

Malawi: Innovative campaigning by women candidates

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LILONGWE: You will find Beauty Kasonda on her campaign trail at funerals, weddings, church functions or just about any local gathering in her community. Kasonda does not have the sort of funding her male counterparts have for campaigning in the country's November 2010 elections but she is not letting that stop her.

In Malawi election campaigns are costly because most potential voters expect contestants to distribute handouts, such as T-shirts, cloth, food items and even money during campaign rallies and door-to-door campaigning, as a sign of 'compassion' to their constituents. In the past if they do not receive these handouts, they just will not vote for a candidate because they deem them to be 'stingy leaders'.

But many women do not have the financial resources of their male counterparts who are generally more educated, employed and own land and other assets.

The 24-year-old independent candidate from Mpanje Village on the lakeshore district of Salima, Central Malawi, may not have financial backing for her campaign but she is finding other ways to get herself known to the voters.

"I don't have money to distribute but I have the knowledge to carry out a good campaign. This is the weapon I have against the men I am competing against," she said. She added she knows of four men that are competing against her.

Kasonda has gone flat-out on her campaign trail - almost daily she goes to the village chief to inquire if there is a funeral, a wedding, a birth or a church function in the area.

"I don't have money for freebies and so I take advantage of any assembly to coax people into voting for me. My husband is very supportive. He escorts me to the gatherings all the time. We ride on his bicycle," said Kasonda.

Kasonda says at funerals she stands up to express her condolences to the bereaved family and goes on to remind people of the forthcoming election. "I tell them to vote for me because I will lobby for development programmes from government. This place has been underdeveloped for a long time," she told IPS.

She said people have come to accept her new campaign ways and stop to talk to her after the formal speeches.

Kasonda spends her afternoons with any gathered group she can find, trying to convince them to vote for her. "I go back home when it's dark and I have to ensure that I collect firewood for cooking at home. I still have my family to look after even in the midst of this mammoth task," she told IPS.

As a wife and mother she is up by 5am every morning to make sure that she does all household chores before her campaign team and local supporters start flooding her home. She cleans the house, boils water for her husband and three-year-old child to bath and prepares breakfast.

"I have been very busy since April when I declared that I will be contesting the elections. Many people come to my house everyday to complain on what development projects are lacking in this area. They tell me that they want me to contest and win so that I work on making a difference," Kasonda told IPS.

Kasonda said the electorate in the area believe in women leaders more than men. "They say women are more honest and motherly and therefore more caring. I am also young and therefore dynamic and easy to work with," said Kasonda.

The Member of Parliament in Kasonda's area is also woman, Delia Kankhwani - she was voted into office in the May 2009 parliamentary elections where she ran against five men. "I am so optimistic of a victory come November," Kasonda told IPS.

Kasonda is not alone in her quest for political leadership; the Centre for Human Rights and Rehabilitation (CHRR), a human rights non-governmental organisation engaged in the promotion of good governance is imparting unconventional campaign skills to women candidates vying to be councillors.

CHRR is identifying aspiring female councillors in Malawi and is providing them with skills in election campaigning, among other things.

"Campaign skills that we have provided include campaign advertisement and use of media," said Michael Kaiyatsa, programme assistant for CHRR.

He said the women candidates are also being taught how to conduct mass rallies and to disseminate campaign messages, lobbying self mobilised audiences in groups such as in funerals, churches and markets, canvassing and in using drama and traditional songs.

Emelida Kamatenda, another female contestant from Salima town, is also employing the skills learnt at CHRR.

Kamatenda, 57, who is representing the ruling Democratic People's Party told IPS that she lost in the party primary elections for the May 2009 parliamentary elections but still wants to pursue political leadership.

"I only lost because the voting was not fair then. The man I was competing against had a lot of money to give out. I think I now have the skills to win even without money," she said.

Kamatenda said although her political party provides financial support to its candidates; the money is never enough. "We have to use our own money most times. The men have more money of their own and things are easier for them."

Meanwhile, the campaign trail still remains tough for women aspirants. The local media is awash with stories of female aspirants who are living in fear claiming that male contenders are also using their financial muscle to hire "thugs" to intimidate them.

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