

Prioritise gender parity efforts ahead of 2017 elections

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Kenya joined countries around the world to mark the International Women's Day on March 8.

The 2016 theme is Planet 50-50 by 2030: Step it up for Gender Equality. This year, individuals around the world have pledged to take action to help accelerate gender parity.

There is a perception that progress has been made because women now feature in appointive positions but until they make progress in elective positions, gender parity remains elusive.

The Constitution espouses the rights of women as being equal to men, and entitled to enjoy equal opportunities in the political, social and economic spheres. Article 81 (b), which refers to the general principles of Kenya's electoral system, provides that not more than two-thirds of the members of elective public bodies shall be of the same gender.

Article 27 further obligates the government to develop and pass policies and laws, including affirmative action programmes and policies, to address past discrimination suffered by women.

In 2012, the Supreme Court gave an advisory opinion that the two-thirds gender principle had not been transformed into a full right capable of enforcement. The 2013 elections were the first to be held under the new Constitution.

Sixteen women and 274 men were elected to the National Assembly. In addition, 47 women were elected to serve as county women's representatives and five were nominated.

This means that there are a total of 68 women in the National Assembly which represents 19 per cent of the membership.

The two-thirds gender principle was therefore not attained. Further, in the Senate, women did not win any of the 47 elected seats.

Currently, there are three amendment bills before the National Assembly seeking to ensure the two-thirds gender rule is adhered to in the next general elections.

MPs should deliberate and pass a cohesive Affirmative Action Bill to avoid a constitutional crisis after the 2017 election if one gender exceeds the two thirds gender limit.

Despite the strides made in ensuring the participation of women in public affairs, current trends in Kenya's politics indicate that they still have a long way to go before attaining equity and equality with men.

There are several reasons behind this phenomenon, but key among them include structural constraints, attitudes and socio-cultural practices such patriarchy, lack of adequate resources and gendered power relations and roles.

The road to gender equality has been arduous and women remain underrepresented in both elective and appointive positions.

As Kenya prepares for the 2017 general elections, the need for gender parity and women empowerment in the electoral agenda should be a priority and not at the periphery.

Ms Shako is a Riara Law School lecturer and practising advocate. fshako@riarauniversity.ac.ke