

Abstract:

Since Kenya attained formal independence in 1963, women have been seeking to effectively participate alongside men, in governance and decision-making in all aspects of public life. But for the first three decades of postcolonial governance, progress was painfully slow due to a combination of structural obstacles: i) deeply embedded patriarchal socio-cultural values; ii) undemocratic institutions, buttressed by nequally undemocratic and gender blind legal and policy frameworks and iii) low levels of civic and gender awareness . Under this institutional and socio-cultural environment, it is hardly surprising that despite the active and effective role women played in the colonial liberation struggles, the first post independence government under the late President Kenyatta did not have a single woman member of Parliament. When leaders of the only national women's organization at the time sought to engage the State over this exclusion, the male political gatekeepers argued that there were no qualified women. But the presence of women in politics and public decision-making in institutions remained dismal several decades later, despite the large pool of highly educated women in the country. During this period therefore, women in Kenya were circumscribed in advancing a gender agenda, as they operated primarily within civil society, with no political space and with minimal connection or support from the largely patriarchal State.