

THE IMPACT OF WOMEN MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT ON POLICY OUTCOME AFFECTING CHILDREN IN UGANDA, 2001-2009**Kakuba Sultan Juma*****ABSTRACT**

The impact of women on decision making in Uganda had been constrained for long because of the patriarchal nature of the societies in the country. But since 1986, women have gained recognition and representation in the Parliament. This has given them a unique opportunity to present and influence issues of their concern into legislation. The study is based on content analysis of parliamentary debates, particularly contributions to issues related to children and subsequent policy outcomes. Using systematic stratified sampling a total of 377 hansards were selected out of 752 corresponding to plenary parliamentary sittings which had been held in the period 2001-2009. With the help of content analysis, data were extracted from the sampled hansards, coded and categorised on issues raised and debated in parliament to promote and protect children. The study findings show that though women were new comers in the Parliament, they displayed that they are equal to the task agitate for legislation to improve the status of children and family issues in Uganda. The study uncovered that women Members of Parliament raised many issues to prioritise the welfare and needs of children into legal framework in the country. These included child labour, child sacrifice/child trafficking, street children defilement and girl child education among others. The study found that this resulted into enacting and amendment of laws such as the Child Act, Expansion of defilement and Persons With Disabilities Act among others. The study concludes that women as mothers and Members of Parliament have achieved some legislation, which can positively impact on the status of children. Therefore, there is need to put these legislation into practice because having them on paper is not good enough to improve on the conditions of children in the country.

***Kakuba Sultan Juma, lecturer at IUIU**

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INTRODUCTION

In 1962, women acquired the right to vote and stand for election in Uganda following transfer of power from colonial rule to independence. Although Ugandan women gained franchise at this time, their situation to involve in politics did not change much after obtaining the right to vote and to contest for election. Career opportunities in electoral politics were culturally closed to them. In the 1960s, there were two women in the legislature in Uganda and in the 1980s there was only one woman member of parliament out of the 143 members in the House. In fact, during the period 1962-1986, there was little growth in the representation of women; the parliament was significantly biased against women. The women's participation in electoral politics remained minimal although women exercised the right to vote. However, with many decades of women's absence in the parliament, the National Resistance Movement (NRM), which came to power in 1986 and restored democratic rule in 1996, called for an all inclusive and participatory system of

government. This improved women's representation in electoral politics and government. There are presently 135 women Members of Parliament out of 386 Members of Parliament in the 9th Parliament (2011-2016).

In the light of this, the government set out legal framework to give women opportunity who historically, had been kept out of mainstream politics and leadership positions. The 1995 Constitution of the Republic of Uganda provided a significant enabling framework for women to participate in politics in the country. Article 3, paragraph (vi) of the Constitution stated that "the state shall ensure gender balance and fair representation of marginalized groups on all constitutional and other bodies." Article 78 (b) allowed a reserved seat for one woman district representative in the Parliament. The election of women to Parliament in Uganda has increased tremendously reaching above 30 per cent. This increase of women legislators has marked the beginning of women to participate in decision making using their leadership positions in a country

based on patriarchal setting. This way, women have not only gained numbers in their representation in parliament but this also presents a unique opportunity for them to raise issues of their concern in Parliament with a view of having what they have raised legislated into law or policies that protect their interests. The main point in this study is that women when elected to the parliament, one among the many key issues they are concerned about is defending children rights.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Women when elected into the parliament use their positions as legislators to “propose feminist bills such as sexual violence, reproductive rights and childcare.” In that regard, evidences from previous studies show that women Members of Parliament in different countries, using their positions as legislators had moved motions in Parliament to make matters concerning children a priority on legislative agenda. In that regard, Powley contends that “when empowered, women make decisions that positively affect children and families.” Using case studies from Latin American countries; Argentina, Costa Rica, and Columbia among others, Schwindt-Bayer, found that women legislators were key in promoting legislation of issues of women’s concerns like children and family. She points out that they sat on committees that amend and report women’s issues and this gave them opportunity to advance and influence women concerns into legislature.

Geisler extends similar finding that women in the parliament in South Africa took the centre stage in debating issues of women’s interests and concerns, which resulted into legislation of policies and laws that favour women. These among others included sexual harassment, and the 1998 Domestic Violence Act that increased legal and institutional protection for the victims, the 1996 Choice on Termination of Pregnancy Act that provided for abortion on demand to all women, the 1996 Film and Publications Act that provided for the protection against degradation of women and children.”

