



What men can do to enhance women's voices and impact

Politics is tough. It's also tough for men. It is definitely tougher for women. It is like shark infested waters. Our job as men in leadership is to identify, equip and deploy capable women to jump into the deep end, win and strive to make a difference in the society. Their failures and successes, which we also share as men, can enable us pick up vital lessons and inspire us to plod on against all odds.

In terms of political power, most women are still in the shadow of men. Some are occupying a few tiny spots of light. We have to identify the points of light and seek to connect them. In my work, I have encountered some amazing women. Some women have even surprised themselves....I have even pushed some women to exceed the limits that society and the political system sets for them.

A story is told of a rich man who wanted to marry off his daughter to a brave young man. When the daughter was due for marriage, the man advertised and all suitors of different backgrounds came to his palatial home. He took all of them to his great swimming pool and told the suitors that he would give his daughter's hand in marriage and half his wealth to the man who would swim across the pool. For that occasion, several hungry crocodiles had been dropped in the pool.

The wealthy man and his daughter stood on the edge on one side of the pool. The young men lined up on the opposite end of the pool readying themselves for the perilous swim to the other side where untold wealth and the hand of a beautiful maiden awaited. The thought of such rewards filled the minds of the young men. Suddenly, there is a splash in the water. Someone had dived into the pool and was swimming across. All the men watched in amaze-

Women who venture into politics are seen as an aberration. Hens that want to crow among the cockerels!

**Norbert Mao
Women's Day**



ment as the "brave" young man was swimming across, expertly avoiding the dangerous crocodiles. Somehow, he made it to the other end and emerged from the water panting.

The rich man could not believe it. He summoned all the suitors to gather around the pool and immediately announced the brave swimmer as his new son-in-law. Such uncommon courage was worthy of praise and reward. The young man was garlanded and was about to receive his new bride. But he then turned to his fellow suitors and said in a low tone: "After receiving my bride, I want to know who pushed me into the water and almost got me killed by the crocodiles."

A lot of challenges and opportunities await women who enter the political arena. Many times women underestimate their abilities and capacities and let opportunities fly past. They don't realise their potential and think certain things are not meant for them. Sometimes they do not know what they are capable of doing, until they are pushed.

To the women aspiring to lead, I say the

onus is on you to dive into the crocodile infested pool and wade across. Good things come with a bit of discomfort. There is no growth in comfort. Some people are scared of change; they can't take a single risk. Whenever there is a change, a transition, there is always discomfort, but in most cases, the discomfort is temporary.

Some people would rather die in the comfort of a subordinate and lowly position because they are scared of taking risks and improving themselves. I can assure you, all you will get is a long service award. Employee of the year. It's like eating your seeds rather than planting them.

I believe that men should become enablers to help women access the positions from where they can question power, access power and exercise power.

Women need a place to stand. They also need levers. The levers include progressive laws and regulations, whether they be national laws or party constitutions and rules. The places to stand are the positions where decisions are made and opportunities to be heard in person. To move an immovable obstacle, you need an irresistible force.

The participation of women in politics is still marginal. Women who venture into politics are seen as an aberration. Hens that want to crow among the cockerels! A proper consideration of this matter should, therefore, be at the nexus between the law and the reality. Women's rights to participate in politics are guaranteed on paper but undermined systemically, structurally and bureaucratically.

The question is, should women be content with being represented or should they demand full participation? Should women demand to be present? I'm here to defend the politics of presence and impact. It is not enough for women to have a seat at the table. They must have a voice. And that voice must be heard!

Norbert Mao is the Justice and Constitutional Affairs minister.