POWER IN MALAWIAN POLITICAL PARTIES: THE POLITICS OF WOMEN'S EXCLUSION

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Abstract

This article employs Steven Lukes' Three Dimensions of Power to analyse how power disparities between men and women shape the institutionalisation of engendered exclusionary mechanisms in Malawian political parties. The article derives from a qualitative study that was conducted in Mangochi and Phalombe districts of Southern Malawi during the 2014 General Elections. The key argument is that Malawian political parties behave like a political market where there is a strong positive correlation between one's possession of power and their level of political participation. The article identifies exploitation, opportunity hoarding, emulation and adaptation as key mechanisms perpetuating women's exclusion from meaningful political participation.

Keywords: Power, Participation, Exclusion, Political Parties

Introduction

Power takes many forms and operates at different levels of society. It operates at strategic and functional levels of formal organisations such as political parties, government departments and academic institutions. It is also manifested in informal and semi-formal relations such as friendship networks, cliques and the family. Within these spheres, power is exercised and addressed depending on people's cultural frames of reference as well as on formal rules that regulate how it should be acquired, distributed and used (Pettit, 2013). Robert Greene, in his popular book; *The 48 Laws of Power,* regurgitates the Machiavellian philosophy that in everyday life, power is an insatiable resource by pronouncing that 'no one wants less power; everyone wants more' (Greene, 2013: 08). This is true for formal spheres of the society as is for informal and semi-formal ones.

In the discourse about the participation of women in Malawi's mainstream politics, referents have been made to the effect that the low levels of women participation are *inter alia* generated and sustained by pre-existing power imbalances that exist between men and women in all political organisations including, and not limited to political parties (Kayuni, 2016; Chikadza, 2016; Kamlongera, 2008). Factors attributed to such imbalances are many and varied but do not generally transcend the structure-agency nexus. While some factors illuminate structural dysfunctions and institutional deficiencies within and beyond political parties (Kamlongera, 2008; Chinsinga, 2011), others are actor-centric and have to do with the exercise of agency by political party gatekeepers as well as women themselves as socio-political actors in the domain (Khembo, 2005; Chikadza, 2016). Political party gatekeepers are, in this case, understood as the powerful individuals within the parties who influence

decisions about which party members should occupy contested and non-contested positions at the local, regional, and even national levels of the respective political parties (Kayuni, 2016). Oftentimes, such influence derives from holding an important position in the affairs of the respective party. Considering Malawi's long history of male dominance over women in social, political and economic spheres, most of these positions of influence are held by men. Understanding the roles of these gatekeepers is, therefore, important as they inherently hold the key that determines whether one participates in party processes and, more importantly, to what extent.

While there is consensus to the effect that power imbalances between men and women matter in as far as shaping the extent of women participation in political parties is concerned, there has not been much effort to theorise just how that power is exercised in the formation, application and reinforcement of the exclusionary mechanisms that follow. It is, therefore, against this backdrop that this article adopts Steven Lukes' Three Dimensions of Power to interrogate how the exercise of power in its visible, invisible and hidden forms shapes the exclusion of women in Malawi's main political parties.

The article derives from a qualitative study on 'Women Participation in Political Parties' that was conducted by the author in Mangochi and Phalombe districts of southern Malawi soon after the 2014 General Elections. The study, which employed Rational Choice Institutionalism as the main theoretical framework, set out to establish structural, institutional and agentic factors that shape the extent of women's participation in Malawi's four main political parties, namely; the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), the Malawi Congress Party (MCP), the People's Party (PP) and the United Democratic Front (UDF). The parties were selected based on the percentage of their MPs in the National Assembly as well as the percentage of votes that their respective presidential candidates amassed in the 2014 elections. Specifically, the study interrogated how the interface between institutions, both formal and informal, and the exercise of human agency on the part of political party gatekeepers and aspiring female politicians shapes the extent of women's symbolic and substantive participation in political party processes. In order to acquire information requirements for the study, data was collected at the policy and implementation levels of the four political parties through three main methods, namely; literature or document review, key informant interviews (KIIs), and focus group discussions (FGDs).