Devline and Elgie examined women representation in Rwanda. Their research finding also echoes same findings like those, which were found in other African countries regarding the influence and

impact of women Members of Parliament on policy outcomes. They found that women legislators were instrumental in debating and passing of gender-based policies and laws. Some of these policies and laws include; a law extending “the rights of pregnant and breast-feeding mothers at their place of work (1997), in essence this law was beneficial to both the mothers and children, Protection of Children from Violence (2001), and the Inheritance Act (2003).”

In Uganda, as elsewhere in the world, women have succeeded in bringing issues that are of importance to children’s protection into important legislation. This began with their increased involvement in the 1995 constitution making process in the National Constituent Assembly, which debated and resulted into the 1995 Constitution. Tamale, argues that women made a mark in this constitution making process in bringing women issues to be included in this constitution. Presently, this constitution guarantees women a lot of political privileges, which among many include women’s rights of equal representation in the legislature and elimination of all discrimination against them. Therefore, women legislators appear to play a prominent role in the policy outcome in the legislature.

In addition, Bauer in her study on Uganda found that female legislators in Uganda have fought to change rape, sexual offence and defilement laws, and to influence Land Act but only lost the inclusion of a clause of co-ownership. She also mentions that women parliamentarians attempted to push Domestic Relations Bill, which was to address issues such as inheritance as well as regulation on polygamy, abolition of payment of bride price, child-custody, divorce, consent to sexual relations and the age of marriage but it still remains shelved. This is so because this bill seemed to be controversial as in some situations was perceived to violate the rights of some people such as Muslims regarding polygamy.

The empirical literatures reviewed above suggest that women Members of Parliament are more active in proposing legislation in favour of children.

METHODOLOGY

This study investigates the impact of women in the 7th and 8th Parliament of Uganda (2001-2009) on the debate and legislation to promote and protect children. The study is based on content analysis of parliamentary debates, particularly contributions to issues related to children and subsequent policy outcome. The task of using this method was to capture exhaustively all verbal contributions of Members of Parliament in the legislation process. This process of content analysis provided easy identification of legislations women demanded, stood for and were passed into law regarding children rights. This method was easy and effective because it revealed the necessary data that would be difficult to collect using other methods like observing casually. According to Babie, content analysis is “the study of recorded human communications, such as text books, journals, paintings, laws and websites.” Neuman stresses that content analysis “is a technique of gathering and analyzing the content of a text.” The content according to him refers to “words, meaning, pictures, symbols, ideas, themes or any message that can be communicated.” He also highlights that “a text is anything written, visual or spoken that serves as means of communication such as newspapers, books, magazines, speeches and poems” to mention but a few.

SAMPLING AND SAMPLE OF HANSARDS

The sampling frame consisted of 752 hansards accumulated between 2001-2009 chosen for the study. These hansards correspond to the plenary parliamentary sittings. However, due to resource constraints, particularly money, time and the voluminous nature of these hansards, the researcher was not permitted to carry out exhaustive analysis of all of them. Instead a number of them were sampled based on Moten’s, Morant and, Jones’, and Olson’s; suggestions that generalization is not only based on data derived from the observation of the entire population defined by the entire research population. They emphasize that it may, in some situations, be impractical and extremely expensive to collect data from all the potential units of analysis.

This way, they suggest, one can make precise inferences about the population based on a sample when the sample accurately represents relevant

attributes of the population. But they stress that “sampling of documents should be conducted in a logical and consistent way.” In light of this, the systematic sampling method was used to select the hansards. Systematic sampling is a statistical sampling by which the sample selected as part of the study is drawn systematically from the sample frame. It involves selecting every *n*th element from the target population. This denotes that in every two parliamentary debates, one was systematically selected. The first parliamentary debate was chosen in a random manner starting with the first, and the rest followed a systematic order by choosing every odd number. In that regard, a total of 377 parliamentary debates were chronologically chosen corresponding to plenary parliamentary sittings.

Therefore, in order to establish the actual involvement of women Members of Parliament in the legislation process, one must attend parliamentary session sittings or read hansard, which contains detailed records on the activities of each individual member of parliament in a particular parliamentary session. This way, each hansard contains the names of all members of parliament who participate in that plenary parliamentary debate, party affiliation and constituency he/she represents. Thus, this study thoroughly and critically analysed contextual text of parliamentary debates to ascertain initiatives and interventions of women members of parliament, particularly on issues that were to result into legislations to promote and protect rights of children. This dimension involved identifying issues believed to be of children’s concern to guide the study. Therefore, while scanning the hansards to establish policy outcome, the focus was laid on identifying these issues, contribution and logical conclusion reached.

