No easy way out for people ravaged by war

The African Union faces its first major challenge as rebel troops in Ivory Coast threaten to overthrow the government. The AU has pledged ‘zero tolerance’ of coups and mutinies in an attempt to rid the continent off wars. But are the forces of rebellion so deeply entrenched in Africa listening? Nabasayi Wamboka visited northern Uganda to measure the progress of President Yoweri’s campaign against the Lord’s Resistance Army led by Joseph Kony.

IT IS LATE IN THE NIGHT IN GULU, northern Uganda. There is no respite from the booming sounds in the neighbourhood. No, it is not the bombs that one might expect in a war-torn zone. It is the latest in hip-hop and Lingala music from Alohs Night Club and Travellers Inn on Kampala Road. I toss and turn, praying that the loudspeakers will blow up and allow us some peace. Images from my trip to Lacor, Agwe, Bungarwa and Trianga-Layja villages flash past my tired mind — hungry and angry faces, sickly children and adults resigned to their fate. Life has been a daily ordeal for the Acholi who have been displaced by the war that has raged between the Lord’s Resistance Army and the Ugandan Government for the past 15 years.

The booming music is the least of their worries. For a people who have listened to bomb blasts day and night, suffered humiliation, been torn away from their families and still ended up being blamed for their misfortune, loud music offers some reprieve from the hardships of life.

I fell asleep still pondering the implications of this long-running war between the rag-tag army led by Joseph Kony and President Yoweri Museveni’s Government.

Today, a generation of Acholi has been born and raised in protected camps — yet more people are at risk. So the other two are back.”

Out looking in: Children who were locked out of Lacor hospital wait outside the fence for a chance to be let in for the night’s shelter. The majority of people affected in Gulu are women and children.

Wild leaves can’t be better than GM food

Marita Benchura’s family last had a proper meal of sadza, vegetables and peanut butter nearly a month ago, when her husband received a 50-kg bag of maize from the Grain Marketing Board centre in Shangare village, about 50 kilometres east of Harare. It was enough to feed them for just a week.

After poor rains in the last farming season, hunger has left a trail of suffering in this small rural community. “Our yields were not very good this past farming season because of the drought. We also lost a lot of time trying to get land on the white-owned commercial farms. But, as women, you know how difficult it is to get land in your own right, so we came back home and tried to grow crops. It was too late by then, and there was no rain.”

Benchura adds: “We failed to grow as much as we usually do because my sons, who normally help me, were out on the commercial farms trying to get land. Only one of my three sons got a piece of land, so the other two are back.”

She can no longer cook porridge for her family in the morning. They have only one meal a day — at night — and spend the day looking for wild fruits and honey. For almost three weeks, they have kept their eyes peeled in the hope that a lorry or two will deliver maize, the staple in these parts. About 400 families are hunger-stricken at Shangure.

Six million other Zimbabweans — half the population — could starve to death unless they receive more than 800,000 tonnes of emergency food aid required to feed the nation between now and the next harvest in March next year. Already, three million women and children are described as being in distress because of hunger.

It’s got to be love if Joburg is to mean anything

Western leaders claim to love Africa, but still play a major role in helping the continent’s citizens sink deeper into poverty — at least that is what some off us leaders, including Namibia’s Sam Nujoma, think.

Susan Naa Sekyere questions this love for Africa, with reference to Tony Blair’s speech at the recent Earth Summit.

THE MESSAGE WAS STARK: A CHILD dies in Africa every three minutes due to famine. This was the opening statement in British Prime Minister Tony Blair’s speech in the high level segment allotted to heads of state at the World Summit on Sustainable Development.

Blair spoke minutes after his Namibian counterpart, Sam Nujoma, who delivered a stinging condemnation of both Mr Blair and the European Union for allegedly causing all of Zimbabwe’s woes.

