Challenges Faced by Women Ward Councillors in South Africa

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Abstract: The paper aims to identify barriers and challenges faced by women ward councillors in South Africa and how these challenges are addressed when reported. Considering the political history of South Africa, the paper explores whether women ward councillors have ever been discriminated against based on race and or gender while executing their duties. Women in politics face challenges when they have to be elected into positions especially at the local government level. Ward councillors are elected by local communities to represent their respective wards, to be accountable to the community that elected them and not their interests. Women, irrespective of race had to contest elections equally with men at the local government level after 1994 in South Africa. South Africa has been recognised worldwide for its advanced policy frameworks which have enhanced the condition and representation of women. However, statistics show that the number of women councillors has been fluctuating over the years. Most women are in the municipal councils as Proportional Representative (PR) councillors, and are struggling to attract more women into politics. The study is exploratory and qualitative in nature. It focuses on ward and PR councilors, males and females from six local municipalities of the KwaZulu-Natal (78 out of 341) and Eastern Cape (26 out of 54) Provinces who were interviewed using an interview guide, face-to-face and telephone techniques. The findings of the study were analysed using content analysis and themes were generated from the interview data. The study revealed that although women are not discriminated against within the councils, race and gender are a challenge. Furthermore, there are no mechanisms to report or to ensure that discrimination issues are properly addressed. Politics in general, political parties, lack of municipal support, limited resources and community projects not completed, are some of the challenges identified in this study.

Keywords: Gender, Local politics, Ward councillors, Participation, Representation

1. Introduction

Women in politics face challenges when elected into positions, particularly at the local government level. Both developed and developing countries have been struggling with the low number of women due to government or political party's strategy failures. Women can be discriminated against by their community, party leaders and family members when they contest the elections. Furthermore, there is lack of information on the challenges faced by those already participating as ward councillors in different municipalities, especially in developing countries. The history of South Africa portrays women, especially Black women, as the most marginalised group in all spheres of life. Women are severely affected by the failure of local government in terms of providing good services. Beall (2004) affirms that the woman of the house is most affected when municipalities terminate services because of unpaid bills. Ward councillors are elected by local communities to represent their respective wards, to be accountable to the community that elected them. However, they face different challenges while attempting to execute

their duties. Statistics shows that the number of women councillors has been fluctuating since 1996. Most women are in the municipal councils as Proportional Representative (PR) councillors and are struggling to attract more women into politics. The paper aims to identify barriers and challenges faced by women ward councillors in South Africa and how these challenges are addressed when reported. It also explores whether women ward councillors have ever been discriminated against based on race and or gender while executing their duties. The paper identifies how discrimination challenges experienced by women ward councillors are reported and addressed by the municipal council. The findings will be useful to government, municipalities, communities, gender advocates and other policy makers when planning for the future of women's participation and representation in politics at local level.

2. History of Gender Representation in South Africa

Historically, women were excluded from politics based on gender, race and class. South Africa's

apartheid system created an urban and rural landscape of race-based inequality that was destined to prevail long after formal apartheid was dismantled (Kusambizi-Kiini, 2018). The segregation policies divided Whites from Blacks, Indians and Coloured people in South Africa. Black people were further divided according to their ethnic groups with minimal infrastructure and basic services. Lack of access to economic, education and health resources forced especially African women to stay in rural areas (Chagunda, 2004). However, South African women of all colours and races were at the forefront in their communities, fighting for emancipation and their democratic rights (Imbokodo, 2006).

After the first non-racial democratic elections in 1994, most women activists moved from local to central level and left a vacuum without grooming any other women in community work or politics. The presence of women in politics now depends on the political parties. Lovenduski (1993) identifies three strategies that can be employed to increase women's representation in political parties. Firstly, when the leadership of the political parties take women's participation in politics seriously and ensure that they are represented at all levels. Secondly, they groom women candidates for representation and participation as well as providing resources to support them. Lastly, they use the quota system to allow women to influence decisions that are taken in different structures. It must be noted that the South African government has no position on the issue of a quota system, but created institutions to address gender issues. According to SALGA Women's Commission (2017), statistics indicate that there has been a fluctuation on the number of women ward councilors after 1994. There was an increase from 11 (1995); to 17 (2000); and 37 (2006). There was a decline in the number of women ward councilors from 33 in 2011 to 32 in 2016. Hence, it is crucial to identify barriers and challenges faced by women already in the council.