In that regard, real verbal contributions (textual and contextual analysis) on issues affecting children were scanned from the parliamentary debates and coded. The interest and focus here was to establish the purpose, content and meaning of what actually Women Members of Parliament said during parliamentary debates. That is, making specific proposals during parliamentary debates and subsequent legislation they made on these topics. Interestingly, parliamentary debates provide evidence of which interests a Member of Parliament prioritise based on his or her participation

in the debates. This way, it was easy to detect the legislation reached from these debates because discussion of each item is systematically arranged according to the flow of discussion up to its conclusion. This process was done manually by scanning the content of parliamentary debates to identify relevant and irrelevant parts to meet the demand of the study. Steenberg et al. point out that “a relevant part is that one, which contains a demand, that is, a proposal on what decision should be or should not be made and constitute the heart of the content.” Meanwhile, irrelevant part is that information that makes no demand. This exercise was aided by searching terms commonly used to refer to children’s concerns. The data coding and categorisation of issues raised and debated in parliament to promote and protect children are shown Table 1

Table 1:

Code
Issues
CI-1
Street children
CI-2
Child labour
CI-3
Child sacrifice/child trafficking
CI-4
Female child education
CI-5
Defilement
CI-6
Children healthcare
CI-7
Under-age marriage
CI-8
Corporal punishment in homes and schools

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study was carried out with the aim to investigate the impact of women Members of Parliament on initiating and guiding through legislation issues that promote and protect children. The data were elicited according to the objective of the study.

Profiles of Women Members of Parliament

Out of total 175 women members of Parliament who served in the 7th and 8th parliament, 19.4% belonged to the youth age group (18-35), majority 75.4% were of middle age group (36-59) and

remaining were of old age (60+). Meanwhile, majority 84% out of the total number of women MPs were married, while remaining percentage were either single or widowed/separated. They were predominantly Christian with 89.7% and 10.3% Muslims, respectively. Majority of them (49.4%) possessed undergraduate academic qualifications, while a total of 39.4% had postgraduate qualifications, the remaining percentage possessed qualifications below undergraduate degree. Occupationally, majority 83% were public servants, while lawyer and Business had similar slot of 8.6%. Majority (102) were party members, while 73 were non-party members. It was found that majority (53.7%) had a two-term experience (6-10 years), while a few (10.9%) had more than ten years experience, the remaining were fresh with experience of 1-5 years. The study also revealed that majority 77.7% had been elected to parliament on affirmative action, while 15.4 and 6.9% were on direct seat and special nominee, respectively.

The Status of Children in Uganda and Legislation Pursued by Women in the Parliament

There are many children in Uganda, who witness different difficult experiences in their life such as child labour, defilement/sexual violence and abandonment by their parents among others. Women Members of Parliament as mothers had prioritised these issues in their legislative job to improve on the care of children in the country though process is complex. The process to draft and introduce bills for legislation in the parliament of Uganda is complex if not limited. Most of the bills are initiated from the cabinet, which is a male dominated to Parliament. Despite this arrangement, women MPs have demonstrated legislative competence to ably push and advocate for the rights of children. They raised and debated common issues of concern about children. These were mainly contained in the discussions of the Education Act, Persons With Disabilities Act and Child Act amendment bills. A woman MP moved a motion in the parliament that the number of street children was on the increase in the country. She said that “children who were getting into the streets were helpless as many were abandoned by their parents.” It was clearly stated that children abandoned and dumped were below five years. It was argued that children of this age were too young

to disclose their origin and, therefore, making it difficult to get the perpetrators of this inhuman act and have them prosecuted. It was also pointed out that to make matters worse, some street girls who were at tender age, were becoming pregnant at this young age. In that perspective, women MPs stressed that these children need shelter and food to feed their new-born babies.