Key informant interviews were conducted with purposively selected respondents drawn from as follows: (a) district; (b) constituency; (c) area; and (d) branch levels of the four political parties. These respondents were key to the study as they included the gatekeepers who have the influence to determine who should participate in which contested positions, to what extent and who should not. In other words, they are the people who nominate candidates for contested positions for the respective political parties and moderate both decision-making and agenda setting processes for the parties. The KIIs were also conducted with women who represented any of the four political parties in Parliamentary and Local Government Elections, regardless of whether they were successful in the elections or not. The idea was to get first

hand insights from individual women who managed to secure nominations of the respective parties in the electoral process. In addition, KIIs were also conducted with candidates who participated in Parliamentary and Local Government elections as independent candidates to understand why they 'opted' to contest as independent candidates and not as party sponsored candidates. Lastly, KIIs were conducted with District Civic Education Officers of the National Initiative for Civic Education (NICE) which is a public trust committed to deepening democracy and good governance among Malawians through provision of civic and voter education. The idea was to get 'neutral' narratives about the challenges and prospects that women face in mainstream political processes. Following that purposive sampling technique, a total of twenty-seven respondents participated in the study as key informants. Two were drawn from NICE while the remaining twenty-five were drawn from the political parties. Seven respondents came from DPP, eight were drawn from MCP, five came from UDF while another five came from PP.

Focus group discussions, on the other hand, were conducted with men, women and the youth who were sampled from one constituency in each of the two districts using systematic random sampling. In Mangochi district, FGDs were conducted in Mangochi Central Constituency while in Phalombe district, they were conducted in Phalombe Central Constituency. Systematic random sampling was operationalised by way of selecting one respondent from each Kth household from a randomly selected household in the constituency. The Kth value was arbitrarily determined as three, which implies that every third household from the north, south, east and west of the randomly selected household stood a chance of participating in the study. Once a household had been selected, and a respondent had agreed or refused to participate in the study, the counting started again to the next third house up until six men, six women and six youths had been identified. Thus, in each district, three FGDs were conducted. One FGD was comprised of six men, another one had six women and the last one consisted of three male and three female youths aged between fifteen and twenty-four years. The idea was to enable the men, women and youth to discuss their views and experiences associated with women's participation in mainstream politics free from interference of members of the other demographic groups. The researcher's role was, in this case, reduced to that of a facilitator as the input was entirely contributed by the participants. Tailor made semi-structured interview guides were used for data collection during KIIs and FGDs. All data collected was analysed using thematic analysis which involved segmenting the data, developing categories, coding the segments, grouping the categories and developing themes from the emerging findings.

Theoretical Framework

Within the broad discipline of politics, power is one of the leading concepts for studying political participation, domination, and exclusion (Dhal, 1961; Bachrach and Baratz, 1962; Lukes, 1974; Wolfe and McGinn, 2005; Solt *et al.,* 2011). Despite the relative importance of the notion to political studies in general, power remains an essentially contested concept *inter alia* because it originates from multiple and,

sometimes, competing disciplines. However, modern thinking around the notion of power is hardly conceivable without making reference to Nicollò Machiavelli's 16th century works particularly those covered in his book *The Prince*, and Thomas Hobbes' mid-17th century works in his book, *Leviathan*. According to Machiavelli, power is a means which individuals use towards the realisation of strategic advantages, such as military and political ones (Sadan, 1997). He considered the State as the highest form of human association and opined that whatever brings success to the operations of the State and its 'rulers' is dependent on the amount of power at their disposal and how that power is used (Holler, 2009). He, consequently, justified the individual's use of any type of means to acquire power, making the process of acquiring power as the major theme of his work (Ibid). His major critique was that he defended dissolute means of acquiring power, on the account that the ends justify the means. On the other hand, Hobbes posited that power is all about sovereignty of a total political community, the embodiment of which is the state, or the community, or the society (Sadan, 1997). For a long time, Hobbes' views gained momentum as it resonated with the emerging view of placing more faith in the State than in individual rulers as Machiavelli had earlier opined.