Nujoma went on to claim that some of the countries represented at the summit developed HIV to wipe out people in the Least Developed Countries. He challenged the supposedly guilty countries to pay...
Wild leaves can't be better than GM food

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poor rains last farming season that affected five other southern African countries, blame to blame.

But aid agencies and agricultural experts say the food shortage in Zimbabwe, traditionally a net food exporter, was exacerbated by President Robert Mugabe's chaotic land reforms in which land is seized from white commercial farmers for redistribution to landless blacks.

Without adequate training and inputs, poor peasant farmers cannot maintain productivity levels in the agricultural sector.

But village headman Silas Bangure, who is in charge of food distribution in Shangure, says it is the deepening economic crisis, with rising prices and shortages of nearly every basic commodity that has worsened the situation.

Says Bangure: “We have not had any bread deliveries for more than a month. At the beginning of the year, the government used to give us two bags of flour and as much as possible. But the shops have run dry and the shop owners tell us that they have been told by the government that wheat is in short supply.”

Baking industry players recently announced that the bread shortage would ease as farmers start harvesting the year’s crop. But they warned this would be short-lived, as farmers could not plant enough because of the disruption caused by the government’s land reforms. The 165,000 tonnes they are expected to produce is expected to run out by January.

Like so many other villagers, Bangure does not understand why the government has turned down maize from America.

“They tell us that it is dangerous because of something called genetic engineering but we are hungry and are already eating wild leaves that we are not even sure are safe. We want that maize, why are these men deciding what women think?”

As the villagers wait for the next lorry to bring food, hunger is growing deeper into the social fabric, with crime now on the rise. Emeri-

na Shangure confides: “Crime has gone out of control. My house is unattended now because these young men have all turned into petty thieves, stealing anything primary to buy beer. They abuse our teenage daughters when they get drunk.”

The village women also lament the poor administrative decisions on who gets what food and as such many young men are made by men despite the fact that the women are responsible for feeding the family and minding the food stocks.

There’s no easy way out for people ravaged by war

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risk of losing their national identity. “Even in situation of no war or conflict, women and children are marginalised,” says A.A. Otto, secretary-

general of Human Rights Focus, a non-governmental organisation that monitors human rights abuses in camps for displaced people.

Women in war situations have been stripped of their traditional family protection, according to Otto. “Most men have taken off, joined the rebels or been killed,” adds Otto.

In the backyard of Lacor hospital in Gulu town, one of the places that have become a home for thousands of desperate people fleeing the war, a large field has been cleared to accommodate the rising number of new arrivals. Hospital Superintendent Opio Cyrian says: “We are al-

ways stressed. It is not sustainable for us to offer the basic necessities. But we can’t close the gates on the suffering people no matter what.”

When Museveni and his National Resistance Army took power in 1986, he declared Uganda a “no-party” state and imposed severe restric-
tions on political and civil rights. The military led to armed resistance and gave rise to rebel groups that have left a permanent dent on his largely respected leadership.

Northern soldiers were dominant in the Idi Amin and Milton Obote armies and many fled to Sudan for fear of retribution. They formed the Ugandan People’s Defence Army, which later took on religious overtones under the leader-

ship of the “prophetess” Alice Lakwena of the Holy Spirit Movement. The movement developed into the Lord’s Resistance Army after Lak-

wena fled to Kenya.

Attempts to crush the group have borne no fruit since 1984. Museveni, in fact, lost a Usha bet with veteran journalist Tamiru Mirunde when he promised to flush out Kony in a week and failed. The president has camped in Gulu for several times and threatened to leave only after the rebel is “cooked”. His presence has provid-
ed only temporarily relief.

Two high-ranking officers, Salim Saleh and James Kazini, have talked tough — to no avail.

Kazini has now given Kony until December to leave the rising number of new arrivals. Hospital Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs gives the total number of displaced by the war in the north as 376,781 in Gulu, 2,462,972 of them children.

In Kitgum, the number of those displaced stood at 82,845 in 2000, with abducted children number-
ing 3,114. 141 children were abducted in Lira.

