



By Zukiswa Wanner



Wambui is intelligent and funny. She went to a girls' boarding school and, presumably, is more "girl power" than the average girl. Or so our past conversations have shown. On this day we are talking politics and sadly, I realize we have a problem. These are only the second elections she is eligible to vote in and says she will vote in. She declares, "Even if there were a woman candidate, I would not vote for them. Kenya is not ready to be governed by a woman."

She grew up in a woman-headed household. Her aunts push her to be the best she can be and try to be good examples of this themselves. She went to a school where she was taught that anything boys could do, girls could do just as well.

Yet...

She has internalised the idea that despite women's competence in running a home - a government is, after all, just a bigger home - and her ability to compete as an equal academically with her male peers, women are not ready to govern. I am saddened though not surprised. A little over a month before the elections, I have realised that my niece is a product of a society that, through the media, silences women as voters, as political commentators and even as politicians in one way or another.

### ***Women as the electorate***

An incident in the American town of Baltimore comes to mind when I think of the disregard for women's voices. Recently at a bar dubbed *Kamau's* (yes, there are just that many Kenyans in Baltimore), I sat sharing drinks and having a political discussion with some Kenyan friends. All six of

them were men. As in any election year, the conversation was intense. Every now and again, one of them would ask another man passing by to come and support what they were saying. I noticed with interest that although they paid keen attention to and debated ferociously what I said, never was any other woman's opinion sought. It almost seemed as though, by virtue of not being Kenyan, I was an honorary man in these political discussions and the only woman who could be listened to.

During the last elections, I recall seeing a news clip of men being interviewed in Nyanza. The men stated authoritatively that their wives were voting for certain candidates because failure to do so would result in unfortunate consequences. Of course, alone in the voting booth, the women's decisions would be their own, but it is difficult not to see how, unless the women were otherwise strong-willed and independent-minded, they could very well be coerced to believe that when it comes to politics, their husbands' opinions were more valid than theirs.

Now this may seem like it is nothing. These Kenyan men and women are US citizens and although many of them hold dual citizenship, the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission has not made it such that they can vote from outside of Kenya. But it is not nothing. While perhaps only one of the six men I sat with will make it to Kenya for the elections on 8<sup>th</sup> August, they are very real influencers in the political space through communication with family and friends at home. The ethnic stereotypes, the opinions on the politicians and their running mates, played out in this bar in Baltimore in the same way that it would have played out at a home in Kenya.

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### ***Women as political commentators***

Dr. Wandia Njoya is possibly one of the more riveting political commentators in the Kenyan landscape. A lecturer at Daystar University, her fellow academics seem to know and respect her political commentaries, as do a core part of the electorate that is her students. Non-governmental organisations also see the value she adds to political analysis and often request her to moderate or participate in a panel discussing important political issues of the day. She is an example of how to provide well-thought out and contemporary political thought that never forgets to look at Kenya's history and compare it with that of other states in the hope of progressing further.

Programmes like Press Pass on NTV more often than not have all-male panels week in, week out; when they do manage to get female panelists, they seem to be the ones that prop up the political hegemony, never the ones that question it. This then only serves to make it seem as though there are no women commentators, and when they can be found, their opinions are so unbalanced as to not warrant further engagement.

Whether it is criticism or praise, the one thing that Dr. Njoya's commentaries cannot hide is how

much she loves Kenya, how much she wants it to be better and how much she wants to be one of the Kenyans who helps make it progress. I mention her as an example rather than an exception. She is an example of women with powerful and important political opinions who can potentially shape the trajectory of this country. And yet none of the editors-in-chief of the three major media houses, namely, the Nation Media Group, the Standard Media Group or Radio Africa, have thought it worthwhile to give Dr. Njoya a regular column in their print or online publications so that her views can be widely disseminated or debated.

Indeed, apart from Rasna Warah, who writes a weekly op-ed column for the *Daily Nation*, most female columnists seem to be relegated to lifestyle or fashion topics. When political opinions by women are published, they are usually as guest columnists, not as regular contributors. And it is not merely in print that mainstream media is failing to take on board women's political perspectives. This is true also in broadcast. Programmes like Press Pass on NTV more often than not have all-male panels week in, week out; when they do manage to get female panelists, they seem to be the ones that prop up the political hegemony, never the ones that question it. This then only serves to make it seem as though there are no women commentators, and when they can be found, their opinions are so unbalanced as to not warrant further engagement. But that is when viewers are lucky to get any women at all.

