

## **Does gender matter in higher learning students' politics? A case of Mwalimu Nyerere Students' Organization (MASO) general elections, 2017**

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### **Abstract**

Female students experience the electoral process mostly as either voters or electoral candidates. This is of no exception at the Mwalimu Nyerere Memorial Academy. The electoral market is usually informed by various factors which in turn affect the female students' participation in the election processes. The liberal theory is employed to explain the low turnover of female candidates in Mwalimu Nyerere Memorial Academy Students Organization general elections 2017. The main objective of the study was to examine the factors which impede female students to participate as vote seekers. The study reveals patriarchal values to be perceived as being embedded in female students' mind that politics is a realm of men. The males' students also subjugate the female students through patriarchal values such as believing that females cannot be good leaders. The study has also found out that female students lack self-confidence and feel disempowered before their counterparts male students. It is thus concluded that the 2017 Mwalimu Nyerere Memorial Academy Students Organization elections have depicted a gendered students' politics limiting female students' participation as vote seekers. Therefore, robust efforts are needed to combat the situation through female students' leadership programmes and having a functioning gender club for deliberating on gender relations and empowerment.

**Keywords:** Female, gender, elections, patriarchy, participation

### **Introduction**

Politics is a multidimensional term but power is the key ingredient. Power in politics refers to the relationships between who controls or influences and who is controlled or influenced. Politics produces the leadership to manage the affairs of society (Sunseri, 2011), and leadership involves men and women. An analysis

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of the composition of men and women in politics and political leadership has the potential of depicting the social constructions of the two sexes (Butler, 1990). Gender relations in politics determine who is to be voted, who is to win, who is to vote and, above all, who should govern. These shape the electoral systems and governance institutions. The exclusion of women from collective decision-making organs and in particular political careerism is exacerbated through patriarchy. The male values have percolated all the circles of social and political lives (Squires, 2007). Feminism activists have critiqued the universalization of patriarchy by suggesting that in some communities matriarchy is in place instead (Lamphere, 2001). Brenner (2001) cites an example of Indonesia, where the trading in the market was seen as the domain of women. However, the general accepted truth is that patriarchy is a driving force which leads to disparities between males and females. The political power is concentrated in the hands of men and it is now becoming historic and socialized (Sunseri, 2011).

Communities in Tanzania are highly patriarchal to the extent that the intensity of female subjugation becomes socialized, evidenced, and acted throughout the national socio-political settings. The patriarchal values seem to have percolated into most institutions including the higher learning arena. The post-Beijing epoch has been influenced by the call to have an empowerment strategy in order to allow women to participate in decision making bodies (Nowrjee, 1995). The Beijing Platform of Action (BPA) diagnosed the women underrepresentation and robust efforts were set to promote women's voice in decision making organs. While, efforts are vivid at the national level, the meso level is yet to be unveiled. The Mwalimu Nyerere Memorial Academy Students Organization (MASO) general elections in 2017 saw female candidature being very low and the query rested on the Gender Department which could not see her female students aspiring for departmental representation in MASO Assembly. The MASO constitution provides equal chances to both male and female students with regard to competition for MASO offices. Female students, who engaged in MASO politics, were mostly engaged as cheerers and this follows the definition of politics by Leftwich (1997) who sees politics as an inherent activity in all levels of social interaction.

Using this meaning, female students would be counted as participants in the political process. The distinction between cheers and participants as candidates depends on the restrictive view of politics. In this study, the restrictive view of

politics focuses on female students as contesters for presidency, representation of hostel halls and academic departments. The female students being reinforced to cheering function depicts politics to be the domain of men, in this case or male students. Female and male students without bias participated in different ways as cheerers and runners for various posts. The female who courageously broke the deadlocks was a first year student in Education Department.