Says Northern Uganda Youth MP Dan Kidega: “There is no doubt that 98 percent of the people that make up the LRA are children and youth. The method the rebels have used is by con-
scripting, abductions and coercion. It is also true that about 50 percent of the Uganda Peoples De-

fence Forces soldiers fighting in the north are young.”

Kidega fears the suffering of the Acholi may lead to a cycle of revenge. “It is important to preach forgiveness not only to the foreigners in this war but to our own people who have been part of it. There should be reprieve in future and that is most frightening,” he adds.

The worst war is set to be fought, however, when the guns go silent. “Because alcohol and sex are forms of entertainment and relief for people in such situations, the threat of HIV/AIDS is looming and might wipe out more people than the Kony war,” Kidaga says. “People are having sex like animals and they are not protected. This is very worrying. HIV/AIDS could be a bigger war to fight than Kony.”

The most worrying factor for now is the im-
mediate health, education and social well-being of the people of Gulu. With the biting cold and hunger, the only safety net for children is schools. They walk to school with empty oil tins, which they turn into stools in class then into buckets as they return home.

Out of school, youth and the majority of dis-
placed young people have resorted to what some people in Gulu describe as the “easy way out”. Several weeks ago, the local church in Gulu town chased away those who had taken refuge at the church at night for what they described as immoral behaviour.

“The immediate worry is food and shelter. You can’t tell a girl who doesn’t know where to spend the night or what to eat about Aids,” says Steven Latek, who works for the Red Cross. “They will simply sleep around. If they don’t sleep on the verandahs in town, they will find their way to the disco or offer sex services in some lodges.”

Sources in the WFP Uganda country office say the northern region may suffer the worst famine ever in the next six months since there is no kind of agricultural or economic activity go-

ing on, a statement supported by Minister for Agriculture, Animal Industry and Fisheries Kisamba Mugerwa.

“It is true the war has halted agricul-
ture activities in the northern region and this may affect the general production but govern-
ment is supposed to reverse this problem,” he said during a videoconference organised by Africanwoman.

With Kony said to have crossed over to Sudan, the population is only waiting and see in a land where death can come by way of the gun, hunger or HIV/AIDS.
“It's poverty that drives people to live in these houses, it's poverty that makes parents send their daughters to sell themselves and it's poverty that will drive a teenage boy into crime and a girl into early marriage.”

Never too young to make a difference

By Florence Machio, Kenya

Once a shy and rebellious girl, 24-year-old Sarah Langa is changing the lives of the people of Kliptown, a squatter camp in the neighbourhood of South Africa’s famous Soweto Township. When she was 18, Langa enrolled in the Women's Leadership Training Programme held in Johannesburg. The head of the project at the time, Leonorah Khanyile, described her as “not focused.” How times have changed! Driven to do something about the poverty that affects her people, Langa has made it her business to improve the circumstances of her people — especially young women. With seven programmes to pull together, no one could be more focused.

Freedom Charter Square is the name given to the area where Kliptown squatter camp is located. This is where the African National Congress freedom charter was adopted back in 1955 during the struggle against apartheid. The same charter helped the ANC fight apartheid and take over power in 1994. Ironically, Freedom Charter Square is home to about 30,000 of the poorest South Africans. Many of them dreamt that when the apartheid government was over they would be able to afford to take their children to school, get decent living quarters and never have to worry about crime.

The charter says: “All people shall have the right to live where they choose, be decently housed, and to bring up their families in comfort and security . . . slums shall be demolished and new suburbs built where all have transport, roads, lighting, playing fields.”

With 2,000 families sharing 252 toilets, this is hardly what the people of Kliptown had expected. Against this backdrop, Langa decided not to pursue a career as a pharmacist. There were more pressing needs that needed attention.