However, the most important issue that women Members of Parliament raised was to review laws and possible legislation of new ones to help government to effectively address issues of abandoned children i.e. increasing street children, child sacrifice, child labour and generally violation of children rights. Women MPs estimated that up to 10,000 children were beggars living on the streets in filthy conditions in urban areas. They said that the life of these children was deplorable as they are forced to beg to survive. They argued that street children are not only a threat to society but they were also vulnerable to so many social problems. Some street children were a security threat because some of them were used by thieves and robbers to break into people's houses and shops, while others turned into armed robbers. There were reports in mass media that some of the street boys raped and defiled women and girls at night after sniffing drugs, they said. These children too, broke into vehicles parked on the streets.

Data collected showed that issues concerning children touched the hearts of many legislators. But from the opinions expressed by legislators who spoke on this matter, women MPs showed stronger feeling for the plight of children in the country. One woman MP said:

Every child is a blessing from God. It has a right to good health, education and shelter, a right to play and adequate food. But many children are on street without any help. Some have been neglected by their parents, who do not bother about them. While others run away from their homes as a result of mistreatment by their parents. And what is most hurting is that some of these children are sent on streets to beg on behalf of their parents or older women. Others run away from torture by step mothers and fathers. As a mother in the parliament, I cannot stand seeing children being forced to beg on behalf of older women and then they themselves eat at the garbage bins. Many of

the street children scramble for leftover food thrown at the garbage bin, this is very dirty and unhealthy. Many children in this situation have contracted diseases such as scabies, jiggers because they live in filthy environment.

The main concern in these views was to enact a policy to stop the increasing number of street children in urban centres and devise means to provide alternative accommodation for street children in need of care and protection, as well as promoting children rights, ensure early child development and putting in place effective means to hunt down the culprits who abandon and dump their children. The emphasis was to ensure children were removed from the streets. They pointed out that the government had no comprehensive and specific policy on street children. Yet, these street children needed to be provided with the necessary protection, adequate health service care, education and other social services. In support of women's MPs submission, a male legislator suggested that special funds should be allocated to the Ministry of Gender and Social Development to resettle street children and send them to school under the Universal Primary Education (UPE) programme. He stressed that sending these children to school was very important because it would deter some social ills caused by street children that were gradually but steadily developing in different urban centres in the country. He added that this should be taken up as a national problem. Therefore there was need to find accommodation for these children where they could undergo rehabilitation before either sending them to school or making them to rejoin their families. And "we as a law making body must come up with strong legislation that will ensure that parents take good maximum care of their children. Any parent found to have neglected his/her children and they are left to turn into street children shall be charged in the courts of law."

Furthermore, concerning children, Women MPs argued that government had offered free Universal Primary Education (UPE) and it was doing what it could to ensure that all school age going children benefited from this government programme, but that disabled category was not well catered for. Women MPs further highlighted that those children who were mentally retarded, the deaf and blind are totally forgotten. They proposed that the Ministry of Education and Parliament should look at this

issue so that these children also benefited from free Government education programme. They also argued Ministry of Education has the biggest allocation of funds from the government treasury but children with disability had not fully benefited. They admitted that, it was true that there were structures built, particularly classrooms under the UPE programme. But they said that these structures did not cater for the needs of children with disability. They stressed that there was not even a single school to cater for children with hearing impairment. They expressed that it would be wise to have at least one school on regional basis caring for children with all kinds of disability, the blind, the deaf, the physically handicapped, the mentally handicapped.

Evidence from Hansard's studies, women Members of Parliament too, prevailed over in the plenary parliamentary debate discussion concerning education for children, particularly female children. They submitted to the parliament that the Constitution of Uganda is gender sensitive. They pointed out that there is effort to empower female children through the Universal Primary Education (UPE). But she said that there was an indication that most of the dropout rates in schools were girls; she added that children who got married early were girls; the children who stayed at home to do domestic work were girls. They, therefore, noted that female children faced a lot of challenges, which many parents seemed to neglect. In the light of this, women MPs called on government and the parliament to take action to ensure that government policies on education were implemented to benefit both sexes of children.

It was noted that increasing opportunities for children to access education was crucial because, children, families and government all benefited from it. They appealed for a strategic policy to ensure that that all people (parents) appreciated the value of educating female children as well. They argued that female children education could ripple through families as it was thought of for the boys by many people. They stressed that "we must give the highest priority to delivering better education to female children so that when they fully become responsible women (mothers), they can serve the nation." They also pointed out that the shortest way to develop Uganda was to empower girls through education. "Uganda simply cannot develop and do

away with some social problems with so many female children growing up with no education," they said.

