

Update on the Women's Movement in Botswana: Have Women Stopped Talking?

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Abstract: Across Africa in the early twenty-first century, autonomous women's movements have transformed the political landscape. With their support, African women are lobbying for constitutional reforms, entering political office in unprecedented numbers, and initiating legislation to expand women's rights. African women's movements have been emboldened by changes in international and regional norms concerning women's rights and representation, a new availability of resources to enhance women's status, and in many places, an end to conflict. In Botswana, the 1980s and 1990s were a period of heightened women's mobilization. Led by the women's organization Emang Basadi, the women's movement accomplished many significant victories, including winning a landmark citizenship case, prompting a comprehensive review of laws to identify instances of gender discrimination, issuing the first women's manifesto in Africa, and organizing workshops for political parties and women candidates. Some scholars have suggested that Emang Basadi's work was responsible not just for increasing women's representation in parliament, but also for broadening democracy in Botswana. Since 2010, however, a once vibrant women's movement has gone quiet. This article seeks to understand this development and to explore how the movement might be revitalized. The article concludes by drawing comparisons with other women's movements in the region and suggesting that the women's movement in Botswana, like others in the region, may be, in the words of one scholar, "in abeyance."

Résumé: À travers l'Afrique du début du vingt-et-unième siècle, les mouvements féministes autonomes ont transformé la scène politique. Grâce à leur soutien, les femmes africaines font du lobbying pour obtenir des réformes constitutionnelles. Elles s'engagent en nombres records dans les milieux politiques et amorcent des

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projets de législation pour les droits des femmes. Les mouvements féministes africains ont été encouragés par l'évolution des normes internationales et régionales concernant les droits et la représentation des femmes, ainsi qu'une accessibilité nouvelle des ressources pour améliorer le statut des femmes et, dans, plusieurs régions, pour mettre fin aux conflits. Au Botswana, les années 80 et 90 furent une période d'accentuation de la mobilisation des femmes. Mené par l'organisation féministe Emang Basadi, le mouvement a obtenu plusieurs victoires importantes, dont un procès décisif sur un cas de citoyenneté entraînant une révision complète des lois afin d'identifier des cas de discrimination sexiste. Il en a résulté le premier manifeste féministe d'Afrique, et des ateliers de sensibilisation pour les partis politiques et les candidates féminines. Certains universitaires ont indiqué que les efforts de Emang Basadi avaient conduit non seulement à l'augmentation de la représentation féminine au Parlement, mais également à un élargissement de la démocratie au Botswana. Depuis 2010 en revanche, le mouvement féministe auparavant si actif est devenu silencieux. Cet essai cherche à comprendre cette évolution, et à explorer les moyens de revitaliser ce mouvement. L'argument se conclut par des comparaisons avec d'autres mouvements féministes de la région, et la suggestion que le mouvement féministe au Botswana, comme d'autres dans la région, pourrait être, selon les mots d'un spécialiste, "en suspens."

Across Africa in the early twenty-first century, autonomous women's movements have transformed the political landscape. With their support, African women are lobbying for constitutional reforms, entering political office in unprecedented numbers, and initiating legislation to expand women's rights. African women's movements have been emboldened by changes in international and regional norms concerning women's rights and representation, a new availability of resources to enhance women's status, and, in many places, an end to conflict (Tripp et al. 2009). In Botswana, the 1980s and 1990s were a period of heightened women's mobilization. This was the period, to use the phrase that I heard many times in Botswana, "when women started talking."¹ Led by the organization Emang Basadi, the movement had many significant accomplishments, including victory in a landmark citizenship case and significant legal reform in the area of gender discrimination. The organization also issued the first women's manifesto in Africa and organized workshops for political parties and women candidates that resulted in the most successful outcomes for elected women that Botswana had ever seen. Some scholars have suggested that Emang Basadi's work was responsible not just for increasing women's representation in parliament, but also for broadening democracy in Botswana. Since 2010, however, this vibrant women's movement has gone quiet. This article seeks to understand this development and to explore how the movement might be revitalized.

This article is based on field research carried out in Botswana during 2009 and on subsequent follow-up research. During six months of research in Gaborone and surrounding areas, I conducted semi-structured in-depth

interviews with past and present leaders of women's organizations, including several founding members of Emang Basadi, current women activists, women members of parliament (MPs) and women ministers, chairs of the women's wings of the three main political parties, (male) leaders of the political parties, successful and failed women candidates for parliament and local councils, officers of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Gender Unit, the Women's Affairs Department, and the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC), as well as representatives of donor agencies. I participated in workshops of the Botswana Caucus for Women in Politics (BCWP) and the Botswana Media Women's Association (BOMWA) and to that extent engaged in participant observation.² I also consulted primary and secondary sources in libraries and archives in Gaborone, including those of the National Archives, the BDS Collection at the University of Botswana, the Botswana Society, SADC, the IEC, and the Women's Affairs Department. The article utilizes the grounded theory approach, uncovering reoccurring themes in order to analyze the data (see Fallon 2003).

In parliamentary elections in 2009, the percentage of women directly elected to Botswana's National Assembly fell dramatically to 3.5 percent compared to 7 percent in 2004 and 15 percent in 1999. Taking into account specially elected or appointed women members, the total percentage of women members in Botswana's National Assembly in 2011 is a mere 7.9 percent—in stark contrast to the 44.5 percent in neighboring South Africa and 56.3 percent in nearby Rwanda.³ Disillusionment with the institution has not been a reason for the diminished representation of women. To be sure, in some African countries, such as Senegal, women and their organizations have shunned the legislature, considering it an institution unworthy of their electoral aspirations. Creevey noted in 2006 that Senegal's National Assembly was referred to as a mere "applause chamber," and such a dim view of parliament is common among academics and the media in Botswana as well.⁴ Molutsi (1998:372) has described Botswana's liberal democracy as "characterized by a weak parliament, a weak opposition and a weak civil society, all leading to a de facto one party state and a top down political culture." Barei (2008) also describes a parliament that effectively performs its functions, but is ultimately disempowered by the fact that its resources and staff are provided by the executive. And when Ian Khama ascended to the presidency in 2008, many media sources predicted a further marginalization of parliament and saw the potential for it to be reduced to "a mere rubber stamp institution."⁵ It should be noted, though, that none of the Botswana politicians or activists interviewed for this study expressed this view of parliament.

