

From the Women's Decade to Multi-Party Era: Women's Political Participation in Kenya

The 1985 Nairobi Conference to close the United Nation's decade dedicated to women of the world, in many ways marked the beginning of the awakening of the Kenyan society to the fact that the issue of women's empowerment was central to the achievement of the triple goals of **Equality, Development, and Peace**. It is true, however, that during the ten year duration of the Women's Decade (1975-1985) the Kenyan government had adopted a "Women in Development" (WID) policy position and created and/or promoted national machineries to develop and coordinate programmes for women. But there it could be argued that Kenya was merely complying with 1975 United Nations' resolutions that demanded of all member states to make changes and introduce policies and programmes geared towards accelerated advancement of women, especially by creating national machineries to serve women and strengthen the existing organisations. This argument notwithstanding, in the post 1975 era, the Kenyan official development policy position changed from one that was completely gender blind to one that at least acknowledged that women are an important element in the development process and should be integrated in that process. However, long after the end of the Women's Decade, government action on the question of women remained at the level of high sounding rhetoric, consisting of sweeping and vaguely worded statements of government commitment and intention.

It has, therefore, been quite rightly argued that the major achievement of the women's decade was the proliferation of women's groups and organisations that rose from 4,300 groups with a total membership of 156,892 in 1976, to 16,500 groups with a total membership of 630,000 by 1984. By early 1988, there were about 23,000 women groups with 1.4 million members. However, research into the activities and performance of these organisations has revealed that they did not succeed in empowering

women.¹ Government interference in their activities, especially the co-optation of top women group leaders, and the social welfare orientation of these organisations, conspired to make them toothless bulldogs.

Gender based discriminations against Kenyan women in almost every aspect of life, remained rampant throughout the women's decade. Discriminatory laws and practices remained in place on such matters as: inheritance, marriage and divorce, custody and maintenance of children, employment related benefits such as housing allowance for married women in public service and maternity leave. Discriminatory practices and punitive action for women and girls who got pregnant while undergoing government sponsored educational programmes, physical and psychological violence against women and the manipulation of common and customary law to deny women their basic rights on such issues as burial rights of a dead spouse,² are but a few examples that demonstrate the powerlessness and the suppressed nature of the womenfolk in Kenya. This is also a clear illustration of the continuing pervasiveness of patriarchy and male chauvinism in Kenyan society.

While the women's movement in Kenya remained weak throughout the decade, and government action largely unresponsive to women's issues, the end of the women's decade conference, saw the emergence of a new awareness and self-assertiveness among Kenyan women, both individually and in groups. For example, women started coming out more aggressively to challenge the institution of polygamy. There were also some positive indications of women asserting their rights on matters of forced marriages, which previously were common among some Kenyan communities. Other women began to assert their reproductive rights and yet others, especially women in professions such as law, media and academia, began organising awareness raising seminars, workshops, educa-

¹ Mazingira Institute, *A Guide to Women's Organisations and Agencies serving women in Kenya*. Nairobi, Mazingira Institute, 1985, p. 286.

² A classic case is that of Wambui Otieno's 1986/86 protracted legal tussle over the burial rights of her dead spouse. For more details, see Nation Group of Newspapers Publication, *SM: Kenya's Unique Burial Saga*: See also, *SM: Wambui's defeat is a defeat for Women*. in *VIVA* June 1987, pp 16-17 6 p. 36.



tional tours and public poster campaigns, to publicize the situation of women and to educate women about their rights.³

Despite these emerging changes in attitudes among women and evident desire on their part to uplift their subordinate status, the political environment remained quite undemocratic and generally hostile to any forces that challenged the status quo, whether on gender relations or any other issue. And as already noted, despite the dramatic expansion of women's groups and organisations during the women's decade, Kenyan women did not succeed in developing a cohesive and strong women's movement that could lobby for the advancement of women in the country.

³ Maria Nzomo: "The Impact of the Women's Decade on Policies, Programs and Empowerment of Women in Kenya" Issue: "A Journal of Opinion" Vol. XVII/2, 1989, p. 14.

In my view, therefore, the powerlessness of women in Kenya and their total inability to advance their status, derives to a large extent from the undemocratic structures of the Kenyan society and politics, that are best epitomised by the gross under-representation of women in key decision-making and policy-making positions, as explained below.

The Marginalisation of Women in Politics and other Public Decision-Making Positions

Kenya's record of women's participation in politics and other public decision-making posts is pathetic by any standards. In the Judiciary, for example, the first woman judge of the High Court was appointed in 1982, almost twenty years after independence; the second one in 1986 and the third in 1991. There is still no woman to date who is a member of the most supreme court in Kenya – Court of Appeal, despite there being some vacant positions. For the first time in 1983, two women were appointed to head two of the many public parastatal organisations in the country and fifteen others were appointed in 1986, seven as heads and eight as members of boards of parastatal bodies (Daily Nation January 17, 1986:1). During the same year (1986), President Moi also appointed two women to senior diplomatic positions. One was appointed to become the first woman High Commissioner in charge of Kenya's Diplomatic Mission in Britain but was recalled in 1992, and redeployed as Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation. The second one was appointed as Kenya's representative to the Nairobi United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), replacing another who had earlier resigned from this post. In 1987, the President appointed the first ever woman Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Commerce and Industry. (Daily Nation June 2, 1987:1). No other major appointments have been made since, although from time to time a "token" woman is appointed as a member of the many ad hoc boards and committees that are regularly set up.