Since these classical works, the central tradition of research in the social sciences has sought precision and logic about how one can observe, measure, and quantify power. It was, therefore, only after the Second World War, that Max Weber (1947) conceptualised power as a source of domination in the organisational context by parading his popular definition of power as 'the probability that an actor within a social relationship would be in a position to carry out his will despite resistance to it' (Weber, 1947: 47). According to Weber, the activation of power is, therefore, dependent on a person's will, even in opposition to someone else's. The explicit inclusion of resistance, to the definition of power has inspired other scholars to define power as a source of domination in interactive processes of conflict (of desires) among actors in social, political and economic spheres. These include Robert Dahl's (1961) *pluralist view of power* and Bachrach and Baratz's, (1962) *Two Faces of Power*. It is, however, Steven Lukes' (1975; 2005) approach; *Three Dimensions of Power,* that integrates the earlier works by Dhal, Bachrach and Baratz into a more comprehensive framework that this article has subsequently adopted.

Lukes' Three Dimensions of Power

Lukes' concept of three dimensions of power argues that power prevails in three forms namely; visible, hidden and invisible. According to Lukes (2005), these dimensions of power prevail in formal decision-making processes, informal agenda setting processes and semi-formal preference shaping processes, respectively. Although the framework is attributed to Steven Lukes' (1975) work, it has its origins in the works of Robert Dhal (1957), and Bachrach and Baratz's (1970) critique of Dhal's earlier view on power.

Decision Making or Visible Power

Also known as the *one dimensional view of power* (Lukes, 2005) or the *pluralist view of power* (Dhal, 1957), the first dimension of power has its roots in the work of Robert Dahl's (1957) article, The Concept of Power' which was later refined in his 1961 seminal book Who Governs? According to this analytical tradition, power is exercised based on formal rules of the game about who does what, when and how in formal decision-making processes. This dimension of power is chiefly concerned with the actual exercise of power, which is visible in formal decision-making processes and not necessarily its mere possession. Secondly, the first dimension of power, limits the exercise of power to decision-making processes in formal spheres of public life where the mandate to exercise power is legitimised by formal rules of the game. The spheres may be political, such as political parties, economic such as the market place or social such as the wide array of social institutions including, but not limited to, religious bodies and cultural structures. To determine who has power, you look at the outcomes of formal decision-making processes. One is said to have power if they can initiate decisions that are finally adopted or if they can successfully veto initiatives that are initiated by others. Logically, one is said to lack power if they propose alternatives that are eventually turned down or if they fail to veto proposals made by others. Drawing up on these features of decision-making power, it can be argued that one party does not exercise power over the other when there is coincidence of desires and means to satisfy those desires. On the contrary, one can only exercise power over another person when there is conflict of desires between the parties. Thus, in a political contest, one who gets a decision in their favor, in the context of prevailing formal rules, is said to have power over the other who does not.

Control of the Agenda or Hidden Power

Bachrach and Baratz (1970), in their critique of Dahl's *One Dimensional View of Power*, argue that it is too simplistic and restrictive to confine the understanding of power to visible decision-making processes, while ignoring the hidden agenda setting processes that precede the former. Their central point is that 'to the extent that a person or a group, consciously or unconsciously, creates or reinforces barriers to the public airing of policy conflicts, that person or group has power' (Bachrach and Baratz, 1970:8). Their logic is very simple: powerful individuals do not only surface when formal decisions are being deliberated on. More importantly, they shape what should be discussed and what should be shelved away, either momentarily or permanently. By suppressing what could have been deliberated on, individuals and groups are already preventing others from discussing such potential alternatives. The major argument in the second dimension of power is that agenda-setting plays a role in the exercise of power because of its ability to see through some items to the discussion whilst at the same time keeping away some agenda items from the debate.