3. Current Political Situation Affecting Women in South Africa

Ramzanolgu (1987) mentioned some practices of violence against women such as abuses, stares, scorns, intimidations, verbal abuse, and dirty jokes as mechanisms to show women where they belong. In South Africa, between 2004 and 2017, there have been 1377 municipal service delivery protests attributed to local government not fulfilling its mandate (Kusambiza-Kiingi, 2018). Communities display their anger by destroying and burning buildings as well as attacking councilors in their homes (Hamhill, 2015). According to Mkhize (2018) beyond governance challenges, some of the municipalities are beset by a high level of political infighting and instability. In KwaZulu-Natal alone, 80 councilors including women have been killed since 2004 (Harper, 2019). While the family unfriendly and male-dominated culture of political institutions may discourage women from pursuing long-standing careers (Dolan, 2010), women are also less frequently reselected by party gatekeepers than men (O'Neill & Stewart, 2009). Women also experience significant challenges posed by family, community and other political leaders when they indicate interest in joining politics (Martin, 1993).

4. Theoretical Overview of the Functions of Municipalities and Councillors

4.1 The Constitution and Municipalities

The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996 (Constitution), Bill of Rights Chapter 2(9) (1) to (9) (5) has a clause on equality which reveals a guarantee to promote gender equality and ensure that women enjoy equal rights. Chapter 7 of the Constitution creates a framework for local municipalities where each municipality is divided into wards and each ward is represented by a ward councilor. The Constitution's section 152(1)(a) states that the councilors must be sensitive to public opinion. Furthermore, section 153(1)(e) makes provision for the councilor to react to the community needs.

The White Paper on Local Government (1998) states that municipalities should ensure that there are representatives from different groups who were previously councilors and who can contest the elections. The emphasis is also on accountability that strengthens the role of councilors for the benefit of all community groups including women. It also addresses the issue with regard to the delegation of roles and powers to committees within the municipal council to ensure participation in the council's decision-making processes. Furthermore, ward councilors serve as a link between the ward community and the rest of the government for proper consultation with local communities with respect to the planning and implementation of provincial and national programmes impacting on the ward.

Consequently, a number of legislation such as Local Government Municipal Structures Act 117 of 1998;

and Local Government Municipal Systems Act 32 of 2000 were promulgated. Section 19(2)© and 3 of the Municipal Structures Act, directs municipalities towards a new culture of governance that complements representative democracy through participation. Section 21 states that municipal councilors are elected public representatives of their constituents and are mandated to make decisions on behalf of their constituencies. According to this section of the constitution, one can be elected as a councilor irrespective of race, gender or level of education, whereas, Section 22 provides that an equal number of councilors represent the various political parties proportionally in accordance with the percentage of votes attained by that party. The participatory form of democracy is evident in the Municipal Systems Act (32 of 2000) where a community consists not only of the structures, functions and administrators of the municipality but also the communities, residents and ratepayers of the municipality (Cameron, 2001).

4.2 The Role of Municipal Councils and the Speaker

The municipal council has a significant role in the public policy process (Memeti, 2016). Firstly, municipal councils pass by-laws which include local laws and regulations about any of the functions they are responsible for and are subject to the Constitution. Secondly, they approve budgets and development plans as every year a municipal budget must be passed that sets down how money will be raised and spent; and impose rates and other taxes (PLM, 2015). In terms of Schedule 5 of the Constitution, the council is responsible for the roads, public transport, street trading, water and electricity. It is crucial for the council to be kept informed of the business of the municipality by receiving regular reports on the activities of the administration (Potgieter, 2019). A Speaker is the chairperson of a municipal council in terms of section 36 of the Municipal Structures Act (1998). According to section 37, the Speaker should preside at council meetings; ensure compliance in the council and its meetings with the Code of Conduct, and ensure the necessary training for councillors, provide support and assistance.