In an earlier article (Bauer 2010), I identify diminished women's movement mobilization as one of several factors explaining women's decreasing legislative representation in Botswana.⁶ In this article I seek to uncover the factors accounting for the diminished mobilization from the early 2000s onward. These include (1) the accomplishment of many of the women's

movement's early goals; (2) challenges facing civil society in general in Botswana; (3) an increasing ambivalence within a powerful executive toward a women's rights agenda; and (4) a constitution that is essentially neutral (rather than egalitarian) in terms of gender difference. The article concludes by drawing lessons from women's movements from around the region.

"When Women Started Talking": Emergence of the Women's Movement in Botswana

From independence until the present, women's activism in Botswana has followed a continuum, but with some periods more robust than others.⁷ In the early years the main organizations articulating women's interests were the Botswana Council of Women (BCW) and the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) (see Ntseane 2005). Wass (2004) describes the origins of the BCW in a 1965 meeting in Francistown of the secretaries of village women's groups from around the country. Neither group had a strong political orientation (and certainly not a feminist outlook); rather their focus was on social welfare and development (see Mookodi 1972). Two decades after independence, one of Botswana's first two women MPs, G. K. T. Chiepe, who later was the foreign minister, cited the two organizations as still the main women's organizations in the country (Novicki 1985:15).⁸ Unlike many other African countries such as Ghana (see Fallon 2008), Botswana at independence did not find itself with one all-powerful national women's organization in service to the state.

At the same time, women appear to have been singularly absent from nationalist and political party politics in Botswana's protectorate and early independence periods. A survey of much of the literature from the pre-independence period found a reference only to the Bechuanaland People's Party women's league whose members led protests in Francistown in the early 1960s against encroachments on their right to brew and sell traditional beer (see Mosojane 1993; Parsons et al. 1995).⁹ Mookodi (1972:358) observed in the early 1970s that "since politics is something new to us, women did not take a leading role at the beginning."¹⁰ Of the three major political parties that existed in Botswana in late 2009, women's wings had been formed years after the parties were founded, in 1987 in the ruling Botswana Democratic Party (BDP) and in 1977 in the Botswana National Front (BNF).¹¹ (The third party, the Botswana Congress Party [BCP] was only founded in 1998, at which time it formed a women's wing.) According to Selolwane (2000), when they were formed, women's wings neither encouraged women to participate in elections nor articulated the concerns of women voters. Rather, they were "social clubs for spouses of male politicians, with their political activity restricted mainly to fundraising and canvassing for support for the men as well as providing entertainment during political rallies."¹² Just as significant, despite Botswana's proximity to

and interaction with several southern African liberation movements, the nation never spawned a strong leftist political party or liberation movement of the type that has historically been more receptive to women's political empowerment and reliant on women's movement mobilization.¹³ (Indeed no nationalist struggle of any sort was required for Botswana to attain its independence.)

In the 1970s and 1980s Botswana followed the path of many other African countries influenced by emerging international norms and discourses around women's rights.¹⁴ Across the continent the United Nations Conferences on Women had a formative impact. The majority of independent African countries established the first national machineries for women in the wake of the 1975 conference in Mexico City, and forty-one countries had done so by 1980 (see Tripp et al. 2009). Indeed, the government of Botswana sent a delegation to the Mexico City conference and shortly thereafter two pivotal government bodies were established. In 1981 the Women and Development Planning and Advisory Committee (WODPLAC) was set up as an interministerial committee to advise the government on project formulation. In the same year a Women's Affairs Unit was established in the Ministry of Labour and Home Affairs under the Department of Culture, Registration and Social Welfare.¹⁵ (The unit was upgraded to a division in 1989 and a department in 1996 [see Ngwenya 2002]). Lebohang Letsie, one of several founding members of *Emang Basadi*, notes that the 1975 conference "sharpened our gender politics" and that WODPLAC was determined to discover "the root causes of the subordination of women" (personal interview, June 4, 2009, Gaborone).

The 1980s and 1990s were a period of heightened women's mobilization in Botswana.¹⁶ Ten years after the Mexico City conference, the United Nations Conference on Women held in Nairobi in 1985 was widely considered a turning point that provided an impetus for the formation of women's organizations and the emergence of national women's movements across the continent (see Tripp et al. 2009).¹⁷ Following the conference, WODPLAC members invited Athaliah Molokomme, then a lecturer at the University of Botswana, to do a study of laws that discriminated against women (see Molokomme 1993), and around the same time Unity Dow challenged an amendment to the Citizenship Act of 1984 that sought to establish citizenship through a father only. Then, in 1986, the activities of WODPLAC, the Unity Dow case, and the impetus provided by the Nairobi conference led to the founding of *Emang Basadi* (Stand Up, Women!). According to Athaliah Molokomme (1991:848), one of several founding members, the idea behind *Emang Basadi* was to "start a different type of women's organization that would initiate and provide a platform for serious discussion of issues affecting women."