In a community where the people have resigned themselves to a particularly harsh fate, it is a David and Goliath challenge to try and change people’s attitudes, according to Langa. “In this community people do not want to stand up for their rights, women still feel that this is where they belong,” says Langa. “The girls are often sent by their parents to have sex with older men so that they can get money.”

It's been five years since she left the leadership training programme, which has since collapsed. “After the project folded up due to lack of funds, I was selected to co-ordinate all the girls who went through the training and form a network,” Langa says.

She later joined the Soweto Kliptown youth group and was soon in the management committee. She now manages seven programmes in Kliptown that involve girls, the aged, women and young men. All these she does without pay or funds from anywhere. “During my leadership training, I learnt how to manage funds.”

We found Langa surrounded by girls aged between eight and 17. She has a passion for this age group because “poverty causes high teenage pregnancies. It takes time to change the mind-set of an individual and the earlier you begin the better.”

She mobilises the girls to help with community development projects, encouraging them to build their aspirations. “It is frustrating to see girls still selling their bodies so that they can get quick cash,” says the youthful crusader. “Sometimes I wonder why I try, but when I see a girl pull herself out of this place I am happy that I helped in one way or another.”

Miet Bill and Hillary Clinton

Langa's work won her the Clinton Democracy Fellowship in 1999. She and 11 other people — most of who had university degrees while she only has a secondary school certificate — were chosen from South Africa. She had an opportunity to hold discussions with former US President Bill Clinton and his wife Hillary. Being part of the fellowship has given Langa added incentive. “I want to push for housing for our people. The song about decent housing has been sung for the last 10 years and nothing has changed.”

She attributes this to the fact that most policy makers are detached from what happens on the ground. “I see myself as an activist and I want to be in a policy-making position and push for the rights of the people,” she declares.

Langa believes the bottom line is to eliminate poverty. “It’s poverty that drives people to live in these houses, it’s poverty that makes parents send their daughter to sell themselves and it’s poverty that will drive a teenage boy into crime and a girl into early marriage.”

Deals with the government

She was recently nominated the chairperson of the South African National Civic Association that deals with community development. “I will now be dealing directly with the government in the town planning meetings, which also involve budget allocation.”

Khanyile, now the deputy director of education at British Council South Africa, says: “In many ways, Sarah has been instrumental in changing the attitudes of young women in that community — from feeling obliged to be victimised to feeling that they can contribute to their development in the midst of an almost helpless situation.” She adds: “Sarah has been able to demonstrate resolve in standing up for women and young ones at that — in development issues and goes out to grab opportunities, if she is not given them, to make that point.”

When a reference group was set up in Kliptown to look into a strategy to address a local development issue, no woman was considered. Langa promptly challenged the all-male committee. She volunteered to participate in the planning meetings. Not only did she become a full member of the committee but she also raised the issues that affect women like safety, health and violence. The elderly were also being abused by men, who would take over their shacks and even the money they were receiving from welfare.

She pointed out that it was about time they included women — and young ones at that — in development matters. Indirectly, she was able to influence the new thinking and played a major role in sanctioning decisions, ending up a signatory in the project account. “She is still an important member of the committee and I think she has potential for growth and leadership,” says Khanyile.
Women in politics: more than just numbers

A couple of months ago, the British Council sponsored a two-day workshop for 10 women parliamentarians as part of its Effective Leadership project. The workshop focused on the nitty-gritty of leadership as opposed to the common pre-occupation with numbers.

We at AfricaWoman consider this a significant breakthrough in strategies to boost women’s participation in leadership. This is particularly important on a continent where the number of women in politics continues to generally rank low.

According to statistics from the Geneva-based Inter Parliamentary Union, only six African countries have women’s representation above 20 percent. They are South Africa at 29.8 percent, Rwanda at 25.7 percent, Namibia at 25 percent, Uganda at 24.7 percent, Senegal at 23.5 percent and Tanzania at 22.3 percent. Zimbabwe comes in at 10 percent, Ghana at 9.0 percent and Kenya at a measly 3.6 percent.