The Speaker plays a role in monitoring the degree to which councillors are open and accountable towards the community (SALGA, 2011). Complaints lodged against councillors by community members must

be dealt with by the Speaker according to item 14(i)(b) of the Code. Councillors as public representative must be given administrative support in order to exercise their duties. In relation to Ward Committees, the Speaker is tasked to oversee the election of ward committee members; ensure that ward committees meet regularly; ensure that ward councillors report back to the council on their ward committee meetings; and coordinate the assignment of PR councillors to ward committees, where possible.

4.3 The Role of Municipal Councillors

The duties of councillors are found in the Municipal Systems Act, section 54 which has the code of conduct for councillors and staff members. The responsibilities of municipal councillors according to SALGA (2011:61) are that they must:

- act as representatives of the community they serve;

- provide leadership in councils;

- act as custodians and guardians of public finance;

- promote the cooperative governance ethos;

- provide effective oversight over the municipal executive and council officials;

- be accountable to local communities and report back to their constituencies on council matters;

- be responsive to the communities they serve.

Councillors are responsible and involved in the municipal decision making process:

- In accordance with the Standing Rules of Order;

- Through their party caucuses;

- In ward committees and ward activities; in development forums and community based organisations;

- Through community information/liaison exercises;

- Through the various committees of Council of which they are members; and

- In regard to any municipal function designated to them by the Executive Mayor (Potgieter, 2019: 12).

As ward councillors often receive complaints from the public, they are in a good position to advise the public on how to resolve their issues (IOB, South Africa, 2019). However, when a councillor breaches the code, community members may report them for investigation and disciplinary action (Corruption Watch, 2016).

4.4 The Duties of Ward Councillors and Ward Committees

In terms of Section 17 of the Municipal Systems Act, the roles of ward councillors is to establish ward committees, chair and report progress on ward activities. A ward committee may make recommendations on any matter affecting its ward to or through the ward councillor (Municipal Structures Act, 1998). According to the SALGA (2011), ward committees provide advice to ward councillors on policy matters affecting wards; identify needs and challenges that wards face; receive complaints from residents about municipal service delivery; and communicate information to wards on budgets, IDP's and service delivery options. Ward councillors and committees must know their communities and the people they represent (PLM, 2015).

5. Empirical Studies on Municipalities and Councillors

There are relevant studies which can shed more light concerning the challenges at local level. In a study conducted by Allen (2012:712), women have 'consistently been found to be more likely to drop out after just one term as a councillor'. In the 2012-2013 survey, the ICMA (2014) found that 60 percent of women reported "inappropriate or disrespectful" comments from a commissioner or council member (Holman, 2017:290). Marumo (2014) conducted a study on challenges faced by female councillors in Ekurhuleni Metropolitan Municipality and found that the support structures and systems exist solely on paper as there are no proper assessments to check if it is effective and relevant. Other challenges were low levels of education, lack of communication skills which made it difficult for women to campaign for strategic decision-making positions. Kusambizi-Kiingi (2018) argued that without definite clear systems and credible structures, democracy is almost non-existent for most citizens in South Africa.

Councillors should not be struggling on their own as municipalities have an option of establishing ward committees that can communicate the needs, aspirations and potential challenges of communities. A study conducted by Seitlholo (2016) on ward committee challenges in Tlokwe City Council found lack of finances and infrastructure, lack of knowledge of local government legislation and regulations, absence of continued training and empowerment and political interference from committee members which affects the functioning of the committee.