In its early days, consistent with its origins around the Unity Dow case, *Emang Basadi* focused on legal reform. It held workshops, seminars, and conferences in an effort to mobilize women, to make them aware of dis-

criminary laws, and to advocate for reform of these laws. It also cultivated the collaboration of other new women's organizations such as the Metlhaetsile Women's Information Center, Ditshwanelo, and the Botswana chapters of Women in Law in Southern Africa (WILSA) and Women in Law and Development in Africa (WILDAF) (see Leslie 2006). With the establishment in 1993 of a political education project, Emang Basadi shifted its main agenda from law reform and legal education to political education and political empowerment (see Selolwane 2000). The shift was brought about by women's continued marginalization in politics and society, a reluctance on the part of authorities to respond to women's needs, and government passivity and inaction (indeed intransigence) in the Unity Dow case—which was not resolved until 1995 (see Emang Basadi 1999a; Machangana 1999; Selolwane 2000). In 1994 and 1999 Emang Basadi issued electoral manifestos in the hope of influencing the manifestos of the political parties that were contesting elections in those two election cycles; the 1994 manifesto was the first such document in Africa. The organization also held multiple workshops to train women candidates in an effort to elect more women to parliament and local councils.

The 1995 United Nations Conference on Women, held in Beijing, "marked a watershed in terms of government initiatives regarding women" (Tripp et al. 2009:168); with prompting from women's movements and women's organizations, gender mainstreaming policies and national plans of action were adopted in many countries and national machineries were upgraded to women or gender ministries. Based on interviews with women activists, Leslie (2006:62) argues that the government of Botswana "wanted to participate in the Beijing conference to portray its 'democratic and liberal ideals,'" and its delegation was led by the deputy speaker of the National Assembly, Bahiti Temane. In the aftermath of the conference the government identified six critical areas of concern from the Platform for Action, adopted a National Policy on Women in Development, a National Gender Programme Framework, and a Plan of Action. In addition, Gender Focal Points were created in all government ministries, and in 1996 Women's Affairs was upgraded to a department (see Mhlanga et al. 2009; WAD 2003).¹⁸ In 1996 the government also ratified the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), after having refused to do so for more than two decades, and in 1997 it joined other southern African governments in adopting the 1997 SADC Declaration on Gender and Development, which called for 30 percent women in political and decision-making structures by 2005.

In 2001 Van Allen predicted that "whatever happens [in Botswana politics], the women's rights movement will be a significant part of it" (2001:57), and in 2006 Leslie concluded her book with the statement that "it appears from the data that the women's movement will continue to be an effective force in the future" (2006:137). Yet when I did my research in Botswana in 2009, Emang Basadi was a shadow of its former self and a once vibrant wom-

en's movement seemed to have gone quiet.¹⁹ There were no new women's manifestos for the 2004 and 2009 elections (Segametsi Modisaotsile, interview, May 18, 2009, Gaborone), and training sessions for women candidates had been handed over to a less effective organization, the Botswana Caucus for Women in Politics (BCWP), which had been created by Emang Basadi in 1997. The BCWP was meant to provide a forum for women officeholders at the local and national level to discuss the challenges of male-dominated legislative environments, to provide continued political leadership and empowerment training, and to accomplish the SADC goal of 30 percent women in politics and decision-making by the time of the 2004 election (see Leslie 2006; Machangana 1999; Ntseane 2005). In the event, this goal was not achieved in the legislature or cabinet even by 2005 (in Botswana or in many other countries in the region). In advance of the 2009 parliamentary elections, the BCWP was still offering training to potential candidates, but it was fraught with partisan tensions over whether it was, in fact, dominated by the ruling BDP. While most women MPs claimed to belong to the organization and occasionally gave speeches to the group, it seemed by then to be primarily an organization for local council candidates and, perhaps, the leadership of women's wings of political parties.²⁰ Women's rapidly falling representation in parliament since 1999 has been the most obvious and most visible result of a waning women's movement.²¹

What happened to Botswana's women's movement? This question has received scant attention in the literature. Sebudubudu and Osei Hwedi (2005), who observe that Emang Basadi was much less active in the 2004 election than in the previous two elections, suggest an explanation in the loss of leaders to government, a decline in donor assistance, organizational deficiencies, cynicism, and a general apathy. Mokomane (2008) cites the loss of donor funding that came about with Botswana's increasing prosperity as well as a lack of internal democracy and a deficiency of human resources within civic organizations in general. Van Allen (2007) suggests that the way forward for the women's movement lies in stronger ties to social democratic opposition political parties in the country. Women activists, politicians, and other observers have offered some of the same ideas.²²

The Accomplishments of the Botswana Women's Movement

As one looks back, it is apparent that the accomplishments of Emang Basadi (and its collaborators) were numerous and significant.²³ According to Leslie (2006), in addresses to parliament in 1993 and 1995, the president of Botswana mentioned such concerns as women's rights, the importance of including women in the development process, and the need to make legislation gender neutral. In response to the mobilization around the Unity Dow case—which eventually was won, although the effort took more than a decade—and Emang Basadi's initial legal reform efforts, the government undertook a comprehensive review of its laws to identify instances

of gender discrimination. The result was the abolition or amendment of many laws, including the 2004 Abolition of the Marital Power Act, which provided for equal power within common law marriages; the 1998 Penal Code (Amendment) Act, which amended sections of the penal code dealing with rape; and the 1996 Employment (Amendment) Act, which allowed women to work in underground mines (WAD 1998, 2005). Emang Basadi's political education project, women's manifestos, and workshops for political parties and women candidates resulted in the best outcomes for women elected to parliament, especially in 1999, when all six of the BDP women candidates were directly elected (see Van Allen 2007). Mokomane (2008) credits Emang Basadi and the Botswana Caucus for Women in Politics with increasing women's presence not only in politics (at least for a time), but also in senior management positions in the private and public sectors and in the chieftaincy and the priesthood (see also Somolekae 2000).²⁴ A number of scholars also suggest that Emang Basadi's work was responsible for broadening Batswanas' understanding of democracy and to some extent democratizing elections and politics in the country overall (Molomo 1998; Selolwane 2000; Van Allen 2001). At the local level women's representation on city, town, and district councils before the 2009 election was 19.4 percent, considerably higher than their representation in the national legislature; these numbers ranged from 7.7 percent in Kgalegadi District to 42.9 percent in Sowa Township (Mhlanga et al. 2009:37).²⁵

