

# Interview With Honourable Ms Ntlhoi Motsamai

Speaker of Parliament of  
The Kingdom of Lesotho

Conducted by Keiso **Matashane-Marite**



## Profile

Ms Ntlhoi Motsamai started as a deputy speaker in the National Assembly of Lesotho in 1996 and was elected Speaker after the tragic death of her predecessor Dr. J.T. Kolane. At the time, two issues militated against her appointment; her age and her gender. Through hard work, and a passion for gender issues, Ms Motsamai has represented Lesotho at a number of regional, continental and global forums. In 2002, she was elected Chairperson of the SADC Parliamentary Forum (SADC-PF), a responsibility that she assumed seriously, judiciously and with such vigour that she has made a lasting impression on civil society, the international community and governments in the region. In 2004, her tenure of office as Chairperson of SADC-PF came to an end and she will be remembered as a Chairperson who took national Presidents and Prime Ministers to task on the pace of implementing regional and continental commitments. During her term of office she worked closely with the Gender Unit of the SADC PF. She has led election missions in the region and canvassed for inclusive participation of women in politics and in decision-making. Having been a Deputy and ultimately a Speaker at such a young age (33 years), she has become a beacon of inspiration to young women in Lesotho and the SADC region. She has canvassed her support for women's representation in politics

to a wide audience including the Pan African Parliament. She has officiated in various public functions in Lesotho and elsewhere. And of course as the Speaker she has had occasions of welcoming dignitaries to the Parliament of the Kingdom of Lesotho, these include the President of Botswana, His Excellency Mr. Festus Gontebanye Mogae, the former President of Mozambique, His Excellency Mr. Joaquim Alberto Chissano, Secretary General of the United Nations, Mr. Kofi Annan, Secretary General of the Commonwealth, Mr Don. McKinnon, to name but a few. Ms Motsamai's outspokenness has landed her "in trouble" with her mother who feels that she has "failed" in her task as a mother to groom a daughter who does not openly challenge traditions and customs of being a submissive Mosotho woman. Speaker Motsamai remains a role model for women and young girls in Lesotho and Southern African region.

## Gender and Development Initiatives in Lesotho

**Q: What strides have been made in Lesotho and regionally in the area of the status of women in politics and decision-making?**

**A:** There has been tremendous progress towards the achievement of women's representation in politics. Given where we were in 1995, Lesotho and the region

have come a long way. For instance, upon return to a democratic dispensation in 1993, in the National Assembly, Lesotho started off with just three women out of 65 seats. In the next elections of 1998, exactly the same number of women was maintained in the Assembly, although the membership had increased from 65 to 80. In the 2002 elections, there was a marked improvement to 16 women out of 120 members. These numbers are important because they are evidence to a change in the political landscape, which has expanded to include women.

The government of Lesotho is making a commendable effort towards the achievement of gender equality. There is notable political will on the part of government. There are currently five women full cabinet ministers and one assistant minister, totalling of six out of 23 ministers. Lesotho has recently made history by appointing a woman Commissioner of Police, the first ever, not only in Lesotho but on the entire continent. There is one woman Commissioner on the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) out of three commissioners, and three women judges out of 11. We are also seeing a trend of an increase in appointments of women ambassadors, i.e. five out of 13. The list is endless, with appointments of Principal Secretaries, directors in the civil service and in parastatals.

Over and above these, the government has adopted progressive declarations such as the one on Gender and Development, whereby the Heads of State and Government of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) have committed themselves to ensuring equal representation of women and men in all decision-making positions of member states and SADC structures at all levels and the achievement of at least 30 percent target of women in political and decision-making structures by the year 2005.

Political will in Lesotho is not only illustrated by an increase in the number of women in decision-making but also in initiatives that accompany these moves. For instance, women parliamentarians have established a women's caucus across political parties. This caucus is a forum for debate, learning, training and information sharing for women members of parliament. It is in this forum that women have a space to discuss and debate issues that concern them. This is a positive move that illustrates that issues of gender equality are permeating structures that were traditionally and historically conservative and male-dominated.