Taaibosch and van Niekerk (2017) identified some challenges in their study on municipal councillors' specific competencies and skills in order to successfully execute their mandate in the Mangaung Metropolitan Municipality. On the part of councillors, challenges are high turnover rate and excessive workload that hinders them from meeting the requirements of their positions, whereas, municipalities performance is affected by shortage and availability of skills of councillors to fulfil their functions effectively. In addition, they mentioned that, with the introduction of new council structures and new mandate for municipalities, specific functions of councillors are not comprehensively dealt with in legislation. Furthermore, they recommended that training on national, provincial, municipal legislation and policies should be provided including budgeting and financial management. Training should also be on the code, reporting and report writing skills as well as induction training.

6. Methods and Materials

The study adopted an exploratory research design and is qualitative in nature. It focuses on six local municipalities of the two provinces in the Republic of South Africa, namely, KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) and the Eastern Cape (EC). The provincial estimates showed that KZN has the second largest population, with 10.8 million (21.4%) people, after Gauteng with, 11.3 million (22.4%) people. The EC is in the third place with 14 per cent (South African Government Information, 2017). In KZN, four local municipalities under UMgungundlovu District were involved namely, uMsunduzi, uMngeni, uMshwati and uMkhambathini Local Municipalities. Ethekwini Metropolitan Municipality, the only metro in KZN, which has 103 wards, was also involved in the study. The EC Province is situated in the eastern part of South Africa and the study focused on Mzimvubu Local Municipality under Alfred Nzo District Municipality. In KwaZulu-Natal 78 out of 341 councillors were interviewed, in the Eastern Cape, 26 out of 54 councillors took part from the only municipality that was targeted. There were

Table 1: Discriminated Against Based on Race and Gender

Themes	Frequency of Responses
No, never experienced any discriminated	56
Discriminated against based on gender	21
Discriminated against based on race	18
Discriminated against based on other grounds such marital status, language and social status	9

Source: Author

twenty-three (23) women ward councilors; thirty-seven (37) male ward councilors, thirty (30) women PR councilors and fourteen (14) male PR councilors that participated in the study.

In-depth semi-structured interviews were adopted to allow the respondents flexibility when responding to questions. Face-to-face interviews were conducted and the telephone was used due to the geographic dispersion of the respondents, especially from the EC. Data was collected using secondary information such as annual municipal reports, national policies and local government prescripts and other publications. Content analysis was used and themes were induced from the interview data. Data was presented in the form of tables and percentages. The gatekeeper's letter was obtained from all targeted municipalities and ethical clearance approval from University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) was granted before data collection. The issue of confidentiality was communicated to all respondents. The study was limited to ward and PR councilors.

7. Results and Discussion

The findings were analysed and presented in the form of tables which list the themes and the frequency of the responses. Anecdotes were also presented to describe the respondents exact response where there are no tables. In order to identify challenges experienced by ward councillors, four questions were asked. The focus was also on establishing whether or not there were mechanisms available to address such barriers and challenges. It must be noted that the researcher decided to address this question not only for women councillors but for all respondents to share their experiences.

7.1 Discrimination Based on Race and Gender

Firstly, respondents were requested to state whether they ever felt discriminated against based on race or gender while executing their duties.

The research findings in Table 1 show that the majority of the respondents (n=56) 54%, never experienced any kind of discrimination when executing their duties. Respondent 59 indicated that his *"ward covers Indians and White communities, our problems are not the same but have never experienced any discrimination".* This response points to significant progress as the new constitution emphasises equality. Most councillors are able to focus on representing their communities and make decisions on their behalf in terms of section 21 of the Municipal Structures Act (1998). Nonetheless, 20% (n=21) of the respondents reported that they had been discriminated against based on gender while executing their duties. Respondent 13 mentioned that if there is a community meeting *"they say, that girl is coming and do not recognize me as a councillor".* It must be noted that respondents who indicated that they had been discriminated against based on gender, were women ward councillors. It was not only African women, but women of all races in the council that experienced some kind of discrimination within and outside the council. This is in line with a study (Holman, 2017) which revealed that 60 percent of women reported 'inappropriate and disrespectful' comments from a council member. Hence, women are likely to drop out after just one term as councillors (Allen, 2012).