To some extent the legacy of Emang Basadi's legislative achievements endures. Even with only limited women's mobilization, new legislation has been adopted in parliament such as the 2008 Domestic Violence Act, which criminalizes many acts of gender-based violence and provides some protection to the victims, and the 2009 Children's Bill, which requires that birth certificates provide the names of both parents. As one woman MP put it, these bills "cater to women's interests," and indeed they were promoted by individual women MPs: Gladys Kokorwe, a former MP and minister, is proud of the role she played in resurrecting and introducing the domestic violence bill, the first private member's bill in the history of the Botswana parliament (personal interview, March 3, 2009, Gaborone), and the children's bill was presented and strongly supported by Margaret Nasha, also a former MP and minister. These may be examples of what Childs (2006) describes as the power of individual women to commit "critical acts" even in the absence of a "critical mass" of women in a legislative body. In addition, many of the movement's early activists have been or are now in positions of power in government, arguably giving women like former High Court Judge Unity Dow and Attorney General Athaliah Molokomme an opportunity to use their positions to further advance women's rights.²⁶

Nevertheless, some longtime women activists question whether there may have been an adverse reaction to the women's movement's many accomplishments. The activist and scholar Elsie Alexander goes so far as to speculate that the successes of the women's movement may have con-

tributed to its undoing—in the sense of a backlash or resistance in some quarters to a perceived threat posed by increasingly powerful women.²⁷ At the same time, however, there are, at this point, no markers of a true backlash in the form of social changes or legal reforms that have been *undone*—a situation that has definitely come about in neighboring Zimbabwe (see Ranchod–Nilsson 2008).²⁸

Challenges to the Women's Movement: Civil Society, the Executive, and the Constitution

In 2004 Maundeni asserted that a proliferation of civic organizations had improved pluralist politics in Botswana and that civil society undoubtedly was playing a crucial role in democratization in the country. He argued that an initial hostility between state and civil society had waned and that civil society organizations were having more of an impact—in particular with the emergence of umbrella organizations—though challenges remained. However, one of the chronic challenges for African civil society organizations in general has been the obtaining of reliable funding, and in Botswana in particular, the loss of NGO funding as a result of the nation's attainment of middle-income status was being lamented as late as 2009, a condition that one journalist called the “middle-income status blues.”²⁹ Outside funding for Emang Basadi has dropped substantially and has not been replaced with locally generated contributions, either private or public; this lack of external funding was cited repeatedly in my interviews as a reason that Emang Basadi, at least, is no longer as active as it once was.³⁰ Somewhat prophetically, Ngwenya observed in 2002 that “in contrast to women's community groups, contemporary women's NGOs in southern Africa are likely to collapse once funding that brought them into existence dries, or because the topical issues which prompted their emergence have shifted attention to other competing concerns” (100).

Indeed, my informants also suggested that with the emergence of HIV/AIDS and the startlingly high infection rate in Botswana, other issues came to dominate or even supplant the women's movement agenda. As elsewhere, a whole AIDS industry has emerged in Botswana to meet the challenge of the epidemic, which has had a particularly hard impact on women since they are the caretakers for the sick and dying (Livingston 2005).³¹ In general, the “bur[ying] of women's issues” under “multiple crises” that Ranchod–Nilsson (2006:50) has observed in Zimbabwe may describe the situation in Botswana as well; even more importantly, perhaps, HIV/AIDS as well as the other critical issues facing women in Botswana today such as poverty and unemployment are much less easy to address than matters of law reform and an increase in women legislators. In this regard, the women's movement may have suffered from its general failure to broaden its geographic base beyond the capital city and its socioeconomic base beyond educated, professional women, despite significant efforts to do so (inter-

view with Leloba Molema, March 9, 2009, Gaborone). Similarly, a failure to build broad-based coalitions (for example, with trade unions) may have hampered the women's movement. Van Allen (2001:55–56) suggests that there may have been a moment shortly after the 1994 elections when a political party might have provided the organizational leadership for such a coalition. But, she notes, the moment passed when the BNF split in 1998, plagued by the factions that have been characteristic of political parties throughout Botswana's postindependence history.

My respondents also reported that a project orientation, rather than an advocacy and policy orientation, has come to dominate civil society organizations in Botswana. This may have been facilitated by the creation in 1995 of the Botswana Council of Non-government Organisations (BOCONGO) with eleven different sectors, one of them a Gender Sector meant to coordinate the efforts of women's NGOs.³² Carroll and Carroll (2004:343) report that several of their NGO informants "suspected that state authorities . . . hoped to gain greater control over civil society through the creation of government dominated umbrella organizations."³³ Finally, many civil society organizations around Africa have faced the challenge of losing leaders to government, and some observers have viewed this as the deliberate co-optation of civil society leaders with the clear intention of rendering their organizations less powerful and less threatening (see Maundeni 2004). In Botswana, many of the early women activists have had or still have positions in government, such as attorney general, High Court judge, and director of the SADC Gender Unit. This is not necessarily seen as a deliberate strategy to undermine the women's movement, although early women's movement leaders lament that no generation of new leadership has come forward to replace these early leaders.³⁴

Over the years there has been a substantial movement of women activists into and out of government, and yet today women activists consider the government to be less receptive and less responsive than ever. In particular, a highly centralized and powerful executive seems increasingly indifferent to a women's rights agenda, in the view of many women activists. Several scholars (Good & Taylor 2008; Maundeni 2005; Molomo 2000; Zaffiro 1993) have noted Botswana's dominant executive, with some (e.g., Good 2010; Hoon 2010) describing a further concentration of power under Ian Khama, president of Botswana since 2008. As in many parliamentary systems, legislative initiative in Botswana rests largely with the executive, and the fact that cabinet members must be drawn from parliament effectively neutralizes their legislative autonomy. The potential imbalance between the executive and the legislature is exacerbated by election procedures that have been in place since 1998, according to which the president of Botswana is not elected directly by the people (or even the parliament), but rather ascends to power by automatic succession from the vice presidency in advance of a general election (see Lekorwe 2005; Molomo 2005).