**Q: Is there a value in looking at gender equality beyond numbers?**

**A:** Absolutely. However, numbers are an important aspect as well. Without numbers efforts would be fruitless. Lesotho Parliament is a good example of a critical mass of women moving beyond numbers. Parliaments everywhere else in the world are dominated by men; the language used, the culture of doing business is largely reflective of male character. Lesotho is no exception to this trend. Because the numbers of women in Parliament have gone up, their contribution and effectiveness is also being felt. Women parliamentarians have contributed to a change in the language used; where language was largely sexist it is now at best gender neutral. When making contributions in Parliament, Male MPs are conscious of women Parliamentarians objecting to insensitive language. Ever since the tenure of office of a woman Presiding Officer, male MPs have quite often been requested to withdraw statements which are derogatory and seem to undermine women.

Women's contribution does not end in changing the culture and language used, but extends to policies that are adopted and laws passed. For instance, women's presence in Parliament has been of great significance when laws which take into cognisance their needs and aspirations were debated. These include the Sexual Offences Act 2003, which is intended to combat sexual violence and to prescribe appropriate sentences for sexual offences, and the Local Government Elections (Amendment) Act 2004, which makes a provision for 30 percent of seats to be reserved and be contested by women only as a practical way of ensuring the representation of women in the Local Government Councils.

**Q: What has been civil society's contribution to gender and development?**

**A:** Civil society has made a big contribution, specifically women's NGOs and media groups. They have worked very hard to give support and visibility to women who are in leadership. Organisations like the Electoral Institute for Southern Africa (EISA), Gender Links, Women and Law in Southern Africa (WLSA) and Women in Development in Southern Africa Awareness (WIDSAA) programme have worked tirelessly to empower women in decision-making positions by offering information and training to build capacity, confidence and self-esteem for women to make informed choices. Civil Society has also contributed in promoting accountability by holding workshops and

creating awareness on important international and regional instruments that Lesotho has acceded to. The vibrancy of civil society has to be maintained because they are an important watchdog to commitments that member states make at national, regional and international levels. NGOs have played a major role in the

of Zambia. SADC-PF has worked a lot in the region to engender parliaments and to ensure that members look at issues through a gender lens. The SADC-PF has also worked very hard in lobbying Leaders of political parties in member states in the run up to elections to field women candidates.

## **SADC HAVE COMMITTED THEMSELVES TO ENSURING EQUAL REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN AND MEN IN ALL DECISION-MAKING POSITIONS OF MEMBER STATES AND SADC STRUCTURES AT ALL LEVELS AND THE ACHIEVEMENT OF AT LEAST 30 PERCENT TARGET OF WOMEN IN POLITICAL AND DECISION-MAKING STRUCTURES BY THE YEAR 2005.**

achievements that member states have made today. Civil society has empowered women parliamentarians to open doors for others, to empower and encourage them to join politics.

### **Regional Perspectives**

**Q: You have just ended your tenure as Chairperson of SADC-PF. Where is Southern Africa on the gender and development barometer?**

**A:** During my tenure as Chairperson of SADC-PF there have been important changes that have improved women's participation. For instance, we did amend the constitution to enable the participation of chairpersons of National Women's Parliamentary Caucuses in the Plenary Assembly as bona fide Members. As a result thereof, the Plenary Assembly has achieved 50 percent women representation, whereas initially it was only a third. This is historical because initially women's membership was very small. We were also being assisted of course by the Regional Women's Parliamentary Caucus (RWPC) and the SADC-PF's gender programme which is tasked with the responsibility of engendering parliaments in the Southern African region. Beyond Plenary Assembly representation, SADC-PF has increased women representation and office bearing in its committees. For instance, the Committee on HIV and AIDS committee is chaired by a woman MP, Dr. Khauhele Raditapole from the Parliament of Lesotho and the Committee on Regional Integration is also chaired by a woman MP, Hon. Edith Nawakwi from the Parliament

**Q: Any regional success stories and major accomplishments?**

**A:** In the past 10 years this region has registered numerous successes, viz; Lesotho is one of the countries that ranks very high in "educating a girl child." In Lesotho, women have been appointed to what were traditionally male positions; the Speaker of Parliament and the Commissioner of Police. In the Parliament of the Republic of South Africa, both the Speaker and the Deputy Speaker are women. In Malawi the First Deputy Speaker is a woman. In Namibia, both the Deputy Speaker of the National Assembly and the Deputy Chairperson of the National Council are women. In the Parliament of Botswana, the Deputy Speaker is now a woman, following the 2004 parliamentary elections. In Zimbabwe one of the Vice Presidents is a woman. In Mozambique the Prime Minister is woman.