They further argued that educating female children might partly reduce rates of early marriages in some communities and improve on maternal health because the longer the girl stayed at school, the better for her. As educated women, they could make informed choices on child birth and family planning through knowledge acquired and they could improve on contraceptive uptake and maternal mortality. They further added that by the time the female children got out of school, particularly, at tertiary level, they could have attained well above 18 years, which is the right age for marriage. They also further pointed out that at this age a girl was physiologically and psychologically prepared to get married, to get pregnant and to take charge of her home affairs. Women MPs, held the view that as much as there was legal framework for affirmative action, they argued that women were left behind for a very long time in all aspects of life; therefore, they proposed that it was important to pursue education with a bottom-up method that would benefit women more. Their main concern was that emphasis should not only be given to girls joining university but government needed to focus on how to increase the enrolment of girls from primary level, secondary level and subsequently post-secondary institutions.

Generally within this context, women MPs also raised the issue of special facilities to girls at schools. They stated that when girls reached their puberty they missed their studies because they could not handle themselves in class during their menstruation period. They therefore, pleaded that the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Gender should start to provide free sanitary pads in schools. They strengthened their point by saying that some of the girls in many schools were orphans and when they went into their periods boys laugh at them, something which scared them away from school. They also added that in some schools boys and girls shared pit-latrines and urinals. And those girls who were shy decide to keep away from school because they could not see themselves sharing such facilities with boys. They concluded her argument by saying that parliament should begin to find out mechanisms on how they could

positively impact on the life of female children in schools and women at large.

In the same plenary parliamentary sitting, women MPs expressed concern about rampant cases of malaria among children and the general public. They also added that malnutrition was a threat not only among children but also among women. They stressed the gravity of matter by pointing out that malnutrition affected the learning ability of children. It was further stated that when children got malnourished, they got to lose immunity and they would not develop well. This way, they asked for an urgent remedy for the high mortality rates among children. They also said that the health sector needed policies, which required health workers to pay more attention to health promotion and education for primary health care activities, particularly malaria control, provision of medicines and health supplies for primary health care. They argued that investing in child nutrition programmes should be made a priority of the government because, it would make sense and reap economic and health benefits for the country in the future.

In that regard, women MPs got tangible support on their claims on health matters from male MPs. They agreed that in Uganda besides an increasing street children problem, there were frequent cases of malaria epidemics that affected children very much. They further said that 35, 000 children below the age of five years died because of malaria. They also mentioned that in total, the country lost about 70,000 people, and that many children in different parts of the country were stunted due to poor feeding. In this regard, they adopted the annual National Immunisation Programme to prevent children from diseases that could threaten their health, growth and development.

Hansard data indicated that women Members of Parliament focused on responsive policy gender issues, making it instrumental that they were present in parliament as whistleblowers of the concern of women. Defilement of young girls in war-torn northern Uganda was also raised and extensively debated by women members of parliament in their plenary parliamentary sessions when discussing security matters in war-torn areas in the country. This debate was meant to design measures how children in war-torn areas could be protected against child abuse and how the victims should be rehabilitated and generally sexually

related crimes against and among children. Women MPs also put strong debate concerning especially war-torn areas in Uganda, particularly the Northern part of the country. They argued that rape was being committed by the Lord Resistance Army rebels (LRA). They expressed that not only women were victims of rape but many young girls had been defiled and turned into wives of the rebels. They said that this was perpetuating physical injuries to the victims, prevalence of sexually transmitted diseases, HIV/AIDS and unwanted pregnancies. They stressed that women and girls are particularly targeted when the rebels attack them. "Rape and other forms of sexual violence are on increase," they noted.

One woman MP in that regard said that one woman had approached her and told her that she had been raped by over fifteen men. She added that this was an indicator that there could be many such other unreported stories. She concluded by saying that "our concern as women parliamentarians is about the victim. We are concerned that this child at the age of sixteen, and is traumatised for a life, there is little or no provision for rehabilitation. They said that there was need for psycho-social support to give a definition to the life of children in such condition." Women MPs also articulated that due to sexual freedom in the society, pre-marital sex was very common and that most young people especially girls had sex with two or more partners. These sexual partners helped them sustain their lives. They further added that the feelings and attitudes of young girls and generally young generation were adventurous, and needed to be regulated. She highlighted that most of these young girls and boys sometimes spent their time watching films and some of these films were pornographic films. After being exposed to such films, most of these young people copied and ventured to act out practically what they saw in the pornographic films. In the light of this, women MPs proposed that government should set aside rehabilitation fund to assist the victims, establish mechanism to ensure enforcement of laws to deter young boys and girls from having pre-marital sex; and set up remand homes for juvenile offenders. One female MP (Mrs Alaso), said:

I would like to express my worry about the extent to which defilement cases in this country have been logically concluded. We have the information that offenders sometimes

get out of police custody, they get freedom anyhow and my concern is that it is not so much that people do not know about the law, it is about the enforcement. We have so many laws in this country but offenders go free. I have been to different parts of my constituency and you hear people telling you, that man defiled and was arrested by the police but he has come back. So we do not know where to go. That level of desperation is not about the non-existence of the law, it is about enforcement.

This expression shows that implementation of laws was still weak in the country. According to Nabende-commercialisation of sexual offences was considerably affecting defilement cases. In some cases people were unwilling to tell the truth in court and instead told irrelevancies and the court ended up acquitting the suspects, sometimes against the victim's wish.

Therefore, women MPs proposed to the House to enact laws and policies that would impose heavier punishments to culprits and to ensure that the rights of women were not violated as well as offering more protection to the victims of domestic violence including providing tight security to women and girls in areas affected by war insecurity. They further made an appeal to the members of the House to redefine and expand the definition of rape and defilement. They stated that the law, which was in place, could not sufficiently address the problems of rape and defilement. At this point, (Mr Toskin Johnson Bartille and Mr Mike Sebalu) supported these submissions and explained that the available law excluded other people who involved in sex that would be considered unacceptable by law. They mentioned that this law was unfair to boys and men. He argued that in a situation where a school going boy impregnated a fellow student, it was only the boy who suffered the consequential punishment for their enjoyment, to serve a sentence of a minimum of seven years in prison. In the light of this, he argued that justice should be equitable and fair to all both girls and boys, women and men because, it took two to realise pregnancy (baby). It was unfair to treat one party to the act to which the two parties benefited. Toskin further said:

“Many parents as well as other people who want to defend boys who have defiled girls, have struggled to bring down the ages of the

boys and quite often you find that even the police admit additional statements just to bring down the age of the boy so that the case of defilement is nullified.”

He also said that the existing law was silent on the status of a lady who seduced a young boy below eighteen years into sex although the law clearly implicated the male who lured a young girl below eighteen years who would be charged of defilement. He too emphasised the concern over disabled people who were defiled, made pregnant or infected with HIV/AIDS or elderly women who were raped and left to suffer. The MPs stressed that people took advantage of the disability of these persons and even old age of the elderly women to sexually abuse them. They argued that in a situation where a person with disability was sexually abused when the offenders know that, that person could not fight back, this offender should be severely punished. For example, they argued that a person with hearing problem might not be able to raise an alarm for help, the blind might undress without realising that someone was near seeing her etc. In that regard, women MPs appealed to the parliament to consider women with impairment/disability conditions including the elderly ones to be among the groups to be included in the aggravated defilement offence.

Child sacrifice for ritual was among issues women members of parliament engaged in parliamentary debate discussions to amend the 1957 Witch Craft Act and to enact Trafficking in Persons Act. According to Hansards, surveyed Women MPs submitted to parliament that human sacrifice, which they preferred to call as a form of “human trafficking,” was on the rise in the country. The purpose was to design measures to ensure children were protected at home when people went to work and those while at school. Also, another aim was to establish a law, which would curb this growing inhuman act against children, such that a strong penalty would be imposed on those caught and found guilty in the act of child sacrifice. This would send a clear message to others and prevent them from engaging in the same practice. They mentioned several situations, which showed the need and significance to have such a law in place. Many issues came up in this discussion debate. One woman MP specifically said:

“In Bukedde newspaper there was a story of a young baby boy whose head had been cut off by the neighbour. Earlier on, still in Bukedde, we had a story of two people who were murdered in sexual act. I have not heard any strong voice from government castigating what had happened. The issue of witchcraft and madness in different schools were increasing in the country. What is being done about these things? Most importantly, as parliament, I think we should come out clearly to castigate what is going on around us.”

Women MPs stressed that human sacrifice was escalating in the country. They pointed out that children were being subjected to murder and their body parts hacked off.