President Festus Mogae was seen as generally supportive of women politicians and the women's movement. In 1999, his second year in office, six women were elected to parliament and he appointed two more. In 2004, when only four women were elected, he appointed three other women as specially elected members and appointed all seven to ministerial or deputy ministerial positions (EISA 2006). In contrast to President Mogae, Ian Khama has not generally been viewed as a friend to the women's movement or gender concerns. When he ascended to the presidency in 2008, one of his first actions was to remove one woman minister and one woman deputy minister, without adding women in any other ministerial positions. In the 2009 parliamentary election only two women were directly elected, and President Khama then appointed women to only two of the four specially elected seats in the National Assembly.³⁵ Even more startling, perhaps, is the fact that he was rebuked in late 2010 by representatives of two political parties, the BNF and the BCP, for repeated sexist and insensitive remarks about women.³⁶

While many in civil society found President Mogae to relish debate and deliberation, President Khama is seen to rule through directives and to be inaccessible, a contrast identified by Hoon (2010) and mentioned repeatedly by the respondents for this study. Indeed, most of my informants were reluctant to speak about the new president, presaging Hoon's observation that in recent years ordinary Botswana are increasingly wary of discussing politics in public spaces in Gaborone. One woman activist pointed out that Khama's inaugural speech in April 2008 makes no mention of women (interview, Gaborone, 2009), and the 2009 *BDP Election Manifesto*, in particular Khama's preface, continues this trend, in marked contrast with the party's 2004 manifesto. During the 2009 general election Khama was perceived widely as supporting women candidates only when such support bolstered opposition to factional challenges within the BDP. In her first public statement as speaker of the National Assembly following the election, long-time minister and MP Margaret Nasha excoriated President Khama for his failure to nominate more women MPs and to support women's political participation more broadly.³⁷

The status of the Women's Affairs Department provides another indicator of the lack of concern with gender and gender issues on the part of the government of Botswana today. In 2010 it was the only country in southern Africa, except for Swaziland, that did not have a women's or gender ministry (see Tripp et al. 2009); the Woman's Affairs Department is part of the Department of Labour and Home Affairs, and according to interviews with officials and women activists in Gaborone, it is housed in the wrong ministry, badly underresourced, severely understaffed, lacking in authority, and highly demoralized. A 2009 Gender Links study (Mhlanga et al. 2009:90) found WAD to be "weak." A high ranking officeholder at the Women's Affairs Department described herself as "really disillusioned" by the lack

of support, resources, and staff and the lack of authority to facilitate the department's work (interview, 2009, Gaborone).

Finally, a general consternation surrounds President Khama's refusal to sign the 2008 SADC Gender Protocol.³⁸ With its call for women in 50 percent of positions of political power and decision making by 2015, this protocol moves well beyond the 1997 SADC Declaration on Gender and Development. On numerous occasions President Khama and other representatives of the government have stated objections to the protocol, such as restrictive time lines or requirements that would involve excessive expenditures, and they have claimed that the government does not want to commit itself to provisions and time lines that it cannot meet (see Mhlanga et al. 2009). Although some adjustments have been made to the language of the protocol, the government continues to refuse to support it (anonymous interview, 2009, Gaborone), a position that most women politicians and activists have taken as an indication of the government's indifference toward women and their concerns.³⁹

The delay in adopting the SADC Gender Protocol suggests another hurdle for the women's movement in Botswana, namely, Botswana's constitution and the ideological assumptions that it engenders. Unlike many other countries in Africa that experienced a political transition and adopted a new constitution, Botswana's constitution is still the forty-five-year-old document that was written before the mobilization of the women's movement and the involvement of women in politics.⁴⁰ In a recent comparison of gender provisions in the constitutions of Botswana and South Africa, Scribner and Lambert point out that while constitutional gender equality provisions "are one of several tools available to law-makers, rights advocates, judges and citizens to pursue a legal strategy of social equality," these are largely missing in the Botswana constitution, which is at best "gender neutral" (2010:58). Longtime University of Botswana law professor and senior administrator Bojosi Otlhogile (1998:161) argues, "with due respect," that the Botswana constitution's silence on gender equality "was a deliberate exclusion rather than an omission." Scribner and Lambert conclude, therefore, that the women's movement in Botswana faces "an uphill battle" to combat gender discrimination and improve gender equality (2010:59).⁴¹ This constitutional predisposition has influenced the limited discourse around electoral gender quotas (a women's movement goal at one time) in a clearly negative way. Opponents argue that all Botswana are equal citizens of Botswana and therefore no special measures are required; similarly, all Botswana enjoy rights as individuals and not as members of groups, and thus "group rights" of any kind are eschewed. So, for example, in a July 2009 debate in the House of Chiefs over increasing women's presence in parliament, the Barolong paramount chief Lotlamoreng Montshiwa reportedly said that "the constitution is very clear that everybody is equal and [he] wondered why government wanted to give women special treatment" (*Mmegi Online*, 2009b).

