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CHALLENGES FACING MINORITY WOMEN IN POLITICAL
PARTICIPATION AND THEIR SOLUTIONS: THE CASE OF KENYA AND
OTHER NEIGHBORING COUNTRIES.

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INTRODUCTION:

Ladies and Gentlemen:

I would like to thank those who organized this conference for giving me the opportunity to speak on the challenges facing minority women in political participation in Kenya and other neighboring countries notably, East and Horn of Africa.. I will focus on my own experience in Kenya to highlight the challenges faced by women in our region in their effort to participate in our political process and hope to offer some possible solutions. My • name is Sophia Abdi Noor and I am a member of parliament from Kenya.

PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

I come from Northern Kenya, a region marginalized for many years by the government of Kenya and from a male dominated community that believes a women's place is the house and women cannot provide leadership to a community. I was fortunate to get education and become a schoolteacher and later founded a non-profit organization called Womankind whose mission is to empower marginalized women and girls so that they can realize their lifetime dreams of becoming responsible citizens of their communities.

During the course of my over 20 years community work, I encountered the problems disadvantaged and underserved women and girls face every day. I was touched by the

poverty, lack of education and economic empowerment our community faced then and offered myself for an elective leadership position to represent our community at the Kenyan parliament in 1997. As a result, I become the first Somali woman to contest for a parliamentary seat in Kenya. These become big news to our community and country since no women from our community ever aspired to this position and worse enough Muslim communities were not known for female leadership representation. I also belonged to an ethnic and religious minority who are not known to have such ambition.

It was unprecedented and the most trying time of my entire life. The campaign period was tough and the strength of my faith, family, place in society and personal convictions were tested. Negative cultural and religious practices were used against me during the campaigns. The male candidates reminded the community about the traditional and religious role of women and stated that God will curse a community' led by women. The community was informed that this curse may kill their children and animals and that they should not be the first Muslim community in the country to elect a woman. It is such cultural stereotypes, that are a hindrance to ,the success of minority women in political participation. During my campaign, I could still remember male candidates equating a woman's intelligence that of little children.

But to the surprise of many, the people overwhelmingly elected me against the male candidates. My track record in community development was unmatched and the people resonated with my message of hope, unity and community development. The male candidates were very divisive and their campaign Was about attacking me as a woman whereas my campaign was based on issues, ideas and platform of change. They created a.

lot of emotions about my sex and exploited negative cultural and religious practices unsuccessfully with the hope of winning the hearts and mind of the Muslim voters.

My election was not taken lightly by the male candidates and with the help of senior government officials from the area, they petitioned the government to disqualify my election on public interest. As a result victory was stolen from me and the people's wish to elect the person of their choice was prevented. It was a major blow to the community and me but no amount of cry could change the situation since the county was under dictatorship and words of the president and party leadership were final. The government and the party establishment listened and considered the views of pro-religious and pro-cultural opponents of my election instead of leaving democracy to prevail.

However, after the election was stolen from me and as soon as I could recollect myself, I went back to the grassroots and embarked on community education and development. I joined the civil society and conducted civic education to educate the community on leadership and constitutional reforms. One of the lessons I learnt during the election was that women were not represented: in political parties leadership and it was easy to rig them out during elections. They were also left out in major political decisions. As a result I joined the Orange Democratic party, a pro-reform, opposition party and became a member of the national executive council and was fortunate to be nominated by this party to the Kenyan parliament in 2007.

Looking back to the road I took to political leadership, one thing is certain; I have overcome individual and systemic challenges to be where I am today as a member of the Kenyan parliament. I believe this is the same for all minority women in leadership no

matter the profession, Our community now knows that women can become any thing they aspire to including but not limited to being a member of parliament and more important are leaders and can provide leadership. This was not possible in 1997 but is possible now. What has helped me through out this process is to keep faith in God and to keep hope alive.

Perseverance, patience and persistence not matter the challenge a head has kept my focus and so are the belief in one's ability and sense of community.

It is hard to imagine that this could be possible in 1997. Today, I am the chairperson and the first woman in the Kenyan parliament to lead a major parliamentary committee. As the chairperson of the parliamentary committee of labor and social welfare, I oversee and provide legislative oversight to six ministries namely, ministry of special programs, ministry of youth and sports; office of the vice president and the ministry of corrections, ministry of gender and children and the ministry of labor. If I could achieve this I don't see why other minority women in the world cannot achieve..Certainly, my two young daughters who are in college are growing up to believe that minority women are no less women and can achieve whatever they aspire to and I am glad to provide a good role model for them. Let us all believe in ourselves and in our abilities to succeed and what we will need from the world will be the creation of equal opportunities for all regardless of one's background and status in society. YES WE CAN.