Women MP’s arguments were supported by male legislators. One male MP argued that:

“What we read and hear from mass media about human sacrifice could be a tip of the silent iceberg of rituals in the country. Issues of children are in several broad categories. There is disappearance of children without even tracing where they are being taken; some are being sold in markets. There are reports that there are rackets of people selling each child at 3.5 million shillings. ...the common factor is that all children who have been reported missing are purportedly taken by people who know these children or those people who approach them with kind offers. Children are also found dead after sacrifice.”

Generally, all MPs expressed deep concern that many child disappearance and sacrifice stories are reported by different mass media portraying how children were being brutally murdered in horrific ritual practices (“human ritual sacrifice”). Male legislators supplemented the submission of women MPs and attributed the increasing cases of child/human sacrifice murders on witchcraft. They reported the increasing numbers of quack traditional witchdoctors in different parts of the country who chose to practice their witchcraft did so under the umbrella of traditional herbal healing, a practice, which was not properly legally regulated. They also highlighted that almost all cases of child sacrifice, reported by mass media revolved around witchcraft by those who were eager to get rich through supernatural means. They pointed out that this gruesome act was carried out by witchdoctors

or by their clients whom they give instructions to carry out their rituals. They also mentioned that these acts of human sacrifices are purportedly done to appease and invoke their gods or ancestors to offer them supernatural abilities to protect them against enemies and their wealth or to quickly become rich.

They attributed the growing illegal dealing in human sacrifice to the 1957 Witchcraft Act that prohibited acts of witchcraft that involved threatening others with death was weak and needed amendment. They stressed the argument that this law sentenced one to five years upon conviction on witchcraft charges. According to the 1957 Witchcraft Act, Chapter 124 provided that: “any person who directly or indirectly threatens another with death by witchcraft or by any other supernatural means commits an offence and is liable on conviction to imprisonment for life.” It also states that “any person who directly or indirectly threatens to cause disease or any physical harm to another ... by witchcraft or by any other supernatural means commits an offence and is liable on conviction to imprisonment for a period not exceeding ten years.” It further provides that “any person who hires or procures another person to practice witchcraft or who for evil purposes commits an offence and is liable to imprisonment for a period not exceeding five years.”

However, three women MPs quickly pointed out that the issue of tagging human sacrifices only on traditional healers was escapist. They noted that it was true that some witchdoctors were involved but there were many other people who actually were trafficking in body parts like private parts, kidneys etc. They substantiated their claims that there were many people coming into Uganda and collaborated with people in this business because the laws were weak on this issue. They said that the strong urge for people to a mass wealth quickly because of their desperate poverty they are in and others desperately are looking for ways to protect their wealth encouraged them to involve in evil act of sacrificing children. They said that despite the fact that sorcery/witchcraft was illegal in Uganda, witchdoctors publicly advertised in different mass media. One male Member of Parliament argued this that “with biting poverty, one is sometimes willing to do anything, including human sacrifice to exorcise the perceived curses.” Therefore, it was

appropriate to enact a law to help government focus their energies on regulating the activities of herbalists.

Another issue that women Members of Parliament raised during plenary parliamentary sitting was that of age for marriage. The study reveals that women Members of Parliament were so much touched with how in some communities in the country young girls were being married off before the legal age of 18 years. Women MPs while contributing to discussion on Trafficking in Persons Bill argued that “the tradition of early marriages in some communities was a serious problem, which many female children were facing. They stated that “this had encouraged defilement because when an old man took a young girl for a wife, the parents asked for dowry without minding her age.” They emphasised her point that despite the fact there was a law, which said nobody should marry or marry off a person who was below 18 years of age, there were many girls as young as 12 to 16 years old who were mothers. This had put many female children into a difficult and unhappy life, because early marriage of girls meant excessive childbearing, and lack of control over their bodies. This exposed them to poor reproductive health. They added that many stories in newspapers and other mass media were that defilement cases were on the increase. They also pointed out that poverty stricken parents used their daughters as a source of wealth. They noted too that when these young girls were defiled, some of their parents negotiated with the suspect for an out of court settlement where they were given some money.