Lessons from Around the Region

Are there lessons to be learned from women's movements elsewhere in southern Africa? In many respects, the histories of neighboring countries such as Namibia, South Africa, and Zimbabwe may be too different to yield many relevant insights. In Zimbabwe, for example, the active participation of women in a nationalist struggle and postindependence gains such as the 1982 Legal Age of Majority Act (LAMA) were followed by a strong counterreaction and then by a revival of women's activism. But that effort, too, eventually floundered, as the new Women's Coalition from 2000 onward became increasingly caught up in the single issue of its negative position on a constitutional referendum. Ultimately, as Essof (2009) and Ranchod-Nilsson (2008) conclude, forces beyond the control of the movement came to overwhelm it as political violence and socioeconomic strife escalated in the country.

In South Africa, according to Hassim (2005), a strategy focused on the inclusion of women in formal political institutions has tended to displace goals of structural and social transformation, and the women's movement, save for a fleeting moment in the early 1990s, has "done little to advance the social and economic interests of the vast majority of women" (2005:189). The reasons for this, she continues, have to do with the tense relationship between feminism and the nationalist movement and the elite biases of the democratic model adopted during the early 1990s political transition (see also Hassim 2006). More recently Hassim (2009) has elaborated upon her earlier work, noting that "changing inequities in social and economic power will require not just the increased representation of women within the state, but also the increased and assertive representation of poor women within the state, as well as a strong feminist movement outside the state." Waylen (2007:521) reminds us that "women's mobilization on its own is no guarantee of success" and that a favorable political opportunity structure and strategic organizing by key women actors were essential to achieving some positive gender outcomes in South Africa. Gouws (2008:26) makes the paradoxical case for South Africa that the reason the women's movement is in disarray is that "most of the competent leaders" have gone into parliament.

In the case of Botswana, Van Allen (2007) has suggested that the most propitious moment for the women's movement was in the 1990s when the BNF was at its strongest and it was committed to an agenda for women's rights. By the late 2000s, however, the BNF was a party in complete disarray with party representatives barely able to identify their female general elections candidates, let alone primary candidates (interviews with Mokgweetsi Kgospula and Violet Chimela, May 29, 2009, Gaborone). Indeed intense factionalism is a chronic feature of party politics in Botswana, one of several factors known to be disadvantageous to women's increased participation in politics. Tripp (2001) has recommended the autonomy of women from

political parties altogether, although Geisler (2006) argues, with reference to Zambia, Botswana, and Namibia, that if advances in gender policy are to be achieved, women must form strategic alliances and promote women's advancement and gender issues from *within* political parties.⁴²

Conclusion

So, what has happened to the women's movement in Botswana? A few possible explanatory factors have been identified: the movement's own successes; challenges to civil society in general in Botswana; a powerful executive seemingly indifferent to women's rights; and a constitution negatively disposed against "group rights" and with no gender equality provisions. As for the way forward—Botswana has not experienced a political transition and is unlikely to do so anytime soon. But the question has been mooted whether there might be other political opportunities that the women's movement could take advantage of or build upon, such as a constitutional reform process. Indeed, in late 2010 one of the main opposition political parties in Botswana was calling for just that—and citing the problems of a plurality electoral system and its negative impact on women's representation in parliament as one reason to initiate such a reform process (Saleshando 2010).⁴³ Since political life in Botswana is not nearly as polarized as that of Zimbabwe, and the country certainly is less prone to political violence, a constitutional reform process would not be likely to have a similarly divisive effect and it could, indeed, provide an important political opportunity for a reengaged women's movement.

Selected experiences from around the region also suggest a need for women to pay special attention to relationships with the state, other civil society organizations, and especially political parties. While an organization like the BCWP continues to hold workshops for women candidates and the leadership of women's wings of political parties, male party leaders attend such trainings infrequently.⁴⁴ While the women's movement in Botswana has certainly avoided partisanship, it may be the case that a greater engagement with political parties, if the current factionalism allows for this course of action, might reap some benefits. Clearly, there is still much for a mobilized women's movement in Botswana to do, not least to bring women's parliamentary representation in line with that of leaders in the region.

Perhaps the most productive way to think of the women's movement in Botswana—and others in southern Africa—is that it is "in abeyance," a term revived by Sawyer (2010:604) to refer to "a holding process by which movements sustain themselves in nonreceptive political environments."⁴⁵ Sawyer argues that the idea that women's movements across the globe are effectively ended "is tied both to negative perceptions of institutionalization and to the association of social movements with disruptive or contentious repertoires of action"—with "institutionalization" referring to a whole array of institution-building activities within and outside existing bodies (603).

However, Botswana's women's movement, on the one hand, was never particularly "disruptive" in the first place, though it was certainly more vocal or "noisy" than it is today. On the other hand, as noted earlier, the women's movement in Botswana can certainly claim many "institutional" accomplishments, including the creation of a national gender machinery, the increased presence of women in parliament (at least for a time) and many other government positions, a reform of discriminatory laws, and the promulgation of new progressive legislation. But as Hassim's critique of the South African women's movement suggests, these accomplishments are often seen as inadequate. Sawyer cautions that a lack of visibility should not be mistaken for the end of women's movements—especially when so many gains are being institutionalized nationally and internationally. Therefore, the notion of a movement "in abeyance," and most likely only temporarily so, seems an apt way in which to regard the women's movement in Botswana today. As Athaliah Molokomme said (personal interview, May 27, 2009, Gaborone), the Botswana women's movement has not necessarily gone quiet, but "it has changed. . . . Many of the demands were met, many of the rights were achieved, were realized, not all, but enough, I think, to make the next generation of women feel that they did not have to make the noise that we did—and I think that happened all over the world." Surely, however, women in Botswana have not stopped talking altogether.