**Problem statement:** The Tanzania government and non- governmental organizations have been working hard to promote gender equality and break the deadlocks of patriarchal values in the society. Social and political transformation begins with the institutional transformation. The higher learning institutions are expected to be the leading change agent in breaking the circles of injustice. The general trend at The Mwalimu Nyerere Memorial Academy (MNMA) in MASO general elections reveals a paradox between the efforts of stamping out patriarchy. Female students participated in MASO 2017 general elections mostly as cheerers but not as vote seekers. The few who dared to join the race lost miserably. The study descriptively examines the state of patriarchal values in students` politics at MNMA.

**Objectives of the Study:** The main objective of the study is to find out the perceived impact of patriarchy to female students engagement in MASO politics at MNMA. The specific objectives include: to assess the female students` perception of politics, to examine the MNMA`s community perception over female ability to lead, and to describe the way forward for changing the status quo with regard to female students engaging in MASO politics.

**Research questions:** Do female students perceive MASO politics as a domain of male students? How do members of MNMA community perceive the ability of female leaders in MASO organs? What are the measures taken to address the female low turnover as vote seekers and not simply as cheerers at MNMA?

### **Liberal theory and female students` participation in MASO politics**

The study employed the liberal view of women participation in struggling for power. Liberal feminists consider women to have a mammoth moment with the existing socio-economic and political institutions. The main concern for liberal feminism is to re-do the practice of patriarch institutions to cater for women at

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large. The struggle towards achieving gender equality at MNMA seems to be a paradox despite the number of female students being above the number of males in terms of admission figures in 2016/2017 with females at the 60% and males at the 40%. There was one female contestant for presidency and the rest stood at the back of men as vice candidates. The socialized and institutionalized patriarchal values are the sources of limited women involvement in politics and leadership in formal institutions. This study examined the perceived impact of patriarchy to female students' engagement in politics to be the glass ceilings cobwebbed by patriarchal values that individuals live with in society.

Female students' empowerment is still a necessary fact if the malpractices of male based institutions have to be reversed. Lest the status quo is undisturbed, the glorification of males over females will be perpetuated and become everlasting in institutions. This follows the general claim that when the mother cow chews the grass, the young ones watch its mouth for replicating. Hence, the fight for equality and equity at MNMA students' government needs to change the mind set of the entire community members and this is all possible through gender empowerment approaches. However, the theory is adequate and is still informative to our study variables.

### **Literature review**

Patriarchy is a critical factor to keep women out of visible sectors. The phenomenon of patriarchy is global and women subjugation cuts across all human societies. Gender disparities in elective posts is vindicated to be a socialized norm as even in the so called great liberal democracy such as USA, the patriarchal language in the 2016 general elections was used against the Democrat presidential aspirant, madam Hillary Clinton. The same disparities and marginalization of women have found a fertile ground in Africa and particularly in Tanzania. In Tanzania, very few women come forward to offer their candidature for elective posts and fewer still manage to sail through their internal political parties' nominations. The rationality of political parties is to put forward in the electoral market a candidate with a potential of maximizing votes so as to capture the state power. In the alignment to this very choice, political parties cannot nominate women as they perceive women to be having various strides embedded on them by patriarchy. The magnificence of patriarchy

is revealed through cultural practices, trivializing individuals through assassination of character with impunity, verbal abuse and physical abuse. These socialized and institutionalized patriarchal values lead the female candidature in elective posts to be very minimal in Tanzania. The effect is visible at the national level as well as at institutional levels such The Mwalimu Nyerere students' organization elections.

According to Goetz (2003) the nature of the society does shape the other sub institutions such as the political system. The socialized patriarchal values make the political institutions behavior and practice not only male dominated but also masculine in nature. Phillips (1991) argues that political norms and values scare women to seek for public office as they consider the political structures to be male favoring. Women vying for competitive posts are few and this is explained well by Meena (2005) who argues that the patriarchal structures develop glass ceilings which hinder women to propose themselves for leadership posts. The views of Meena (2005) are also shared by Tamale (1999) who argues that political institutions are male dominated whereby sexual harassment and objectification of women to sex become a norm. The patriarchal values which are socialized to public institutions cannot bring the transformation of women automatically but rather the efforts to change the status quo through de-socialization of patriarchy have to be intensively undertaken. The common trend of patriarchal behavior in public institutions is to allow women to vie for political leadership on the basis of male preferences (Phillip, 1991). Studies have depicted that various empowerment initiatives have been made since the Beijing Platform of Action 1999 through the Millennium Development Goals which all intended to empower women. Nevertheless, there has been an incremental change in political structures to create a conducive milieu of governance between the two sexes.