Data obtained from sampled Hansards revealed that child labour was also advanced by women members of parliament during parliamentary plenary debate. They argued child labour was taking deep root in the country. They said many children were being engaged in odd petty jobs. The Uganda Bureau of Statistics estimated that 33.9 percent of children were engaged in various types of work such as commercial agriculture, fishing, domestic services, street sales and commercial sex. This was a violation of Article 24 and 25 of the 1995 Constitution that provided for the recognition of the dignity of children and their defence from forced labour and exploitation. They further pointed out that in rice growing areas many children were abandoning schooling to go and

scare away birds from eating rice. This in one way or the other had deprived children of their childhood potential and dignity as children. This had led to exploitation of children and many were kept away from attending school. In the light of this, they urged that there was to enact laws to ensure parents took their children of school going age go to school. This law too, should criminalise parents who failed to send their children to school that they should be arrested and charged in courts of law. They also urged government to: institute measures to collect good quality information about violence, exploitation and use of children in work, establish a national system for a systematic monitoring of child protection issues in the country and to concretely support all policies and programmes intended to take good care of children. In addition, they appealed to the government to apprehend those individual parents who were responsible for letting their children to abandon their studies for odd jobs.

Women Members of Parliament placed their demand before the parliament to amend the Child Act 1997 to ban corporal punishments in homes, schools and communities. Plenary parliamentary debate on this matter was crucial to ensure that all views presented on it were taken into consideration so that the authorities amended the law (Child Act) to protect children. In that regard, women MPs said that this law had failed to effectively pin down the perpetrators of corporal punishment. Accordingly to the data obtained from Hansards women MPs emphasized that this awful practice should be stopped because it was a violation of children's rights in the name of disciplining a child. For example, an 11 year old girl sustained severe burns on her lips and tongue after her aunt allegedly burnt her for eating groundnut without her permission in addition to being beaten severely. They added that the already available law only emphasised the punishment of perpetrators and neglected the protection of well being of children. They further stressed that there was no formal and clear system to support abused children. In the light of this, they urged that the government through its organs such as the police should use the law to encourage the public to promote practices, which could change the behaviour and lives of children without causing bodily pain to them.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

To capitulate, although women are new comers in the legislative job in Uganda, but they were extremely important in agitating for legislation to promote and protect children. This study has uncovered that there are significant legislative achievements they have made for children. It is further relevant to note that the findings highlighted above disclose that women Members of Parliament have used their position positively to champion children's interests, which has made them to achieve significant children's policy outcomes. It can be said with confidence, the Women Members of Parliament are good advocates for the needs and protection of children.

The study revealed that women Members of Parliament demonstrated that through their legislative roles performance in the Parliament resulted in the amendment of Education Act and Child Act, 1997, amendment of Child Act, enacting of the Persons With Disability (PWD) Act. These were intended to help to improve the laws to promote and protect the rights of children in the country. For example, the Child Act provides for the control and protection of street children, child sacrifice and child-labour in the country. It gives protection to children against any forms of violence such as corporal punishment, defilement and child-neglect, etc. It provides family and children courts, to be established at sub-county level to help women with child care and protection problem claims. It also provides for child and family protection unit under the police force as well as probation and welfare department at the district level to ensure that cases of child rights abuse are addressed. Thus, presence of women in the Parliament provided veritable opportunity for women Members of Parliament to positively exert impact on legislation policy outcome that promote and protect children in Uganda. Overall, women Members of Parliament created some impact on generating pro-children policies and laws as a result of their presence in parliament. This confirms earlier findings in different countries such as South Africa, Rwanda and developed countries as cited and discussed in the literature review. Therefore, one can interpret this as a qualitative change within the politics of Uganda.

It is good to have laws but without enforcing them they become irrelevant, particularly in bringing

about behavioural change. Therefore, there is need to design regular sensitization programmes through workshops, educational institutions, seminars, religious and cultural institutions to educate the public on the importance of feminist legislations that have been enacted to protect and promote the status of children in the country. In other words, there is need to popularize implementation of feminist legislation enacted such as the Trafficking in Persons Act. The target should be both parents and general public in the country to help them understand why the law or policy has/have been passed by the Parliament and of what benefit they are to them and children. This would provide both men and women a feeling of acceptance, develop positive attitudes on feminist legislations and abide by them so that these legislations are not looked at by both sexes as strange laws or policies that are designed to look down on their social norms and attitudes. Impressive feminist legislations on paper cannot change the traditional masculine mindset, step-by-step sensitization to both children's genders to create awareness between them, to change their attitudes by telling them the benefits and importance of both male and female child. This should also involve massive campaigns and mobilization of people, particularly those who still hold on to their backward traditional cultures which discriminate against female children. They should be made aware that female children are worth as their male counterparts and ensure equal treatment to both. Thus, educating both female and male children to provide them with skills and knowledge should be made a priority by the government.

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