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Notes

1. This is how one young man referred to the beginning of the Botswana's women's movement in a public discussion at the University of Botswana in June 2009. In an interview in Gaborone, April 8, 2009, MP Botlogile Tshireletso used the same terminology when contrasting the independence period during which, she said, no one was concerned about women's issues, with the more recent period, "when women started talking, also started making noise that we want to participate in decision making. . . ." I have heard this way of indicating women's increased participation in politics utilized in other parts of Africa as well.
2. All of my interviews were conducted in English; I transcribed them all fully myself. The workshops tended to lapse into Setswana and there I was at a distinct disadvantage, having to rely on simultaneous translation from participants or summaries at the end of each session.
3. In Botswana the attorney general is an ex officio nonvoting member of parliament; the current attorney general is a woman, Athaliah Molokomme, and is included in the 7.9 percent.
4. This has recently changed in Senegal, however. In 2010 the parliament of Senegal voted in favor of gender parity for party lists in all future parliamentary elections. See www.afrol.com/articles/2489.
5. *Mmegi Online* (2008, 2009a). Already in 2006, Mogalakwe (2006:17) referred to Botswana's parliament as "merely a rubber stamping institution."
6. Factors identified and developed in that article include (1) the lack of a political transition as in other countries in east and southern Africa, which led to the adoption of electoral gender quotas for parliamentary elections; (2) the

- "usual barriers" to women's political participation, especially to standing for office in the context of a first-past-the-post electoral system; and (3) limited commitment from the main political parties to women's increased political representation.
7. Thanks to Athaliah Molokomme (personal interview, May 27, 2009, Gaborone) for putting women's activism in Botswana into a longer term perspective for me.
 8. In 2000, Somolekae (2000:79) contrasted Emang Basadi at its emergence with "the" veteran women's associations such as the YWCA and the BCW. G. K. T. Chiepe became a minister in 1974 but was appointed foreign minister in 1984. All women MPs in the history of Botswana have been from the BDP (Botswana Parliament 2002).
 9. Onalenna Selolwane suggests that "a deeper study of the rise and fall of the Botswana [Bechualand] People's Party has some untold stories that need excavating to establish the role of women in politics from independence to the advent of Emang Basadi." She notes that some of her previous informants have "pointed to women who played a significant role there as both Botswana nationalists and part of the South African ANC/PAC political mobilization." She concludes that there has been "a disjuncture . . . in the accounting of women in politics between the early formation of political parties and the era of Emang Basadi" (personal e-mail communication, November 26, 2010).
 10. Mookodi (1972) notes that there were no women ministers at the time, though there were women on town and district councils, and further that the first "mayoress" of Gaborone was a woman. Gossett and Lotshwao (2009) find that in the 1965 preindependence election the Botswana Independence Party fielded three women candidates for parliament; the next women candidates for parliament were Kebabshabile Disele and a woman from the BNF in 1974 (Botswana Parliament 2002).
 11. There have been and still are other political parties in Botswana, but they have not figured strongly in electoral politics. In mid-2010 a new party, the Botswana Movement for Democracy (BMD), was formed from a faction of the BDP and "gained" several seats in parliament from defected BDP members. In mid-2011 the BMD Web site contained no reference to a women's wing or women's issues.
 12. Years after their formation, women's wings of the political parties were still not "advocating the recognition of women within political parties." Rather, their major work was "ensuring the welfare of the party in general" (Machangana 1999:89–90).
 13. Of the recent major parties in Botswana, the BNF has been the most "left leaning." During the 1990s, until its implosion in 1998, the BNF included the elimination of gender and ethnic discrimination in its party platform. But as Van Allen (2001:43) notes, at the time of the founding of Emang Basadi, the BNF had no platform on women's interests and no women's section, and "no political party was advocating for women's rights."
 14. See Paxton, Hughes, and Green (2006) on the influence of an international women's movement around the world and over time.
 15. See Chiepe (1993); Madisa (1990); Molokomme (1991:848).
 16. See Dow (1995, 2002); Emang Basadi (1994, 1999a, 199b); Leslie (2006); Machangana (1999); Molokomme (1991); Pfothenhauer (1991); Selolwane (1998, 2000, 2004, 2006); Van Allen (2001, 2007).

17. Elsie Alexander (personal interview, March 13, 2009, Gaborone) noted that in Nairobi, African women highlighted the importance of poverty and women's access to basic services, in contrast to North American and European women who were more focused on civil liberties and political rights. For Botswana women, Nairobi was a turning point and a "turnaround."
18. Botswana's six critical areas of concern are (1) women and poverty, including economic empowerment, (2) women in power and decision making, (3) education and training of women, (4) women and health, (5) violence against women, including human rights of women, and (6) HIV/AIDS (WAD 2003).
19. In a late 2010 statement criticizing "sexist sentiments" expressed by President Ian Khama, the BNF information and publicity secretary, Moeti Mohwasa, observed that "the organisations that are supposed to criticise such statements just kept quiet" (forwarded e-mail communication from Amy Poteete, Dec. 4, 2010).
20. Interviews with Tshepo Chape Wareus, April 11, 2009, Gaborone, and Rhoda Sekgororoane, May 15, 2009, Gaborone; author observation at two BCWP co-sponsored workshops in March and April 2009.
21. Signaling an open acknowledgement of the situation, a meeting was held in Gaborone in July 2009 to try to reignite the women's movement in Botswana (personal e-mail communication from Maungo Mooki, July 22, 2009).
22. Interviews with Chigedze Chinyepi, June 19, 2009; Maungo Mooki, June 16, 2009; Kealebogo Gaboeletswe, Feb. 6, 2009; Athaliah Molokomme, May 27, 2009; Elsie Alexander, March 13, 2009, Onalenna Selolwane, March 11, 2009, Leloba Molema, March 9, 2009.
23. Van Allen (2001:40) lamented in 2001 that "little attention has been paid to the remarkable successes of the women's movement in Botswana. . . ."
24. In my interview with Balete Paramount Chief Kgosisgadi Mosadi Seboko (Ramotswa, June 15, 2009), she stated directly that many of her supporters felt that if a woman could be the minister of local government, to whom chiefs report, then she could be a chief: "Most of them didn't see a problem because they looked at the way things were going because already we had two women members of parliament in south east area . . . we already had a minister of local government who chiefs report to . . . And I think in that respect that people, they asked themselves questions, that if women can do it in other spheres then what is wrong with a woman being a chief?"
25. Only two councils, Sowa and Lobatse, had more than 30 percent women members before the 2009 election. Mhlanga et al. (2009:36–42) identify several barriers to access for women at the local level including patriarchal beliefs, women "as their own worst enemy," the electoral system, political parties with marginalized women's wings and no quotas, and lack of financial resources.
26. One innovation that is still noticeably absent in Botswana is a gender budget initiative. Adopted elsewhere in Africa and around the world, gender budget initiatives require the examination of annual national budgets through a "gender lens." Bothale (2011) argues that the failure to implement gender-responsive budgeting in Botswana has had negative consequences for equality in resource allocation and the empowerment of women.
27. "We had this push since the mid-90s; there was also, I think, a lot of awareness among the men that women were getting powerful. So it could be a backlash, it could be resistance . . . you could see it in different forms because it was pow-