In Malawian political parties, gate keepers, exercise agenda setting powers in many respects than one. Not only do they set the calendar of events for their parties, but they also determine how those events must be carried out. Not only do party

leaders determine when to have primary elections, they also decide whether there should be primary elections in constituencies where the parties have incumbent Members of Parliament. In so doing, they exercise agenda setting powers by defining the scope of activities and decisions that the lower ranks are confined to.

Preference Shaping or Invisible Power

Invisible power is also referred to as internalised power (Andreassen and Crawford, 2013: 6). Invisible power is exercised by domination through socially embedded cultural values and norms. In his own words, Lukes (2005:27) posits that power is exercised invisibly by '…influencing, shaping or determining' people's very wants.' The prominence of internalisation of values and norms in invisible power is also observed by Swartz (2007: 2), who indicated that '…the third dimension of power consists of deeply rooted forms of political socialisation where actors unwittingly follow the dictates of power even against their best interests.' Lukes is convinced that the most insidious and important type of power is the invisible power where domination by the powerful over the less powerful prevails without the knowledge of the less powerful (Pettit, 2013: 45). Domination is, in this case, defined as 'the capacity to secure compliance to domination through the shaping of beliefs and desires, by imposing internal constraints under historically changing circumstances' (Swartz, 2007: 3). The dominated, under false consciousness, comply to domination with full conviction that the powerful are making decisions in accordance with their 'real interests.' Because of internalisation, the less powerful have blind loyalty such that they 'are not aware of their real interests' (Csaszar, 2004: 139). In a typical Malawian political context, this would be manifested where political gatekeepers evoke readily made culturally embedded narratives that exclude some segments of the society based on gender or age. For instance, in the run up to the 2014 elections, then opposition party leaders used to remind Malawians that culturally, '*ng'ombe yayikazi sikoka ngolo'* meaning that, 'a heifer (female cow) does not pull an oxcart'. This was in apparent reference to the then president, Joyce Banda who was contesting for the presidency having ascended to the presidency after the death of the late President Bingu Wa Mutharika. As an incumbent president, she posed a threat to the male candidates who had to evoke to cultural narratives to convince the voters that a woman may care but is not fit enough to take charge of the country. What is imperative to note is that such cultural narratives do not suddenly fall from the skies; they are socially constructed by the influential members of the society and adopted by the rest as a reference point for making decisions. By so doing, the powerful secure compliance to domination through the shaping of beliefs and desires.

Power and Participation in Political Parties

In Malawian political parties, evidence exists to the effect that men's superior political, economic, human and social capital bases enable them to exercise influence over women in political processes (Kamlongera, 2008; Chikadza, 2016). While it remains debatable as to whether mere possession of such capital implies possession

of power (Dhal, 2005; Heinsohn, 2004), there is consensus to the effect that the resource that individuals, groups of people and institutions possess is power when they have been utilised to get other people to do what they would not have done on their own (Heinsohn, 2004). Indeed, the study that informed the development of this article uncovered that the resources that men have do not only enhance their participation in political processes and positions, but more importantly they are also used to systematically exclude women from the same.

Men continue to enjoy decision-making powers by outnumbering women in as far as holding political party positions of influence is concerned. This is particularly the case in electoral and senior non-electoral positions of power. Even where political parties have introduced egalitarian mechanisms aimed at promoting equal numbers of men and women in grassroots structures, such gender considerations are obliterated when filling more rewarding positions at higher levels, notably at regional and national levels. Save for the PP, almost all main political parties had gender quotas at the grassroots levels. The UDF had seventy-five men and seventy-five women in all committees from the branch level to the district executive committee level, and the DPP had thirty men, thirty women and thirty youths from the Branch to the district committee level. The MCP had ninety men, ninety women and ninety youths from area committee level to district executive committee level, while it had thirty men, thirty women and thirty youth at the branch level. However, these affirmative arrangements were and are only confined to the grassroots structures and are precluded from senior positions at regional and national levels. Consequently, senior party positions from the regional to the national level are dominated by men owing to their superior positions of socioeconomic capital.