Only 17% (n=18) of the respondents reported that they had been discriminated against based on their race. Respondent 88 said *"ninety percent Indian community in my ward...sometimes they remind me that I am Black and do not have skills to perform".* Race is still a very sensitive subject in South Africa considering its political history. Both Black men and women of all races began to work together for the very first time at local government after 1994 without any experience. Some respondents reported that they had been discriminated against based on grounds such as marital status, language, political party and social status (n=9) at 9%. Respondent 41 commented *"I do not speak isiZulu and I feel excluded sometimes".* This response contravenes the Municipal Structures Act (1998) as

Table 2: Barriers and Challenges of Councillors

Themes	Frequency of Responses
Politics and political parties	25
The role of municipalities and councillors	14
Lack of municipal council support	12
Lack of resources like budget	12
Community projects not completed	10
Family issues	7
Threats from community members	7
Age and gender	5
Lack of support for women programmes	4
Traditional authority versus municipal council	3
No barrier or challenges	5

Source: Author

there are no minimum requirements for councillors. The primary role is to represent the interest of the people in that ward, irrespective of race, gender, language, education level, social or marital status.

7.2 How Discrimination was Reported and Addressed

The researcher had to make a follow up where respondents indicated that they did experience some kind of discrimination while executing their duties and had to indicate how they reported or addressed the issue of discrimination at local government level. Forty-four percent (n=21) of the respondents explained that there were no mechanisms to report or to make sure the issue is properly addressed. Respondent 3 pointed out that *"If undermined because of your skin colour, it is a mental gymnastics… you need to prove your capabilities"*. Thirty-seven percent (n=18) of the respondents indicated that they had to report the issue to another structure for it to be resolved. Respondent 24 said *"I just spoke to one official from the municipality to come and speak to those families".* Nineteen percent (n=9) of the respondents reported that they never reported the issue. Respondent 63 said *"I cannot report something that has hurt me…I deal with it myself…I do address individuals after the meeting".*

The White Paper on Local Government (1998), states that municipalities should ensure that there are representatives from different groups which were previously marginalised to contest the elections. Ward councillors serve as a link between the ward community and the rest of government for proper consultation. The question is who should be protecting municipal councillors when faced with these challenges. Is it the ward committee members or the Speaker of the council? Should they like any other citizen, approach the Equality Court for protection against discrimination? The concern is that councillors would prefer not do anything when faced with challenges. It further highlights that there is a lack of structures and support for councillors. However, one of the duties of the Speaker is to ensure the necessary training for councillors, provide support and assistance. The Speaker should not act only when there are complaints from community members against councillors in terms of Item 14(i)(b). This is in line with Maruno's study (2014) that found that the support structures and systems exist solely on paper.

7.3 Barriers and Challenges of Councillors

Respondents were asked about barriers and challenges that they normally face as councillors when executing their duties (see Table 2 above). Twenty-five respondents (24%) were concerned about the way politics and political parties affect them when performing their duties.

Respondent 67 said *"my predecessor was male and he spoke badly about me".* This response indicates that people may come from the same political party but not support each other. Currently, there is high political infighting and instability as 80 councillors have been killed, including women. The role of the municipalities and councillors at 13% (n=14) was another reason mentioned. Respondent 39 remarked that *"to be a councillor you do not go to any special school;*

it is difficult". The response shows that with the new council structures and mandate for municipalities, training of councillors is crucial in order to understand their role and that of municipalities. The respondents added lack of municipal council support at 11% (n=12) as another barrier. Respondent 19 also stated that "*service delivery in the municipality is mixed with politics, which is why we have service delivery protests, they match against you, smash your car".* Councillors should not be struggling on their own when there is a Speaker and ward committees which make recommendations on matters affecting its ward in terms of the Municipal Structures Act (1998). The Speaker should ensure that councillors are provided with administrative support to execute their duties. One respondent mentioned that sometimes support is withheld because the councillors are affiliated to a ruling party. Community members are not aware of internal politics within the council. According to Hamhill (2015), community members display anger by attacking councillors in their homes.

