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- Business
- Court
- Entertainment
- Features
- Femail
- Editorial
- Letters
- Sports

## Climbing ladders on merit: Norwegian example

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GENDER FOCUS with EMELDA MWITWA

THE centenary celebration of Norwegian women's 100 years of full suffrage made me appreciate that the women's movement faces similar challenges worldwide.

Although we are at different levels of political and socio-economic development, women struggles are simply women struggles, and this I believe inspired the resilience in some of our gender equality activists who were present at the event.

The occasion was a celebration of 100 years of Norwegian women's right to vote held at Pamodzi Hotel in Lusaka a fortnight ago.

I received the invitation to the occasion where Norwegian and Zambian gender activists were exchanging notes on the gender agenda with enthusiasm because Norway is close to attaining the 50-50 gender equality mark in decision-making positions.

It was a protracted campaign beset with hostilities from male chauvinists, including rigid institutions such as the church, but today women account for 40 percent stake in the Norwegian parliament (Storting).

At cabinet level, women occupy 10 out of 20 portfolios; or rather 50 percent of the cabinet ministers are women.

And four of the three political parties represented in the Storting are headed by women.

There were a number of things that inspired me as Norway's Ambassador to Zambia Arve Ofstad shared how they got where they are.

One notable feat by feminist activists in Norway is that they received nothing on a silver platter – they fought to become role models in the gender-equality movement and the campaign took over three decades to start bearing fruits.

It was not just a matter of lobbying appointments of women to decision-making positions. Neither did they rise through quota systems in parliament and cabinet.

Rather women themselves stood out as movers and shakers in every sphere of human endeavour in the midst of intense struggle and strong opposition.

According to Ambassador Ofstad, Norwegian women like their Zambian counterparts also face such challenges as sexual abuse, harassment, rape and gender-based violence, but they remain undaunted and unstoppable.

Secondly, major political parties have also propped up the gender agenda by, for instance, introducing an internal rule on 50-50 inspired by women movements within these parties.

Thirdly, the gender equity and equality drive has taken a multi-dimensional approach by bringing on board the conservative but influential partners such as trade unions, political parties and the Church.

Fourthly, education has been a stepping stone and rightfully so in Norway's gender equality campaign. There are

as many female as male students at all levels of education, tertiary inclusive.

And I think it is this high level of education which has equipped the women's movement with the critical eye to see beyond the ordinary; the voice to lobby and criticise government and the sense to claim their human rights.

In our case, the unequal access to education by girls and women has derailed our campaign for 50-50 representation in decision-making positions, including in the economic sphere.

The first step in trying to catch up with countries such as Norway that have made considerable progress towards the 50-50 gender agenda is to ensure education parity at all levels.

Yes we must eliminate bad cultural and social barriers, support female candidates in elections and bring men on board the gender-equality campaign.

But we will achieve very little if girls continue to drop out of school at the current rate, and if women continue to be disproportionately represented at tertiary education level.

Our Norwegian colleagues are able to talk about gender-equality in parliament, cabinet and women's strong participation in the economic sphere because they have achieved gender parity in education.

I hope that Zambia will put education at the centre of the gender equality campaign.

And lastly, I would like to challenge political parties taking part in the forth-coming by-elections to try the Norwegian intra-party policy – adopting and campaigning for (qualified) women candidates.

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