Respondents drawn from the concerned political parties justified the absence of gender quotas when filling senior party positions on the premise that women tend to lack such agentic factors as education, leadership experience, political connections and financial capital. What this implies is, therefore, that where women compete with men for these senior party positions, they are subjected to a competition of unequals. Actually, there have been cases where male officeholders and candidates have been imposed on the party membership without even undergoing any sort of elections. In all these cases, the justification has been premised on the understanding that men are better resourced to run the affairs of the parties than women as the following excerpts illustrate:

> *At the regional and national executive committee levels, we do not consider gender equality because at those levels, we are interested with individuals who are educated, experienced, and those who have been exposed to politics in different countries. So, we don't normally consider gender. For one to reach those levels, it requires demonstrating one's capabilities. Nonetheless, we have a few women holding influential positions at the National Executive Committee* (UDF District Governess, Mangochi).
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> *At the National Governing Council level individuals are elected into positions at a national convention based on their competencies regardless of their sex. They have to be appealing based on their levels of education and experience in politics. Some are appointed by the elected party leaders…* (DPP District Governor, Phalombe).

Thus, the lesson one can draw from the above excerpt is that one's possession of material and ideational resources, enhances their chances of holding senior party positions at the expense of those who are deprived. Considering women's historical marginalisation from economic and social processes, it is not surprising to observe that such positions are dominated by men as women are confined to grassroots level positions. This observation is true for senior administrative positions of the respective political parties as it is for electoral positions. In terms of electoral positions, the study reiterated the observation that was made by Khembo (2004) that in the absence of gender quotas, political parties nominate more male candidates for parliamentary elections than their female counterparts. Table 1 below uses data from the Malawi Electoral Commission to support such an observation:

Table 1: Frequency and Percentage Distribution of Women Candidates, 2014 Parliamentary Elections, Per Party
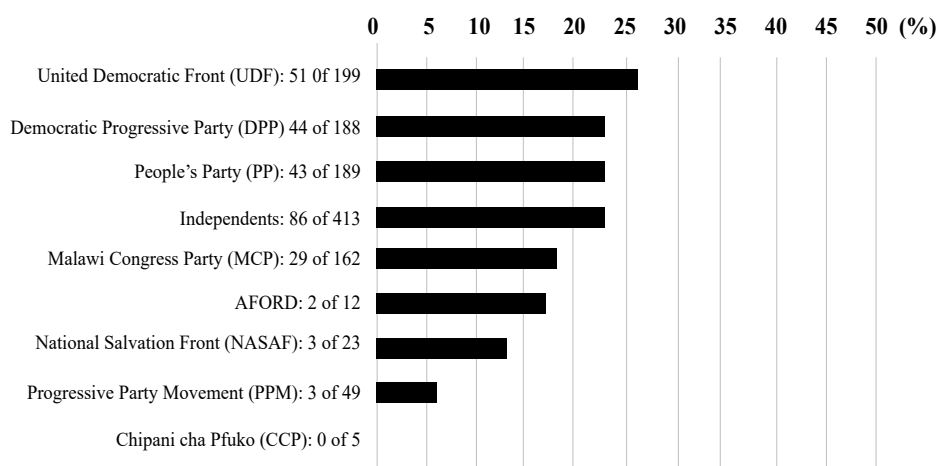
Source: Malawi Electoral Commission

While the preceding narrative gives an account of male domination in terms of numbers, the study established that for the few women who make it into these positions, their participation is rather superficial. This is the case on two main fronts. Firstly, it was established that when the district and sub-district committees meet to make party decisions, the agendas for such meetings are already predetermined by the party gatekeepers, who are dominantly men. For instance, the national leadership of UDF and DPP instructed their constituency committees not to hold primary elections in constituencies that the parties had sitting MPs in the run up to the 2014 Parliamentary Elections. The explanation was that this was a gesture to thank MPs that had been loyal to the parties at a time that others defected to the then newly ruling People's Party. However, imposing such a decision effectively implied omitting that potential item from the agenda of the parties' grassroot structures. Thus, by way of exercising their agenda setting powers, the political party gatekeepers imposed a resolution that favoured incumbent candidates most of whom were men.