Whereas getting a critical mass of women into parliament is a worthy objective, the Effective Leadership survey carried out in the last quarter of 2001 brought out surprising insights.

Though women are generally believed to bring values such as integrity, loyalty and to appreciate the needs of their people. How to translate this goodwill into numbers and a more people-centred form of leadership depends on how well women are able to package themselves and their leadership style. It calls for a two-pronged approach: polishing their personalities and fine-tuning their principles and values.

Both are predicated upon good communication, which is where we women journalists come in. In much of the region, media women’s associations have spent small fortunes on programmes to help women leaders use the media more effectively to “market” themselves and also to reach out to their constituents.

Significant breakthroughs have been made, but we still have a long way to go. There is, of course, the saying “Rome was not built in a day” but we must not forget that they were using the most rudimentary technology then.

We at AfricaWoman can readily pledge our commitment to advancing women’s interests and giving them a guaranteed platform from which to speak with their own people and the rest of the world.

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Can’t wait to get back on the train

DEEPLY Mired in financial difficulties, Kenya Railways has had to cut down on services — and the first to go has been the passenger train service to Western Kenya. It makes sound business sense, according to Manager Yamnami Masha, who argues that cargo accounts for 80 percent of the profit while passenger services contributed only eight percent of the corporation’s revenue.

There’s only one problem with this position: No one bothered to ask locals what they wanted when the corporation withdrew the train service between Nairobi and Bungo, a small town in Western Kenya.

It’s been two years, but Zipporah Okiya, a vegetable vendor who used to shuttle between her home and the capital with sacks of indigenous delicacies, is still trying to recover from her losses.

For many women in her village, the train was the cheapest mode of transport. Besides charging reasonable passenger fares, luggage fees were also extremely low. At only Sh200 (US$2.6) at the current exchange rate of Sh78, Okiya could travel more than 500 kilometres to Nairobi twice a week. She made handsome profits of about Sh500 per trip (US$6.4).

The technical case for withdrawing the service is pretty strong. The corporation has been a constant cash drain. According to records at Kenya Railways headquarters, it lost about US$7 million in 1993/94 — the last year for which we were able to get data.

For over two decades, the century-old railway line has crumbled under the weight of lack of investment, negligence and sheer incompetence. This has raised serious concerns over its ability to guarantee the safety of passengers and cargo.

“We have made huge losses, but we are trying to break even at the moment,” says Masha, justifying the decision to minimise costs by cutting down on some passenger services and concentrating on freight. The only passenger service still running is the Mombasa route, and the Kenya Tourist Board sustains this as part of efforts to maintain the attraction of this lucrative circuit.

Masha estimates that the passenger service to the lakeside town of Kisumu to the west used to bring in only Sh20,000 ($256.4). Maintenance costs came to Sh14,000 ($1,794), leaving only Sh6,000 ($75.6) from which to pay staff salaries and other utilities.

Okiya is not impressed by the financial argument. All she knows is that life has never been the same since the train stopped going her way. Unpacking her sacks of vegetables, Okiya recalls how she would arrive at Nairobi’s Kibera Railway Station in the wee hours. By late afternoon, she would have sold all her goods in time for the return trip.

“I would make at least three trips to the city in a week,” says Okiya, who had to pay two-and-a-half times as much on the bus. She eventually moved to the city and depends on better-endowed traders to deliver the vegetables to her stall at Kibera market.

“Things are just too bad. We are surviving from hand to mouth,” she says, nostalgic about her 10 years of trips on the train.

For many years, the Kenya’s railway passenger transport system was celebrated as the safest and the cheapest in a country where over 50 percent of the population live below the poverty line. The railway line also serves landlocked countries such as Uganda, Burundi, Rwanda and Sudan, which rely on the Kenyan port of Mombasa for their exports and imports.

The management is aware that the country’s main railway lines cannot cope with heavy cargo but the revenue gained from traffic and from its neighbouring countries is important for Kenya.