Minority women operate in environments of unfriendly laws, policies and negative attitudes. By nature, they are few and often lack negotiation power, unity and the capacity to succeed in such environment. The electoral process in most African countries are corrupt and minority women lack resources to be elected and the voters are mostly illiterate and marginalized. Minority women lack the numbers and the capacity to enact

favorable laws in parliament and have constraints such as constant conflict in their areas and poor infrastructure, provision of education, water and food security taking most of their time. The principle of one-man-one vote, which is based on population, denies them the opportunity for many electoral constituencies,

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Some of the challenges I faced then and which I believe minority women in East and Horn of African also face as they participate in the political process of their respective countries includes the following:

1: Lack of economic resources I had little or no resources (money) during the campaigns compared to male candidates who were using a lot of money to influence voters. Money in politics may not matter in the developed world but in third world countries such as ours it matters: Constituencies are big in size and the terrain is tough and one will need logistics and resources to mobilize voters. The people are poor and can easily be lured by an individual endowed with resource.

Marginalization and poverty Most of the communities where minority women come from are poor and already marginalized by their national governments. As a result it is very hard for women to participate in the political process since they are also poor and marginalized. They are uneducated and shut from the leadership and political participation.

3. Lack of education and training Minority women especially in the grassroots are not educated and hardly receive any training to build their capacity so that they

can be at par with other women and male counterparts in political participation and leadership. They lack advocacy and leadership training to effectively participate in the political process.

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Negative cultural and religious practices There still exists bad cultural and religious practices among some ethnic minority communities that could prevent women from participating in political process. For instance the Somali community is conservative Muslim, and does not provide public space for women. Girls are excluded even from religious education, which are reserved for boys. Thus, women grow up in unfriendly environment that hampers their self-confidence and leadership. Culturally it is taboo for women to play any political role in Somali community.

5. *Lack of empowerment, and self-esteem* Some minority women especially in the rural areas and urban poor because of poverty and lack of education are not empowered and lack self-esteem and the confidence to participate in the political process of their countries. They are poor, uneducated and lack the political skills to succeed in competitive politics.

6. *Denial of rights by governments* Some governments have intentionally marginalized and denied rights to minority communities in their countries and thereby minority women. This is especially so in Ethiopia where ethnic Somali women minority in Ogaden region face a lot of challenges that impede their ability to participate in the political process because of the conflict in Ogaden Region of Ethiopia. Women lack the basic skills like education to know their

rights and advance their causes. The government neglects to educate girls in this region and uses rape as a weapon of war to intimidate the population.

7. *Economic challenges at the family level* also force women to avoid political engagement since they are the breadwinners for the families either tending to farms or livestock while the men have the opportunity to discuss politics and shape the future by participating in the political process.

8. *Political parties and political process* in some countries are rigid, and prevent minority women from participation and yet there are no affirmative action.

policies that will help these women participate in their process.

9. *Political violence* Many women including minority women have encountered political violence especially during elections and this undermines their ability to participate in the political process. They are subjected to human rights abuse and rape to intimidate them.

10. 10. *Discrimination and lack of progressive policies in political parties and governments.* -Male who are not gender sensitive and undermine minority women progress dominates most political parties. They are not reform minded and lack policies to empower minority women and women in general. Some parties and governments also have bad and retrogressive legislations that are detrimental to the progress of minority women.

11. Lack of media support. Minority women in political participation lack media support or do not know how best to work with the media and enlist their support and use them to advance their, causes and positions.

SOLUTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS.

The solutions to the challenges facing minority women in political participation lies in the following:

Economic empowerment. We need to create a global fund for minority women that can be used to economically empower minority women in political leadership, grassroots women leaders and minority women in poverty and marginalization. The fund can also be used to help minority women in leadership

to conduct outreach and help fund development projects iii. their- constituencies.

This will elevate minority women and ease their participation in the political

process and put them at par with other more endured women and male counterparts.

2. Education and training. There is a need to build the capacity of minority women at all levels of political participation through education and training. Minority women in most parts of the world are naturally less educated and it is very hard for them to succeed in politics and leadership without skills for the job. They

need trainings on political leadership and participation, advocacy, lobbying,

legislative and other important trainings that will help them succeed. Thus we need trainings and capacity building for minority women at all levels.