## **Methodology**

**Research design:** The study employs a descriptive research design to examine the patriarchal stereotypes over female students' ability to exercise political power at MNMA. The strategy employed was the social survey. Questionnaires and interviews were used as main tools for primary data collection. Data collected was organized and analyzed quantitatively using descriptive statistics to produce percentages and frequencies.

**Sample selection:** The total respondents were 349 students and a random sampling was employed for questionnaires. Two female candidates were purposively selected because of their peculiar role in the MASO general elections 2017. The study used questionnaires and interview methods to collect the primary data. Questionnaires employed were close ended in order to guide the respondents' views pertaining to the focus of the study. Meanwhile, the open-ended interviews intended to capture information which the female candidates drew from their personal experiences and practices. The rationale for opting for a multi-method data collection strategy in this study was to increase reliability and validity of the findings. The following subsection explains the liberal feminism theory as a ground for addressing underrepresentation of female students in MASO organs.

## **Results and discussion**

### **Female candidature and voters' concern about female political aspirations at MNMA**

The respondents were to give their opinion on the leadership abilities which they considered a single female candidate vying for presidency would offer. The three runners for the presidential elective post were two males and one female. The representation by sex for the representation candidature in the Students' parliament through the MASO constitutional constituencies are divided into two categories, that is, residential constituencies and academic Departments' constituencies. The following gender disparities to both main constituencies were recorded.

Table 1: Students representatives in parliament (SRP) by sex

<b>ACADEMIC DEPERTMENTS</b>	<b>MALE</b>	<b>FEMALE</b>
Economics	1	-
Social Studies	3	1
Gender Studies	2	-
Education	2	-
<b>RESIDENTIAL CONTITUENCIES</b>	<b>MALE</b>	<b>FEMALE</b>
Azimio	4	-
Mwongozo	-	1
Kizota	3	-
Off –Campus	4	-

Source: Field data 2017

The general trend of females vying for leadership at MNMA reflects a big disparity between male students and female students. The most hitting concern is the gender department whereby gender issues are domesticated but still no even any female dared to contest for the departmental representation. The dominance of male students in MASO general elections was to be assessed through the established questions to respondents about their opinion on the qualities a female leader can provide.

Table 2: Perceived female students’ ability to Mwalimu Nyerere Memorial Academy Students Organization leadership

Female have inferior ability	47.4%
Female ability similar to male	27.4%
Female superior to men	25.2%

Source: Field Data (2017).

The responses have depicted that there is a big challenge in terms of the socialized patriarchal values. The MNMA is a higher learning institution for social sciences. Gender issues are discussed in various academic lectures or public talks. However, respondents still perceive female fellows to be inferior in

leadership compared to men (47.4%). This shows that even females themselves do not trust themselves that they can be leaders and have the same qualities to overturn men in terms of leadership abilities. It goes without saying that the female students shying away from MASO electioneering elective posts is not by accident but rather by design. Only 27.4% of respondents felt that men and women have the same leadership abilities. The liberal setting of female seeking equality within the patriarchal structures is reflected through the MASO general elections. The females feel stifled by the MASO elections and therefore decide to participate as cheerers and not candidates. For example, it is not surprising that a female presidential candidate managed to garner 88 (8.8%) votes.