- erful what we were saying . . . they looked at it as a threat, instead of supporting the women, they would find ways of excluding them” (personal interview, March 13, 2009, Gaborone).
28. Ranchod-Nilsson (2008:648) suggests that the notion of gender “backlash” would imply that social changes or legal reforms had been “undone”—which would not pertain to the Botswana case. Further, she finds it important to distinguish between what appear to be responses to social changes associated with the changing status of women or with shifting gender relations and what might actually be terror tactics aimed at male opposition leaders.
 29. See *Daily News* (2009). Whereas Botswana was once one of the highest aid recipients in the world (in per capita terms), aid has declined rapidly since it was reclassified as a middle-income country in 1992. According to Maipose et al. (1997), total aid to Botswana peaked in the 1980s at US\$240 million, or about US\$200 per capita, one of the highest rates in the world. Between 1980 and 1992 total aid averaged around US\$140 million per year and subsequently declined steadily.
 30. Onalenna Selolwane also suggested the need to interrogate financial accountability or the lack thereof and its possible consequences. She asks about “the use and abuse of funding, which has also led to more intrusive involvement of donors in the management of programs” (personal e-mail communication, November 26, 2010).
 31. It should be noted that Botswana’s response to HIV/AIDS has been one of the most proactive and successful in southern Africa, the most highly affected region in the world. Botswana is one of a few countries that has achieved universal access to treatment (defined as 80 percent access) and to have met with success around prevention programs especially among the youth (UNAIDS 2009). Recently, however, President Ian Khama has stated that the Botswana government’s budget allocation for HIV/AIDS is “unsustainable” (*Mmegi Online* 2010).
 32. In 2009 the seven members of the BOCONGO Gender Sector were American and African Women’s Business Alliance, Kagiso Women’s Shelter, Women against Rape (Maun), Emang Basadi, Botswana Council of Women, WILSA, and Women in Action for the Abused Women and Children (interview with Chigedze Chinyepi, June 19, 2009, Gaborone). During 2009 the WILSA office in Gaborone shut down and the Women’s NGO Coalition no longer existed.
 33. Although Carroll and Carroll (2004) had not found that to be the case.
 34. In separate interviews, the former president, Quett Masire, and the attorney general, Athaliah Molokomme, suggested that a small country like Botswana can ill afford to waste precious human resources of either gender (personal interviews, May 26, 2009, and May 27, 2009, Gaborone).
 35. In early 2011 one of the two specially elected women MPs resigned but was replaced by another woman.
 36. Moeti Mohwasa, forwarded e-mail communication from Amy Poteete (Dec. 4, 2010); Saleshando (2010).
 37. Some months after the 2009 election, a Pan African Parliament meeting in South Africa refused to recognize the Botswana delegation because there was no woman MP in the five “man” delegation (*Sunday Standard* 2010). See also *Sunday Standard* (2009).

38. Nor has Botswana ratified the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (the Maputo Protocol).
39. *Mmegi Online* (2009c). Even having the SADC Gender Unit in Gaborone and directed by a Motswana has made no difference in terms of what women politicians and activists see as the government's indifference to their concerns (anonymous interview, 2009, Gaborone). In a discussion of civil society in the late 1990s in Botswana, Molutsi (1998:372) noted that government policy had ranged from "hostility to benign neglect." He cited the government's refusal to ratify many International Labour Organisation and United Nations conventions or declarations related to conditions for workers and women as one example of "benign neglect."
40. Banda (2006:17) notes that Botswana is among a group of southern African countries that "have merely kept the gender provisions that they were given" in British-drafted constitutions at independence. "It speaks poorly of them that they have not moved beyond that discriminatory phase."
41. Indeed, much of the activism in Botswana has been about fighting attempts to further limit women's rights rather than about pursuing greater equality; similarly, some of the successes of the women's movement in Botswana have been about removing discriminatory legislation rather than about increasing women's political or economic power (Scribner & Lambert 2010).
42. Tripp (2001), in her work on Uganda, early on identified the critical importance for women's movements of associational autonomy from the state and dominant party—with associational autonomy being defined as a movement's being able "to set its own far-reaching agenda and freely select its own leaders" (2001:101).
43. Sethunya Mosime, University of Botswana Department of Sociology, made this point at a seminar on campus in June 2009.
44. At a workshop of the BCWP at the President's Hotel in Gaborone, March 30, 2009, I did witness a male minister in attendance as a speaker, but the point of his comments was to inform the women that the problem of women's lack of access to higher office was their own fault. See also Bauer (2010).
45. Sawyer (2010:604) notes that the notion of a social movement "in abeyance" was first developed by Verta Taylor (1989).