Secondly, even where women are invited to the decision-making table, their participation has been cosmetic as men tend to dominate such discussions owing to longstanding sociopolitical relations of power that put the women at the peripherals of decision-making processes. They merely attend the meetings without having the real power to participate in a substantive and transformative fashion as one participant in an FGD argued in Mangochi:

> *Although we have the Men's Committee, the Women's Committee and the Youth Committee, when we meet to make decisions as the Main Committee, it is the Men's Committee that becomes the Main Committee. They discuss the issues, right there in our presence, agree on resolutions and only ask us and the youth to chip in if we have questions based on what they have discussed.*

What is, therefore, clear is that men do not only use their control over resources to get into positions of influence, equally important, they use their social positions of power to dominate over the few women who hold positions in the respective party structures.

The Political Underpinnings of Exclusion

At this point, it is very important to indicate that mere domination of men over women does not imply political exclusion. As Lawrence (2015) puts it, political exclusion occurs when certain individuals or groups have greater influence over political decision-making and benefit from unequal outcomes through those decisions, despite procedural equality in the democratic process. Even where processes are characterised by procedural equality, as is the case with competition during primary elections, exclusion exists if such competition is largely a staged contest between unequal categories of people. Clearly, in the case of Malawi's political parties, men do not only enjoy more influence than women, they also benefit the most from political party processes. As Mockaitis (2016) puts it, this exclusionary politics derives from visceral fear by members of a dominant group, in this case men, that they stand to lose their privileged position of power to members of an out-group that is women. As such, they consciously deploy exclusionary mechanisms that alienate members of the out-group. Borrowing recourse from Tilly (2005), this paper identifies *opportunity hoarding, exploitation, emulation* and *adaptation* as key mechanisms at the heart of exclusionary politics in Malawi's political parties.

Opportunity Hoarding as an Exclusionary Mechanism

As Tilly (2005) puts it, opportunity hoarding implies a situation in which members of a social group confine disposition of a value-producing resource to its members. As indicated earlier, political party gatekeepers in Malawi exercise their agenda setting powers in ways that confine senior party positions to fellow men as members of an in-group. In the run up to the 2014 Parliamentary Elections, both the DPP and UDF party gatekeepers instructed their respective party structures not to conduct primary elections in constituencies where they had sitting members. For instance, an aspiring

MP in Mangochi Central had no choice but to contest as an independent parliamentary candidate, after her political party, the United Democratic Front, made a decision that all incumbent MPs should go unopposed as a token of appreciation for their loyalty to the party. This is not a new development. As early as in 2004, the leadership of the same UDF instructed a then parliamentary aspirant Anna Kachikho, in Phalombe, to pave way for their preferred male candidate in the run up to that year's elections. Borrowing theoretical recourse from Lukes' *Three Dimensions of Power*, it clearly confirms that political gatekeepers exercise agenda setting powers by deciding on whether primary elections should be on the agenda of their respective parties or not. Where primary elections have been allowed to go on, the political gatekeepers have exercised the same agenda setting powers to determine whose name should appear on the list of competitors and whose name should be eliminated way before the polls. In so doing, in the exercise of their agenda setting powers, political party gatekeepers have confined the disposition of powerful positions to members of their in-group. Usually, though not always, these are fellow men.

