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WOMEN PARTICIPATION IN THE KENYAN SOCIETY

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Key Points

- 1. Women were affected by the land redistribution experienced by most Africans during the British colonial era. As Kenyan women lost access to and control of the land, they became more economically dependent on men, which led to an intensification of domestic patriarchy, reinforced by colonial social institutions.**
- 2. Female participation in political processes is limited in several ways, mostly through voter registration processes and family voting practices.**
- 3. Government, civil society, and non-governmental organizations must work together with young women to overcome the political, social and economic barriers to empowerment faced by Kenyan women.**

Introduction

A wise lady¹ once said, “There never will be complete equality until women themselves help to make laws and elect lawmakers.” This statement was made in reference to the political role of women in the United States during the 19th century and applies to the political role of women in countries around the world today, including Kenya. Women constitute over 50 percent of Kenya’s population, but the majority of them are illiterate and poor. A number of them are still

¹ Susan B. Anthony, an American civil rights leader who played a pivotal role in the 19th century women’s rights movement to introduce women’s suffrage in the United States.

affected by customs and traditions that have long since been declared as harmful cultural practices.² My essay aims to critically analyze the role of a young Kenyan woman in Kenyan society and what empowerment means to her, the barriers she faces, steps that the Kenyan government and other non-governmental organizations have taken to enhance the participation of women in government, and possible solutions that would increase the participation of women, both young and old, in Kenyan society and the current reform processes.

Brief History on the Role of Women in Kenya

In order to understand the extent of women's participation in Kenyan society, one needs to understand the history of Kenya and the journey women have had to make from pre- colonial, to colonial to post-colonial times.

Pre-Colonial Kenya: Before the British colonized Kenya in 1890, Kenyan communities were governed by councils of elders, consisting mainly of elderly men in the community. The role of women and girls was to farm the family land, harvest, care for the children, maintain the homestead, and tend to their husbands. Girls were socialized to be homemakers and cultivators. Women were economically empowered as they sold their farm produce in the markets. However, in some communities, decisions affecting the community were left for the council of elders and the men in the community.

Colonial Kenya; The British ruled in Kenya from 1890 to 1963. Women were affected by the land redistribution experienced by most Africans. However, women appear to have been more personally affected by this land alienation. This is because as women lost access to and control of the land, they became more economically dependent on men. This led to an intensification of domestic patriarchy, reinforced by colonial social institutions. Land alienation reduced the economic independence enjoyed by women by compromising their economic productivity. As colonialism continued in Africa, the perceived importance of female agricultural contributions to the household diminished as their vital role in food production was overshadowed by the more lucrative male-controlled cash crop cultivation.

Post-Colonial Kenya; Colonialism instilled a feeling of superiority over women in Kenyan men. A patriarchal order emerged, where the male dominated the female. This order suppresses women, restricts the full development of their potential, prevents them from exercising their rights, makes them live for others, forces them to reproduce, and usurps their right to self-determination. After independence in 1963, the lucky girls that managed to go to school were those whose parents were involved in mission work and had interacted with the Christian missionaries during the colonial period. Many girls were not sent to school and were instead married off as early as 12 years old. As a result some communities like the Maasai and Samburu are still struggling to get rid of the practice of early child marriages. The 1995 Beijing Platform for Action brought a change in the status of Kenyan women. It led to a rise in female consciousness and self confidence as women began to speak up and say 'no' to continued social scorn and disrespect. Women today refuse to accept injustice and strive for gender equality.

² Section 14 of the Children's Act, No. 8, Laws of Kenya, and Article 5 of The Maputo Protocol (protocol to the African charter on human and peoples' rights on the rights of women in Africa), 2003.

Currently, the tenth Kenyan Parliament since independence has the highest number of female legislators. There are 16 elected and seven nominated female members of parliament, out of 222 members in total.

Empowerment for the Young Kenyan Woman

Empowerment is a process by which we appropriate resources, assets, skills, capacities, opportunities, and all the elements that favor, enrich, and strengthen our lives at the individual and collective levels. An empowered woman is able to analyze and overcome the oppression that marks her life. There are three dimensions of empowerment.³

- a. Personal Dimension: Empowerment supports development of a sense of one's self, individual ability, and capabilities. A woman achieves this by recognizing her vital strengths, expanding and using them as personal resources, developing a sense of individuality and confidence, and thus eliminating the conditions that oppress her.
- b. Close Relationships Dimension: Empowerment provides the ability to negotiate and influence the shape and form of relationships (e.g. with family, spouse, friends, or colleagues), the conditions in which they develop, and the decisions taken within them.
- c. Collective Dimension: Empowerment enables people to work together to make a greater impact than would be possible individually.

In Kenya, empowerment has been a gradual process for women since independence. Due to the socialization of women in Kenya's patriarchal society, most women believe it is the role of men to provide for the family and, as a result, most women are economically dependent on their spouses or parents. For the young Kenyan woman, achieving economic empowerment is a constant struggle. However, women who are economically empowered make an impact in their communities politically as well as socially. For example, rural businesswomen are known all over the village because they bring supplies to people. Such businesswomen are therefore very interested in the community's decision-making process as they are concerned about how such decisions will affect their businesses, either directly or indirectly.