I recently watched a show moderated by a woman journalist on the upcoming governor election in Bomet. Despite the fact that one of the two leading candidates is a woman, it was interesting to note that all the four panelists who were debating and discussing the two candidates were male. As a viewer I could not help wondering whether, despite the widely circulated list of commentators by Ory Okolloh on social media, Kenyan media has just chosen not to engage with women commentators or thinks their opinions are not worth hearing.

Does this mean that despite being ignored, women commentators have kept their opinions to themselves? Fortunately not. Many share their thoughts on social media and through blogs. Unfortunately, one has to know where to find them in order to engage with their work. As traditional media still offers the best form of widest dissemination, society is all the poorer when women's opinions are not deemed worthy of political engagement. For my Wambui, this means she gets to see very little political commentary by women. And seeing little political commentary from women results in her and many other young women believing that opinion shapers where politics is concerned can and must be those not of her gender.

### ***Women as politicians***

A tabloid leads with a headline on a female politician saying she enjoys sex and which female politician is the best looking. A talk show of questionable quality has the male host watching and grinning while a male politician makes rape jokes (threats?) about a female contender who he is on the show with. While these scenarios are eyebrow-raising, they are sadly expected.

One would not know it through reading the Kenyan newspapers or watching the news just how many bills Millie Odhiambo has authored in Parliament. Yet, because of how she is represented in the media, social media has often condemned her for all sorts of things, including being "too forward".

What irks though is when mainstream media communicates similar information on female politicians. Information on female politicians in the mainstream media tends to focus on their sex lives, as if their sex lives have something to do with their ability to do their jobs. There also seems to

be major coverage on female politicians having petty squabbles while focusing little on the work they do. For example, one would not know it through reading the Kenyan newspapers or watching the news just how many bills Millie Odhiambo has authored in Parliament. Yet, because of how she is represented in the media, social media has often condemned her for all sorts of things, including being “too forward”. These opinions are sadly given by both men and women. Similarly, I am yet to see any engagement on the impact that Rachel Shebesh made as woman representative in Nairobi County. What I and possibly many other women have seen are stories of a past relationship. This is true of Shebesh and many other women politicians.

In the few instances where women seem to be written or spoken of positively in the media, it often appears that even the positivity is slightly condemning. Take the reference to Martha Karua as the “Iron Lady” of Kenyan politics. While this is purportedly to show how tough she is, one cannot help wonder how giving a Kenyan female politician the same nickname as an anti-union, anti-poor former British Prime Minister is supposed to be a compliment. A politician who is principled is admirable but one does not quite get that feeling when the term “Iron lady” is used to describe anyone. In any case, why is this seemingly incompassionate term reserved for women politicians? Why is a Mike Sonko or an Isaac Rutto not referred to as a Kenyan Bulldog, for instance?

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The fact that even when the principals of Jubilee and NASA are not on the front pages of all the major newspapers, mostly male politicians make it there should be a serious cause for concern at how the media engages with women. How women are underrepresented or unheard in the media is probably something worth analysing when we look at why the Kenyan electorate has failed to vote to uphold the one-third gender representation as per the Constitution. How can there be expectations of one-third representation of a gender politically when there is not even one-third representation of that gender in the media, except in ways that have nothing to do with what those politicians claim to stand for or their failure to deliver on what they claim to push?

As Kenya looks to the elections in August, there are more women contesting beyond just women’s representative. Kirinyaga has two women as the leading contenders in the race for governor, which gives rise to hopes that, whoever wins, Kenya may finally have at least one female governor. Machakos, Kitui and Bomet also have women contenders fighting against the male incumbents. And a few other counties have women as running mates. So this is something worth acknowledging as Kenya is actually doing better in representing women in these elections than in previous ones.

But until the one-third gender representation is achieved, no bar in Baltimore, Busia, Mombasa or Tana River should bring out the *busaa*. The road to getting there is long. It will involve the media deliberately putting in place editorial policies where female voters are listened to. It will mean perhaps removing some male voices and getting some female voices to give their political opinions. It will entail holding female politicians to the same standard to which male politicians are held and engaging with their work in the same way beyond their looks.

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With the next elections now so close, we can park any hope of this happening now. What we can do though is hope the media works diligently to ensure that this becomes part of their policy immediately after the current elections are settled.

Until then, my niece Wambui and her peers will probably continue believing that Kenya is not ready to have a female head of state because they see no women in leadership positions and when they do, it has nothing to do with the positions that they hold. This is certainly not a legacy we would like to leave to our sons and daughters. The mainstream media can do better.

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