Masha confides that although there has been pressure to restore the passenger services, the management has to evaluate whether it is a viable project.

In its publication People, Economic Affairs and Politics, the Institute of Economic Affairs accuses the government of failing to adopt a comprehensive policy framework for the transport sector since independence in 1963.

According to the report, efficient co-ordination of planning, implementation and operations of the activities of the various transport sectors: roads, railways, air, marine and pipeline has never happened.

Although the government now plans to revamp the corporation through privatisation, the plans are moving at snail’s pace.

Okiya is willing to wait, anxious to cut out the middleman and raise her profits to the high levels of yesteryears.
Women athletes lead the way

By Margaret Ziribagwana

I t used to be that you could tell a lot about people from their appearance. A man with a creased shirt and a shabby necktie was seen as an alcoholic bachelor who spent the better part of the previous night in a bar. A muscular man was considered physically fit and, if he lived in a rural community, he could win the majority vote to become the chief. A person’s appearance could win him a leadership position in school or fail him. When it came to marriage, he would be spurned or chosen among women seeking security and impressive looks.

Social and historical circumstances seemed to favour men more especially when it came to physical activity like sport. Women were regarded the weak sex and it took time for them to be accepted as serious athletes. The situation was worse in Africa, where women who ventured into sport were called names. In Uganda, where unmarried women are scorned, girls were scared off games with stories that they would lose their virginity — facing the risk of being humiliated in public. This prejudice deprived the country and the African continent of women’s significant contribution to sport.

With the advent of education for girls, however, African women have come into their own in sport. Like the proverbial mustard seed, the women are storming the world of sport, breaking free of the shackles that held them back. Now the names of women who have excelled in sport are quoted freely worldwide.

Maria Mutola, the 29-year-old Mozambican who has enjoyed more than a decade at the top in athletics, clocked a winning time that was a new record for Lausanne.

Mutola’s motivation came when she met former Olympic champion Maria Mutola: “When you grow up in a war, you learn to appreciate sport.”

Mozambique’s Olympic champion Maria Mutola: “When you grow up in a war, you learn to appreciate sport.”

Women hold up half the sky

By Catherine Narley, Ghana

A t a time when poverty is the central focus of development strategies, it is increasingly apparent that women are disproportionately represented among the poor — hence the phrase “feminisation of poverty”.

Despite some progress since the United Nations Decade for Women, generally it has been slow and patchy. Women’s health is a major concern, but remains at the bottom of the priority list in terms of investment.

The poor health status of women begins in childhood when inequity between boys and girls is widespread, even at the level of sharing family resources such as food.

Many girls enter reproductive age without the physical and social maturity required for childbearing and parenting.

More than 50 percent of pregnant women in Africa and Asia suffer from nutritional anaemia. This leads to low birth weight that not only threatens the survival of children but also impedes growth and development.

How do we address this feminisation of poverty? Micro-credit and micro-enterprise have long been considered the principal means to reduce poverty among women. Much of this takes place outside the formal financial sector and it has been difficult to assess its effectiveness. There have been mounting protests that micro-credit schemes hurt women rather than help them. In East Africa women say outrageous weekly repayment rates have turned them into prisoners of micro-credit institutions.

Although Ghanaian women are hardworking, they experience serious problems trying to raise funds from banks to finance their trade. Some have resorted to other financiers, such as money lenders, who take as much as 50 percent of the loan until the principal amount is cleared. Women farmers may also borrow from middlemen, who then buy the produce at ridiculous prices — leaving the women poorer than before.

All this is set to change with the establishment of a Women’s Development Fund set up to provide credit for entrepreneurs seeking to improve their ventures.

The fund is to be based at the Bank of Ghana and will operate as a revolving fund with an interest rate of 20 percent — far below the 50 percent that women often pay to money-lenders. Priority will be given to small-scale women traders.