Exploitation as an Exclusionary Mechanism

Exploitation is another exclusionary mechanism that political party gatekeepers deploy at the expense of women. This implies a situation in which people who control a resource, in this case power, enlist the effort of others in the production of value by means of that resource but exclude the latter from enjoying the full value added by their effort (Tilly, 2005). Indeed, by promoting the participation of women in the parties' grassroot structures, women play the role of mobilising party supporters and legitimising the respective parties, their political processes as well as their various decisions and outcomes. As Kayuni and Chikadza (2016) posit, women often spearhead the party with dances and through mobilising supporters. In this regard, women help by inviting others to join the party, especially during the campaign period. Women members also facilitate logistical issues related to organising party meetings such as welcoming visitors. More importantly, they help to bring more support by attracting their fellow women to the party. According to one of the gatekeepers, 'women articulate the merits of the party much better than men'. However, by reserving rewarding positions for men, women are exploited in that they not allowed to enjoy the full benefits of their effort. In the study, it was uncovered that the exploitation of women is, oftentimes, justified on the basis of cultural referents that apparently assert that mainstream politics is a domain that is not appropriate for respectable women. Such informal institutions are evoked by political gatekeepers in the exercise of their preference shaping powers to systematically exclude women from senior party positions, knowing fully well that they cannot adopt formal institutions that explicitly bar women for fear of possible public backlash.

Women's Adaptation to Political Exclusion

However, the question remains, how do women react to both opportunity hoarding and exploitation? One would expect the women to come together, use their numerical strength and pursue collective action in challenging the status quo. Similarly, one

would expect the political gatekeepers to handle women's interests with caution, considering that they constitute a significant majority of the electorate. However, the study uncovered that instead of challenging the existing rules of the game, women opt to adapt to the same. Adaptation is, in this case, understood as the 'subordinates' adjustment of their daily routines so that they actually depend on the inequality-generating social arrangements' (Tilly, 2005:16). In the study, three main reasons were provided as being responsible for the adaptation of women to their state of exploitation.

The first reason is that women fear probable reprisals vis-à-vis losing short-term benefits accrued to them by virtue of being in good books with the leadership of the respective parties. Numerous examples were provided about women who have 'suffered' for standing up against unfavourable party decisions. They include the cases of Anna Kachikho in UDF in Phalombe, and in recent times, Jessie Kabwila in the MCP. They were both kicked out of their parties for standing up against the party leadership. Both cases substantiate how individual women who stand up against their political parties can easily be victimised thereby losing short-term benefits associated with holding party positions. This continues to work as an effective deterrence on the part of a few women who are not in agreement with exploitative party practices, but have to strike a balance between political survival and social justice.

Secondly, when asked why they could not use their numerical strength to push for a more egalitarian agenda as a group and not as individuals, female respondents argued that the cost of pursuing collective action increases when the group gets bigger. The argument is that where there is a big group of ill-informed and largely indifferent women, it is logistically and politically close to impossible to effectively mobilise them in pursuit of some revolutionary collective action. Politically, chances are that some would deviate and sell the scheme to the gatekeepers before the arrangement materialises. Logistically, the big number of women implies higher financial costs of mobilising them and organising them in pursuit of collective action.

Lastly, the adaptation of women to their situation of exploitation and opportunity hoarding is explained in the context of cultural referents that promote subvention to authority without question. While district level respondents posited that it would be more just and only fair to accord women a fair chance to participate more meaningfully through the institutionalisation of egalitarian mechanisms at all levels of the party structures, female respondents drawn from the grassroots levels indicated indifference to the same. In their reasoning, the dominant reason why they did not see this as an issue was rooted in the fact that 'this is the way things have been since time immemorial and political parties are not an exception.' To borrow, theoretical recourse from Amartya Sen (1995), women in politics have become akin to *happy slaves* who have been exposed to injustice for far too long to an extent that exploitation has ceased to be a problem but rather a condition to which they have subconsciously adapted. This, along with the transaction costs of pursuing collective action, renders any chance of effectively pursuing collective action inconceivable.

