wanawake Organisation, was

elected to Parliament to represent Karachuonyo in 1980 and held the seat till 1983. Hon. Asiyo was elected back to Parliament in 1992 in the multiparty system and served until 1997. Grace Ogot, who had already earned fame as a renowned storyteller and post-colonial feminist writer, entered Parliament in 1984 as MP for Gem after a by-election following the murder of the sitting MP, Horace Ongili Owiti. She was the only woman assistant minister in the cabinet of the then President Moi.

There was also Nyiva Mwenda who served three times as MP, the first time in 1974 and then returning after a long sojourn in the multiparty era to win the Kitui West constituency seat in 1992 and 2002. Nyiva Mwenda holds the distinction of being the first woman to serve as Minister for Culture and Social Services under Moi in 1992. The late 1990s into the early 2000s would introduce the formidable characters of Martha Karua, Beth Mugo and Wangari Maathai, who came to embody the greater feminist struggle of gender equity in governance.

Without an acknowledgement of the contribution of the pioneers, the two-third gender rule could be mistaken for tokenism, which it is not. The road to this representation has been long and hard. The efforts of a collective of concerned women drawn from the legal and academic fields and from civil society and NGOs increased gender sensitivity and awareness that eventually paid off in a gender-sensitive new constitution.

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The momentum towards the liberation of women began in earnest following a United Nations General Assembly proclamation in 1972. It was at this assembly that the year 1975 was chosen as the start of the International Women's Year, back in an era where no one thought an all-women conference would be taken seriously. The first UN Conference on Women in 1975 was hosted by Mexico City and established the period between 1975 and 1985 as the Women's Decade. The close of that decade would be commemorated in the third UN Conference on Women held in Nairobi in 1985.

The outcome of the conference would be the Nairobi Forward- Looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women. The Nairobi Conference declared that gender equality was part and parcel of human activity, not an isolated or fringe issue, and that it was necessary for women to participate in all spheres, not only those relating to gender. The notable contributors of that decade were renowned feminists such as Thelma Awori, then deputy director of UNIFEM and chief of the Africa section and Professor Micere Mugo, who used poetry that drew from a feminist perspective to raise awareness and consciousness about the women's movement. Other prominent names in the women's movement in Kenya were Eddah Gachukia, Julia Ojiambo, Phoebe Asiyo, Wangari Maathai, Jane Kiano, Margaret Kenyatta, Maria Nzomo and Wambui Otieno.

Many of these highly educated women would often be accused of elitism. The Maendeleo Ya Wanawake Organisation (MYWO), then known as an NGO dealing with issues of women's rights and gender equity, would be responsible for changing the perception of the women's movement from just another elitist agenda to a grassroots movement. MYWO gained ground with its social welfare policies that targeted hundreds of small self-help groups in rural communities. In the 1980s the MYWO suffered an image problem after it became part of the ruling KANU party's mobilisation agenda and a conduit for the populist propaganda that defined the Moi regime.

The real structural change of the political system began to be felt in the 1990s, largely as a direct result of the Beijing Declaration and the Platform for Action that was adopted unanimously by 189 countries. It was an agenda for women's empowerment and the key global policy document on gender equality.

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The lobbying and mobilisation for affirmative action began in the 1990s when the push for proportional representation became a global agenda. Kenyan women organised their numbers to demand comprehensive constitutional reform to anchor the feminist struggle in the constitution. The first major light at the end of this long tunnel would be seen in 1996 following a motion moved in parliament by Hon. Charity Ngilu for the implementation the Beijing Platform for Action as envisioned after the Fourth World Conference on Women in September 1995 that served as a roadmap for the achievement of gender equity. Of particular concern to the male parliamentarians was a gender quota that was roundly rejected. The motion did not see the light of day.

The next woman to take a stab at it was Hon. Pheobe Asiyo, who tabled the Affirmative Action Bill in Parliament in 1997, which was also rejected. Hon. Beth Mugo would face the same fate in the year 2000 when she attempted to lobby for an increase in representation of women in Parliament. Concerted lobbying would take feminist activists another five years before the affirmative action agenda became a part of the draft constitution that was rejected at a charged National Referendum in 2005. The activists went back to the trenches, making a stronger case that would see affirmative action become a legally binding principle in the 2010 constitution.

The dream of a critical mass of women in parliament is within grasp. The significant changes in patriarchal political culture have been felt even as we appreciate that there is still much work ahead in the space of gender equity.

But the discourse of the feminist struggle has been waning over the years and the women's movement that was vibrant in the 1970s through to the 1990s and dedicated towards total emancipation of women is now playing lip service to the cause. The conversations around women's empowerment have gotten stuck in a numbers game and the calibre of representatives is worrying in some respects. Many are not guided by feminist grounding principles, which has raised concern amongst activists who question the motivations of the new crop of women leaders. The widespread lack of ideology-based politics means that political leaders become invested only when riding on the crest of a movement that they do not intrinsically support or whose ideals they do not believe in.

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Increasing numbers of women in leadership positions does not necessarily impact directly on

women's issues. Electing more women cannot be the give-all solution to women's issues. The wider picture of emancipation is lost in the Kenyan political space where personal gain takes precedence.

Dr. Achola Pala, a feminist scholar and anthropologist warns, *"We are losing the larger war for the battle."* The battle of the sexes provides a false consciousness partly because it pits tradition against modernisation/Westernisation, she argues. In an article titled *The Ground We Stand On*, she talks about the limitations of adopting a concept of human rights derived from a supposed universalised Western culture. *"So many of us have often accepted the notion of African 'traditional culture' as if it were the enemy of women, and the word 'Western' as if it contained women's rights."*

The emphasis on political representation and numbers loses sight of the larger emancipation solution, the cultural contest and the importance of cultivating a feminist consciousness. Many of the new key players lack this consciousness and remain in danger of privatising personal ambition that feeds into a social class disconnect between grassroots women and their representatives.

Feminist writer Lucy Oriang, in an opinion piece, laid out the challenges of the contemporary movement in a column titled *"The Liberation is Dead, Long Live the Women of Kenya, "Talking about women is an industry in itself. A lot of words flow in boardrooms, policy documents and the best of Kenya's hotels. Much of it is packaged so cleverly that it camouflages the fact that there is nothing new under that particular sun."*

Perhaps we should draw some wisdom from the bold African feminist voice of Nigerian author Chimamanda Adichie, who wrote *"We should all be feminists"*, for many seem to have forgotten that femininity and feminism are not mutually exclusive. May the women who seek equity and equality for all stand up.

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