Lack of resources like budget at 11% (n=12) has been another challenge. Respondent 13 said "*budget constraint is a challenge...a financial year would end without a single project completed for the community".* Ten respondents (10%) indicated that there are community projects not completed which is a challenge for them. The challenge can be with the municipality and or the decisions made by the council. Taaibosch and van Niekerk (2017) recommended training on municipal legislation and policies including budgeting and reporting skills. This is crucial for councillors and ward committees to be realistic and communicate information to wards on budget, IDP's and service delivery options. Other challenges are family issues at 7% (n=7) and threats from community members at 7% (n=7). These challenges have been discussed above as women are marginalised within their families and by community members, especially Black women. Although not that significant, it is also important to note other reasons mentioned by respondents such as age and gender at 5% (n=5) traditional authority versus municipal council at 3% (n=3); and lack of support for women's programmes at 4% (n=4). Very few respondents reported that there were no barriers at 5% (n=5).

7.4 Overcoming Barriers and Challenges

The researcher explores how respondents overcame barriers and challenges in their role as councillors at local government level. It must be stated that a large number of the respondents reported that they have never done anything (n=22) and very few are still dealing with the challenges (n=3). Respondent 15 mentioned "*I do not say anything and I ignore it completely".* Section 153(1)(e) of the constitution provides that councillors should respond to the community needs. But who is taking care of councillor's needs? This response shows that there is no support for municipal councillors. Fifteen respondents indicated that they hold meetings in order to address the challenges. Whereas, ten respondents mentioned that they had to report to higher structures for issues to be resolved. It must be noted that structures included the women's wing of a political party, business people and the police which are independent of the municipality council. Twelve respondents indicated that education especially political education, writing reports and inviting relevant officials to come to meetings assisted them. Twelve respondents mentioned that they received support from senior authorities to deal with issues properly. Respondent 8 said "*the former chairperson is in the BEC, has a lot of influence and political knowledge".* Eight receive support from family members such as children, parents and partners. Six respondents mentioned that they had to draw up a plan. One can notice that councillors have to network and receive family for support in order to resolve issues. None of the councillors mentioned the Speaker of the council or ward committee members as advisors on matters affecting their wards. Seitlholo's study (2016) maintains that ward committees themselves have challenges such as lack of finances and infrastructure, lack of knowledge of local government legislation and regulations as well as political interference.

8. Conclusion and Recommendations

Evidence in the study indicates that, in general, women councillors never felt discriminated against while executing their duties. Both men and women ward and PR councillors have been able to work with diverse people of South Africa. It must be noted that those who experienced discrimination based on gender were women of all races. Race is still a largely discussed issue even after 25 years of democracy in South Africa. The study found that there were no mechanisms to report discrimination or to ensure that issues are properly addressed and resolved by the council. This is a challenge for our democracy as municipal councillors including women need to be protected. It is difficult for councillors to focus on community needs, yet they remain vulnerable and their needs are neglected.

With regard to barriers and challenges that both ward and PR councillors have faced, the study found politics and political parties; the role of municipalities and councillors; lack of municipal support; community projects not completed; family issues; lack of resources like budget; threats from community members; age and gender; traditional authority versus municipal council; and lack of support for women's programmes. The study revealed that councillors overcome these barriers and challenges by holding meetings; drawing up a plan; reporting to higher structures or senior officials; relying on family support and educating people politically. None of the councillors mentioned the Speaker or ward committees providing support when executing their duties. One can conclude that there is something missing in the municipal policies or legislation, not only in relation to specific functions of councillors but also to their protection in the field. These challenges will remain a barrier for women ward councillors to work effectively both in the council and in their ward.

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