3. *Minority women scholarships, internships and fellowships.* The creation of scholarships; internships and fellowships opportunities for young minority women in colleges and universities all over the world can help build talent and prepare future minority women leaders. The UN and other world bodies such as the AU, EU, Arab League and IGAD should set the example and initiate these growth opportunities for minority women and ask governments and other bodies to emulate the example.
4. *Research and lobby groups.* Research institutions should be created that could provide public and authoritative reports on minority women political participation in the world. This will help academicians and journalist to disseminate right and timely information on minority women political participation. Lobby groups will also help lobby governments and UN bodies on the rights and protection of minority women.
5. *Legal aid for minority women.* Minority women in developing countries are constant target of political violence. They are exposed to rape and sexual attacks used to intimidate them so that they can leave political participation: , Unfortunately, Kenya is notorious for women political violence and I have been a target of such violence in the last general election where I was subjected to beatings and I had to hide it from our 'community for fear of creating inter-community conflict and also loosing the message of our campaigns. Such legal

assistance could also help represent minority women and their communities whose human rights are violated.

6. *Political and electoral violence against minority women.* Governments should be lobbied to enact laws to prevent electoral and political violence against minority women in political participation.

7. *Elimination of all forms of discrimination against minority women.* There exist negative cultural and religious practices that hinder minority women political participation in some communities such as the Maasai, Somali, Sanburu and Pokot of Kenya. Funding to educate these communities should be created and governments should be held accountable and asked to eradicate all forms of discrimination.

8. *Enforcement of human rights laws for minority communities.* Minority women cannot succeed in politics and leadership without the support of their communities yet many minority communities today face insecurity and risk losing their religious and cultural identity. A good example is the case of the

. Ogiek community in Kenya where the Ogiek families are losing their ancestral home in Mau Forest Complex saga in Kenya. Whereas it is important to save the Mau forest, the rights of the Ogiek community to their ancestral land is not addressed and as many as 20,000 families will be losing their ancestral homes by December 31 government deadline. The sad part is that the Ogiek community does not have title deeds for their ancestral land and the government will only

compensate what they call "genuine land owners"(people with title deeds). It is difficult for minority Ogiek women to thrive in such an environment.

9. *Affirmative action policies for minority women.* It is important to lobby governments and political parties to create special parliamentary, local government and political party positions for minority women. This can extend to other national appointments, provision of scholarships to minority women and funding to promote the work of minority women. The creation of special electoral constituencies for minority women by governments should be promoted and the UN bodies should consider affirmative action policies in the hiring, promotion and retention of minority women to show an example to governments and other entities. Governments can also be lobbied to create a conducive environment and responsive policies for the success of minority women. Special gender and governance programs should be created for minority women success in political participation.

10. *Minority women progress report.* The UN should adopt to evaluate member countries on minority women political participation and annually release progress report.

H. *Minority women role models.* There is a need to create some kind of a role model among successful minority women in leadership positions, politics, academia and business so that young minority women can emulate them and they can also provide mentorship to future minority women leaders.

12. *Discussion forums, round tables and interactive sessions.* A situation that will allow minority women in politics and leadership to regularly meet and have discussion forums, round tables and interactive sessions to share experience and learn from each other will help enhance minority women political participation.
13. *Minority rights radio.* Such radio can help promote the work of minority women, set minority agenda, and highlight minority women rights and human rights violations among minority communities. Other media channels can be pursued to promote the work of minority women and also the support of journalist in this course can be sort.

CONCLUSION

The conflict in most parts of Africa has ethnic dimension. Ethnic minorities like the case Of Rwanda, Sudan and Somalia have felt insecure and risked losing their cultural identity before situations of instability in those countries occurred. In Ethiopia, ethnic minorities such as the Oromo and Ogaden Somali are persecuted and denied basic rights. Minority

women in these regions are excluded from decision-making and political participation.

Instability and conflict in these countries are caused by the exclusion of ethnic minorities from the affairs of their country. We have seen this happen in Kenya too during the last general election. It is the inclusion of minority communities that strengthens' our countries and create stability and cohesive societies. Developed countries such as the United States of America have deliberately created policies and opportunities such as the Diversity Lottery Program (Green Card) to create ethnic, religious and linguistic diversity in their countries and this are the reasons for their development, stability, and diversity.

We need to secure rights for our ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities and create favorable environment for minorities to feel secure in our countries.