In Kenya, political empowerment for the young woman currently means that she can vote in the general elections that take place every five years and any subsequent referendum. Empowerment for the young Kenyan woman means that she is economically independent and fully aware of her rights and the resources at her disposal to enable her to voice her concerns about her community and government, thereby rendering her politically empowered.

Barriers Facing the Young Kenyan Woman

³ *Self-Care and Self Defense Manual for Feminist Activists*, CREA 2008. CREA is a feminist human rights organization based in the global south and led by women from the global south.

There are several barriers that stand in the way of a young Kenyan woman participating fully in her society. These barriers can be classified into political, social, and economic barriers.

Political Barriers

As earlier mentioned, the tenth parliament (2007-2012) has the highest number of female legislators in Kenyan history. However, the percentage of female legislators is only 10.4 percent.⁴ Female participation in political processes is limited in several ways, mostly through voter registration processes and voting rules.

- The high level of illiteracy makes it difficult for women to understand their voting options. In marginalized communities such as the Maasai, the Samburu, and the Turkana, young girls are not sent to school, as their fathers believe that it is a waste of time and money to educate a girl, as her only role will be that of a wife. The Maasai men consider it a worthy investment to educate boys instead.
- Family voting is a practice where women are led to the voting booth by their male relatives or husbands. This hugely constricts their freedom to vote for whomever they please. Having had the opportunity to work with women from the Maasai and Meru communities, I have heard similar stories from several Loita Maasai women, who informed me that their husbands retain their national identity cards (a prerequisite for voting) and only hand them over on election day, when they would accompany their wives to the polling station.
- Raising sufficient resources to fund a campaign for office is extremely difficult, particularly for women who often lack established funding networks or collateral.
- In Kenya, women who run for political posts face societal opposition, from both male and female citizens. Most opt to drop out of the political race. In the 2007 Kenyan general elections, a woman⁵ who was running for a parliamentary seat in Meru's North Imenti constituency dropped out of the race after she was attacked, tortured, and physically assaulted by young men during her campaign.

Social Barriers

- Cultural impediments, such as the practice of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) as a rite of passage in some communities, stigmatize and traumatize young girls for life.
- When young women are forced to marry men old enough to be their fathers, they lose their independence. They have to abide by the wishes of their husbands, even if those

⁴ Under the new Kenyan constitution, the percentage of women in parliament is expected to increase to 29.4 percent come the 2012 general elections.

⁵ Flora Igoki Tera, an ODM Kenya Parliamentary Candidate.

edicts are oppressive. Such women hardly exercise their freedom of movement or association and as a result cannot participate in the nation building process. Among the Loita Maasai, for example, women are not allowed to address men at a public baraza.⁶ Some women must even adopt subservient positions when speaking to their own spouses.

Economic Barriers

- Most women lack entrepreneurship skills and have no idea how to successfully run a business. This renders them economically handicapped and without the means to educate themselves on business practices.
- Other women simply lack the capital to finance their projects.
- Because of their restricted movements, many women who could run businesses from their home are blocked from economic activity by lack of market access. Maasai women are known for their expertise in making beautiful beadwork. However, they lack the market in which to sell their products due to their lack of marketing skills and restricted expansion. They sell beadwork in an already saturated market.

Government Efforts to Empower Women

The Kenyan government, in a bid to enhance women's participation in government, has instigated several projects to economically empower women. The Ministry of Gender, Children, and Social Development introduced the women's enterprise fund in 2006. The principal objective of the fund is economic empowerment of women. Loans made by the fund reach the target beneficiaries through partner financial intermediaries or directly through the Constituency Women Enterprise Scheme. The Ministry of Youth Affairs also introduced the Youth Enterprise Development Fund⁷ in June 2006 as a strategy of addressing youth unemployment in Kenya.

The Kenya Youth Parliament is a youth-led, youth-based organization whose main object is to harness the creative and collective aspirations of the Kenyan youth to define a national youth agenda. The parliament also aims to shape and influence the direction and outcome of national debate and discourse on issues affecting the nation at large and young people in particular. It is currently involved in creating awareness among the youth on the Kenya Agenda 4 reforms.

Civil Society Organizations

In Kenya, there are several non-governmental organizations formed to socially, economically, and politically empower women and girls at the grassroots level. Some of these organizations include:

⁶ A public meeting that is usually organized by the chief and acts as a platform for community members to address the issues affecting their community

⁷ www.youthfund.go.ke, accessed on 14 June 2010.