The other female student contested for representation of Mwongozo hall of residency and she passed unopposed though, the rule of the game demands for an unopposed candidate to be elected on Yes majority votes. Fortunately, she scored all the yes 63 votes from Mwongozo electorates. The pairs for presidency who picked nomination forms were 9. Out of the nine, it was only one pair of a first year female student who aspired for presidency candidature. The screening of candidates was done and the three pairs for presidency were selected through a fair and just process under a well functioning election *ad hoc* committee. Fortunately the pair of female candidates sailed through. However, the score line of the votes, revealed a gender gap in elections and this necessitated a need for a study of such conjectural phenomenon. The pair became the first from the bottom of the three competitors in the electoral results. The study examined carefully why such a trend at MNMA where there is a gender Studies Department, whereby every candidate at MNMA gains some skills on gender relations through different fora. However, this is what Tamale (1996) concluded as the political competition being fierce to women and thus making them scared to run for public offices. Another question asked the respondents if they would vote the females to MASO offices. The question asked: "Would you vote for a female?" The following table offers the responses of the electorates as regard to the willingness to vote a female candidate into MASO offices.

Table 3. Electorates and voting for female candidates

<b>Yes</b>	10%
<b>No</b>	90%

Source: Field Data 2017



The responses from table 3 reveal how patriarchy has percolated the hearts and minds of the institution. The reflection of the above responses is the nature of the society. The society is imbued by patriarchy and hence operates in a manner that socializes inequality between men and women. The dominance of men is reflected through cultural settings of which a man is regarded naturally as a leader and to be having advantages over a woman. This objectification of a woman as a subordinate fellow to men begins at the micro sphere and passes through the meso institutions such as the higher learning institutions of which MNMA is not an exception. The only female for presidential candidate in an interview had the following to say: “My fellow women were highly criticizing me even more than men...They could laugh at me and sometimes shout at me like, do you think it’s possible for you to win? Stop wasting your time, sit down and study”. The anecdotal evidence from the interview confirms the general response of the respondents. This is followed by what was recorded in Tanzania during the 2005 national general elections, that is, “the greatest enemy of a woman is her fellow women and not men”. Therefore, patriarchal influence is overflowed to MNMA and has made female students to be zealots to male gendered elections.

### **Nature of political campaigns and electoral results**

The general trend of the campaign through respondents’ views is that the campaign tended to be male dominated. The electorates listened to male candidates very seriously when they expressed what they had to promise to deliver. The respondents further accorded that female candidates were looked at as individuals who were escorting others. The general picture here is what Ahikire (2004) depicts as the patriarchal glass ceiling, which wants women to remain in their position, i.e. the marginal or invisible sphere. The campaigns were very hostile and sometimes nearly resulting to violence either among candidates or among zealots of the candidates. Violence, women studies agree, divorce women from politics (REDET, 2000). It could be ascertained that probably female students defied from MASO politics in fear of violence and associated character assassination through abusive language. A female candidate for presidency said: “Some students reached an extent of asking me if I am married or I have a boyfriend...I got angered by such trivial questions as they took me out my mood for campaigning”.

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Therefore, the nature of the campaign tended to remove the female contestant out of track and thus kept her as a mere escort in the election, hoping this experience would discourage other females from engaging in MASO elections. During the elections, there was a great deal of division among the students' electorates. The stiff competition was between two male presidential candidates. The general election results reflected the said campaign bias as the male candidates had a share of 89.6% votes whilst the female candidate scored only 8.8% (and 1.5% of the votes were spoiled). The reflection of the above vote scores indeed cements on how female representation at MNMA is constrained by male socialized values. At the Students Representatives in Parliament (SRP) level, female candidate for Mwongozo constituency passed unopposed. This is because there was no other candidate who aspired for the post in that constituency.