**Q: Any challenges facing the region?**

**A:** Issues of inaccessibility of Parliament to women are still real in this region. Access to political space continues to be largely the preserve of men. Leadership is strongly associated with men, and so is the institution of Parliament. In the Lesotho Parliament for instance, the sight of women at the gallery is still a rarity. Very few who are seldom seen are usually on a different mission altogether, they are mostly constituency secretaries who have come to consult with their Members of Parliament. The region is still faced with massive resistance to gender issues from a general populace that still

does not appreciate why there should be equality in representation. There is a serious need for mass campaigns and mass engendering of different structures in society including, chieftaincies, the church, communities, the family and all other structures. The current status quo of disparities is by-and-large perpetuated by socialization which still emphasizes male supremacy.

The biggest and most important task of parents in our jurisdiction is to instil virtues of humility and obedience, particularly to girls who are expected to take instructions without questions, as this is seen as some form of preparation for the next stage in life, as wives and daughters-in-law. Thus, to instil virtues of gender equality at this later stage in life becomes an uphill battle because skills like public-speaking are discouraged in girls and through our conservative socialization. Women or girls who speak up and answer back are shunned and reprimanded, whereas the same values are nurtured and encouraged in boys. Moreover, decision-making and public-speaking areas (khotla) are only for men. Women only accessed these spaces when cleaning the area and/or bringing food for the men who would be debating issues of communal and national importance.

**Q: What is your opinion to quotas for women?**

**A:** I am in support of quotas as a starting point in redressing the imbalances of the past. Women face insurmountable challenges in their endeavours to participate in politics and to access political power. They need to be assisted with supportive policy mechanisms like quotas. Lesotho stands to benefit by learning from Tanzania on how that country has achieved legislated and constitutionally protected quotas for women, along with The-First-Past-The Post system.

**Q: Do you think electoral systems have created enough entry points for women in Parliaments?**

**A:** Electoral models alone are not enough. Lesotho is a good example, because it has adopted a new electoral model; the Mixed Member Proportional (MMP). One would expect the newly introduced proportional representation to have increased the number of women but it has not. What the new system managed to do is to increase the political party representation in Parliament, an improvement from one to 10 parties. Multiparty democracy did not necessarily improve the numbers for women. Contrary to what a lot of people think, the First-Past-The-Post system has brought about the

majority of women in the National Assembly, i.e. 12, while the Proportional Representation (PR) has brought only four.

Therefore my contention is that electoral models alone are not enough, they need to be accompanied by a strong political will and responsible leadership that put value in inclusive democracy. And indeed I have always asserted that there can be no democracy for men alone, a view which is supported by genuine practitioners of democracy.

**Q: How have HIV and AIDS affected elections and women representation?**

**A:** HIV and AIDS have tremendously increased the burden of care on women whose roles and responsibilities have increased as HIV-related morbidity has escalated. This burden denies women time needed to contest for elections, improve their well being and generally compete on the same footing as men. For women parliamentarians, their care role as women is eating away time that they could have been better utilizing for researching for their contributions in debates.

**Q: Should we move for the SADC Declaration on Gender and Development to be a protocol?**

**A:** The SADC Declaration on Gender and Development has been an effective tool that has committed our member states to action to improve the representation of women in decision-making positions. However, our countries are still grappling with modalities of implementation strategies to ensure that commitments are translated into action. That is very important. Whether it is a declaration or a protocol, some mechanisms are required on the ground to facilitate the implementation. Member states have to work very hard to engender our communities. Everyone has to be conscientized about the importance of a society that respects the rights of all, irrespective of their gender; where all members are given equal opportunities on the development agenda. Societies also have to be made aware of the benefits that all stand to gain from promoting gender equality. We need to build consciousness in schools, religious bodies, traditional leadership, families and in all sectors of our society. 🗨️

*Keiso Matashane-Marite, who conducted this interview on behalf of OSISA, is the national co-ordinator of WLSA in Lesotho. Her contact is wlsales@ilesotho.com*