- FIDA Kenya⁸: Formed in 1985 to improve the legal status of women in Kenya, improve access to justice for women in Kenya, advocate for reform of laws and policies with regard to women's rights, and enhance public awareness on gender and women's rights issues. A lot has been achieved in this regard and could not have been possible without FIDA Kenya's efforts.
- Caucus for Women's Leadership⁹: A legally registered national network dedicated to building women's leadership in Kenya. The caucus works with all women, irrespective of their cultural, religious, political, or socio-economic backgrounds, by establishing structures at the grassroots that act as platforms where women can build their leadership skills. CWL has established female regional assemblies as a model of ensuring women's participation in leadership at all levels of decision-making.
- Amani Communities Africa¹⁰: A non-profit organization formed in 2001 with the goal of building community capacities to resolve conflicts constructively using dialogue, mediation, and nonviolence. ACA also works to enhance access to justice through human rights education, strengthen community governance and justice systems, and increase community capacity to effectively participate in good governance, reform, and democratization processes. ACA is committed to empowering women socially as well as economically.

Possible Solutions and the Way Forward

The following are the solutions that, in my opinion, would enhance women's participation in government and Kenyan society.

Overcoming Political Barriers

1. Include women in the constitutional development process. The current constitution of Kenya considers the interests of women socially as well as politically due to the inclusion of women in the drafting process. The concept of affirmative action in the constitution guarantees an increase in women's participation in the Kenyan society. Further the constitution also provides for legislation to regulate political parties. This will provide a level playing ground for all who wish to participate politically regardless of one's gender.
2. To curb the problem of family voting, the government ought to establish separate polling places for men and women, as well as conducting voter education by scheduling gender-segregated training programs. These training programs will facilitate voter education for women that teaches them about their opportunity and responsibility to vote, and for men about the need for gender diversity in a strong democracy. This will also ensure that

⁸ www.fidakenya.org, accessed on 14 June 2010.

⁹ www.kwpcaucus.org, accessed on 11 June 2010.

¹⁰ www.acafrica.org, accessed on 13 June 2010.

women are not coerced in any way into voting for candidates that their spouses or male relatives prefer.

3. On the issue of campaign funding, civil society can assist by establishing an organization to raise funds for women running for office. Such an organization can seek funding from both international and national donors who want to politically empower women. In Kenya, we are grateful for the work done by Caucus for Women's Leadership, which has set an example for organizations that wish to politically empower women.
4. The government and non-governmental organizations can work together to offer capacity building for female candidates. They can recruit and train women across the political spectrum, then equip them with confidence and skills to run for office.
5. Educated young women across the country can offer capacity building workshops to emphasize the importance of female child education. These young women will act as role models for the rural girls who have never set foot in a classroom and will send a message to the girl's parents on the importance of her education.
6. Decentralized entry points into the political arena should be put in place. As grassroots leaders, women often benefit from decentralization because it can create positions that enable them to gain political experience locally. Local women can run for posts such as councilors in their wards and slowly climb the political ladder.

Overcoming Social Barriers

1. Harmful cultural practices such as FGM and early child marriages should be eradicated. Several non-governmental organizations are already engaged in conducting human rights education at the grassroots level, highlighting the dangers of these practices and offering alternative rites of passage. Amani Communities Africa is one such organization. Its work among the Loita Maasai linked them up with SAFEMAA, a community-based organization that is fighting the practice of FGM and putting alternative rites of passage in place.

Overcoming Economic Barriers

1. Government and local non-governmental organizations should carry out workshops on the existence of both the youth and women enterprise funds and how women, both young and old, can access these funds. Similarly, capacity-building workshops on leadership and entrepreneurship skills should be conducted for grassroots women.

Conclusion

When a woman is empowered, the whole nation is empowered. All Kenyan women may not be politically, economically, or socially empowered instantaneously, but the journey of a thousand miles begins with one step. Kenyan activists have taken this first step and the young women should not be left behind.

The most important determinant of a country's competitiveness is its human talent – the skills, education, and productivity of its workforce. Women account for one-half of the potential talent base throughout the world. Over time, therefore, a nation's competitiveness depends significantly on whether and how it educates and utilizes its female talent. To maximize its competitiveness and development potential, each country should strive for gender equality – that is, to give women the same rights, responsibilities, and opportunities as men. Numerous studies during the last decade have confirmed that reducing gender inequality enhances productivity and economic growth.¹¹ If the Kenyan government places more emphasis on narrowing the gender gap, women will get an opportunity to play an active role in governing and make a difference in the Kenyan society.

¹¹ Ricardo Hausmann, Laura D. Tyson, Saadia Tahidi, *Global Gender Gap Report, 2009*, World Economic Forum, Geneva, Switzerland.

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Claris is a young upcoming Kenyan lawyer who is very passionate about women and girl child empowerment. She holds a bachelor of Laws degree from the Catholic University of Eastern Africa and is currently undertaking a Masters in Laws from the University of Nairobi with keen interest in Public International Law. She has dedicated her career to contribute to the promotion and protection of human rights, democracy and good governance in her country as well as globally. She is a strong believer of the saying “Be the change you want to see in the world!” She is currently the assistant program officer at Amani Communities Africa.

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