Sustaining and enhancing female students' participation in MASO elections elective posts seem to be facing numerable issues as the structures and processes are male biased. The enhancement and sustenance of female students in MASO politics require a comprehensive approach by the society generally and the institution of MASO in particular. The glass ceilings delimiting females from quenching their thirst of leadership potentials needs to be mitigated to change the status quo. According to Nowrjee (1995) the female practical platforms are yet to be established in public institutions. The established structures have oiled the gender gap instead of addressing it. This is reflected by the MASO constitution 2008, which has no provision on female special seats whereby female students would be at least gaining experience. The study found out that the share of the factors which hinder female students engagement in MASO politics are diverse and numerous. The following table reveals the share of such hindrances.

Table 4. Obstacles facing female students in MASO elections

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	Electoral structure	20	5.7
	Character assassination	184	52.7
	Violence, harassment and intimidation	102	29.2
	Public attitude	41	11.7
	Low self confidence	2	.6
	Total		
Total		349	100.0

Source: Field Data 2017

The data reveals that female students face a number of challenges which in a way tend to keep them out of MASO politics. Most of the respondents agreed on the character assassination to females who dare to enter into MASO at 52.7%. This behavior is a threat as it deters the females who could be having the leadership potentials from vying the electioneering posts. The stereotyped language and labeling of female students as unable tend to push out females from politics. Hence, male dominance in the MASO organs is highly socialized. The character assassination which females are afraid of may be regarded as a strategy of kicking away the female students from engaging in electoral politics of students' government.

Also, 29.2% of the respondents were of the views that violence, harassment and intimidation which go around during campaigns tend to send signals to female students that politics is a dirty game which requires hard muscles. Unfortunately, most females are socialized in masculine values whereby men are the ones believed to be violent and with masks for shielding intimidation. Hence, men tend to use that gendered intimidation in order to make the MASO politics a preserve of their own. One female student said "I cannot afford MASO politics as I heard some men saying female contestants are buying trouble at the cheap price". This message signals that female students are feeling insecure if they join politics. Hence, politics of students' governments at MNMA remains a preserve of male students.

Public attitude scored 11.7% and electoral structure scored 5.7 % as factors delimiting female students from engaging in MASO politics as vote seekers. The public attitude is construed through how public psychology and philosophy consider the power and status of women. The status of women is regarded to be low due to the social constructions. Hence, even in leadership positions female students tend to feel the structures to be not comfortable for them. The intimidation and perceived harassment which they consider to happen during campaigns make them whip out of students politics. Moreover, the lack of self confidence which counted for 0.6% cannot be forgotten as a factor which is socialized to society members and particularly to females. The girls from childhood are socialized to be loyal and always to listen to men. This is enculturation of masculinity to females which in turn disempowers them. The lack of confidence therefore, should not be taken as natural to female students when aspiring for the competitive posts but rather as a socio-cultural setting which intends to create gender disparity in MASO leadership organs.

### **Conclusion and recommendations**

The study examined the gender and elections in students' politics. The female participation in the 2017 has been more of cheerers rather than of vote seekers either as presidential contestants or as SRPs. The main reasons described to deter female students from engaging in electioneering for elective posts include mainly character assassination, masculine structures and the patriarchal socialized values. Female students shy away from politics at MNMA due to consideration of politics to be revolving around violence and harassment and intimidation by the zealots of the other contenders. Therefore, female students defy vying for various electoral posts and thus blurring the efforts of bridging the gender gap in decision making at every institutional level. The study concludes that female representation in MASO organs is obstructed by the patriarchy which is socialized and manifested through the structures and processes of MASO organs.

It is commendable that the MASO constitution places a need of special seats for SRPs in order to promote the training grounds for female students in MASO politics. The disempowered female students need a training ground so as to impart them with a positive thinking on politics and also their position as leaders

in organizations. This would help bridge the gap between the males and females in MASO organs. The MNMA institution through Gender Studies Department should establish a leadership special training program for female students in order to orient them with skills, competencies and attributes needed. The approach should aim at empowerment that they may be able to participate in electoral processes in a hub of masculine values. This would not only empower female students to engage in MASO elections but also promote their readiness to utilize their leadership potentials for the benefits of institutions and the nation.

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