Emulation of Inequality-Generating Mechanisms

While it is important to appreciate that women's adaptation to their state of exploitation plays an enormous role in generating and reinforcing their own exclusion, it is equally imperative to appreciate that their powerlessness is shaped by the constraints of the institutional regimes that are oft emulated by the political gatekeepers. As Tilly (2005; 32) posits, emulation occurs when those who control an inequality, generate a set of social relations import categorical distinctions (e.g. by gender or age) that bring with them readily available exclusionary practices and meanings. This includes importing the distinction between 'men' and 'women' from the workforce, where men traditionally enjoy supervisory positions and enormously higher pay or from culture where women are expected to take the socioeconomic backseat in public affairs. Indeed, much as political parties have institutionalised gender quotas when filling their respective grassroot structures, informal institutions are usually evoked when justifying the absence of similar mechanisms in electoral political positions as well as strategic administrative positions of the same. The following interview excerpts illustrate this point quiet well:

> As Malawians, we can't run away from the fact that Malawi is a patriarchal country where there is a feeling that the home constitutes the best place for women and not in mainstream political and economic affairs. Such a culture reinforces the reasoning that women cannot lead. Even sending a female child to school is seen as a waste of time and resources (NICE District Officer, District X).
>
> We cannot impose female candidates on the electorate. The political landscape has changed. If you want your party to win, there is a need to identify an appealing candidate, and it is usually men who have the necessary requirements to convince the electorate" (DPP District Governor, District X).
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> 'Sometimes, it is funny how these gender activists try to oversimplify these things especially when they are advancing the 50-50 gender campaign. The truth is that in our cultural context, politics is not a game for a respectable woman to be involved in. People curse each other. Politicians go home late after campaign meetings. Would you want your wife to be subjected to that?(UDF District Governor, District X).

Consequently, through the exercise of preference shaping powers, gatekeepers import and popularise institutions that effectively exclude women from participating in mainstream political processes. As the excerpt from the NICE official illustrates, the effects of such emulation transcends the women in political parties and gets into the society *en bloc*. Women and the electorates comply with the ensuing domination with the full conviction that the institutions emulated by the gatekeepers are in accordance with the general good. Because of internalisation, women have blind loyalty such that they are not aware of their real interests and those of the political gatekeepers.

Nonetheless, over a wide range of circumstances, a few women have successfully broken the glass ceiling by getting into senior positions of power. They have exercised their human agency to cross the socially constructed gender boundaries at their volition. For instance, where men have been preferred because of their superior

education levels, some women have also presented themselves with similar academic qualifications. Quite a few have made it into parliament and senior party positions owing to their distinguished attributes, that set them apart from the average Malawian woman in the society. However, as Tilly (2005) puts it, this mobility across the gender boundaries does not in itself change the production of exclusion and social inequality, but alters who benefits from the same. For example, as long as college degrees and political connections remain essential for getting National Executive Committee positions, the acquisition of those degrees by women reinforces the exclusion of non-degree holding fellow women. Inequalities produced in these ways become more durable and effective to the extent that recipients of the surplus generated by exploitation and/or opportunity hoarding commit a portion of that surplus to reproducing a) boundaries separating themselves from excluded categories of the population and b) unequal relations across those boundaries. For example, unseating an incumbent MPs is not as easy because they are better placed to devote some of their income to *palm oiling* national, district and constituency levels gatekeepers to keep aspiring candidates at bay. That is why they find it convenient, successfully so, either to get primary elections discriminately suspended or indeed to exclude specific individuals from the list of contestants.

Conclusion

From the preceding findings, it is clear that the exercise of power by political gatekeepers in decision-making, agenda setting and preference shaping plays a huge role on the formation and sustenance of mechanisms that perpetuate the exclusion of women from political party processes in Malawi. While men continue to prevail in visible decision-making processes such as in primary elections and election into senior party positions, it is clear that such success is shored up by underlying agenda setting and preference shaping roles played by incumbent political gatekeepers, who are dominantly fellow men. The article has demonstrated that indeed the quest for, the possession of and above all the exercise of power by men in general and political gatekeepers in particular occupies the heart of the politics of women's exclusion in Malawi's main political parties. Women, on the other hand, are left with little choice, if any, but to adapt to this state of exclusion owing to a) fear of possible reprisals, b) in the spirit of respecting cultural frames of reference as well as c) due to their misgivings about the transaction costs of pursuing effective collective action.

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