It is widely acknowledged that when women have money, families tend to benefit. India’s first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, said the greatest revolution in any country is the one that affects the living conditions and status of women. In 1981, his daughter Indira Gandhi added that when women are deprived, humanity loses half of its creativity and resources.

In trying to describe poverty, one woman said: “Poverty is like heat. One feels it but cannot describe it.” Another says: “Poverty is the inability to meet the basic needs of life such as food, shelter, clothing, health care and education.”

Women are closely associated with providing these necessities since they have primary responsibility for family care and welfare. The fact that most African countries fall within the category of extreme poverty is an indication that women are increasingly being asked to fulfil their responsibilities because they are getting poorer.

Although women are dominant in domestic trade, there are few policies to promote this kind of trade in Ghana. Lack of access to markets, post-harvest losses and poor road and support systems work against the development and growth of informal trade and women’s ability to build up capital.

The Chinese have a saying that women hold up half the sky. Whenever there is a problem in Ghanaian families and wise counsel is required, we say: “Let us consult the old lady.” Indeed, women hold the key to ending hunger and poverty.
Teachers, mini-skirts and dreadlocks
doesn’t interfere with African culture

Dress codes are implemented, partly, to ensure standards of attire in a workplace, yet it sounds as if there are some disparities in implementing the same on teachers in Zimbabwe. Reyhana Masters-Smith wonders whether the idea of a dress code

Mbuya Nehanda is salut-ed as one of the most powerful and influ-

D.G. Muwanguzi, the district has quickly responded with money

"The men are the gatekeepers of tradition and they are also the ones who control their wives. We want them to encourage their women to attend antenatal clinics and to go for routine immunisation.

Studies suggest that educating prospective fathers in reproductive (especially antenatal) health has a positive impact on women’s and children’s health. Men are more concerned about their partners’ health needs during and after pregnancy.
Big cars and leaking roofs

By Lilian Juma

IF POLITICS IS TOUGH FOR MEN, IT IS doubly so for women, if women parliamentarians from East and Central Africa are to be believed. First, they have to overcome traditional prejudices, then they have to contend with offensive language and other tactics meant to intimidate them.

But are these good enough reasons for women to accept subordinate roles and expect sympathy and leniency from the top?

Not if the British Council has anything to do with it!

During a workshop held in Nairobi recently under the auspices of its Effective Leadership project, 10 women parliamentarians from five countries — Ethiopia, Zambia, Malawi, Uganda and Kenya — were put through their paces in areas such as access to information to enable them meet the expectations of their electorates.

The workshop’s title, “Big Cars and Leaking roofs”, alludes to the mismatch between the expectations of voters who need the help of politicians to get leaking school roofs fixed but instead get leaders promising for top positions. They must therefore work hard to overcome the challenges.

Kenyan women have routinely performed poorly in national elections, with only four having been elected to parliament in 1997. In recent times, women’s lobby groups have put up a spirited campaign for affirmative action as a bridge towards boosting the numbers of women in political leadership. But despite parliament having approved a motion to this effect, there is little evidence that much progress will be made before the current session ends.

The training could not have come at a better time for Kenyan women, many of whom are just emerging to declare their interest in the General Election due in December.

So far, 130 women have registered with women’s lobby groups that have spent a significant part of the past five years preparing them to seek parliamentary and local authority seats.

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At the workshop, participants agreed that overcoming the challenges that women face requires courage, determination and vision.

Women are now being encouraged to take bigger positions in the running of their countries, including politics and economic development. But they will need to be well informed to achieve these goals.

Led by consultant MaryAnn Stephenson, the women worked through such subjects as the characteristics of good leaders, people’s attitudes towards their leaders and how women can build their confidence.

At the end of the two-day training session, two critical factors were identified for women who aspire to large positions. They must strive to overcome fear and never lose track of what they aspire for just because they encounter major obstacles.

Though moral, financial and material support are crucial in achieving leadership posts, women must first seek communication skills to know how best to package their information.

Any takers out there?