In the political arena, it was only in November 1969, six years after independence, that the first woman was elected into the National Assembly and one more was nominated to sit in that august legislative body, along with eleven male nominated members. Between 1969–1974,

of the total elected Members of Parliament, women formed 0.5% and 8% of the nominated members. Except for the period 1974–1979, when women's representation improved slightly, the general trend has been one of women's marginalisation in political decision-making at the national level. Indeed by 1991, out of 200 elected and nominated Members of Parliament, there were only two women elected MPs. Of the two women MPs, only one sits on the front bench as an Assistant Minister for Culture and Social Services, alone with 69 men assistant ministers. Indeed, since 1974, when the first woman was appointed to the front bench, the position of assistant minister is the highest position a woman has ever held in Kenya's National Assembly. Furthermore, there has never been more than one woman holding this post at any one time. More significantly, the lone woman assistant minister has consistently been appointed to serve in the "soft" Ministry of Culture and Social Services.

Within the ruling Kenya African National Union (KANU) party hierarchy, women have had even more difficulty participating at the national executive level; save for the lone woman who has since 1989, held the position of Director of Women and Youth Affairs at the ruling party secretariat and one woman party branch chair elected in early 1992. Indeed, women's status in the political party hierarchy has consistently been relegated to that of mere rank and file members or officials of the powerless.

Women's Wing

My own assessment up to 1991 is that, the few women in key decision-making had not used their decision-making platforms to influence national policies in a manner that benefitted other women who had not such a platform. None of these women, for example, had ever made an appeal to the government to remove the many legislations that discriminate against women in property ownership, employment, inheritance, marriage and divorce. The increasing violence against women, including numerous cases of child rape, is an issue one would have expected women in positions of authority to raise and to insist that the law be changed to make rape a capital crime and not a minor offence, as is currently the case. Perhaps, because most of these women leaders had been

presidential appointees in a single party political system, they feared victimisation that could result from being critical of government legislations and practices that discriminate against women, especially when they as individuals were beneficiaries of the system. Furthermore, they must have been aware of the various instances where the government had issued stern warnings to women who had tried to make very modest demands to the government in favour of women.⁴ As for the token women in a male dominated parliament, their numbers clearly worked against any efforts they may have made in pushing for gender related policy changes.

However, since the restoration of multi-party politics in December 1991, the political situation has changed significantly enough to accommodate some freedom of expression, association and assembly of not only political parties, but also various interest groups with a vested interest in the new democratisation agenda. Women have become one of the most vocal pressure groups, and are lobbying very hard for gender equity and social justice, especially in political representation as explained in the next section.

Women's Political Participation in Multi-Party Politics in Kenya: January 1992 – October 1992

In the current transition to multi-party democracy in Kenya, a high premium has been placed on political empowerment as a means of achieving other goals associated with the advancement of the status of women. The argument here is that if women are in key decision-making and policy-making capacities in large enough numbers, they would, for example, exert decisive influence to ensure the removal or repeal of laws that discriminate against women at the social and economic levels and they would participate in designing development policies that mainstream, rather than marginalise and disempower women.

⁴ Maria Nzomo: "Women, Democracy and Development in Africa" in Walter Oyugi et al eds. *Democratic Theory and Practice in Africa*, Nairobi and Portsmouth, N. H., Heinemann. 1987. p. 124.

Since January 1992, women's lobby groups and organisations have been mobilizing and strategising to ensure that in the forthcoming general, civic, and parliamentary elections due in February 1993, women constitute a critical mass of, at least, 30–35% of the total legislative body. One basic strategy to achieve this goal is to sensitize and make women, who form the majority of voters, more conscious of the power of the vote and the merits of casting their votes for committed women rather than for men. The other related strategy is for women's political pressure groups to encourage and build confidence in those women with the necessary political will and commitment to contest for political office in the forthcoming multi-party civic and parliamentary elections.

Non-partisan women's pressure groups are already at work to provide necessary moral and advisory support to women candidates, to increase the latter's chances of being elected into political office. For example, in July 1992, The National Committee on the Status of Women (NCSW) which has been the main lobby group spearheading this particular struggle, organised a national training workshop for women candidates bringing together about 60 women candidates who have already declared their intention to contest political office. The purpose of this workshop was to enhance the capacity of women candidates to win the forthcoming elections by providing them with a forum whereby they could exchange ideas and experiences, and learn from experts on electoral laws and politics, the pertinent issues and strategies necessary to win elections. Among the issues addressed at this workshop included: (i) electoral laws and procedures especially the very complex nomination procedures that women are generally unfamiliar with, (ii) the art of public speaking, taking into account that many African women are not socialized for public speaking, (iii) fund-raising techniques and resource management, given the critical role finance and proper management of the campaign plays for a candidate to win and the fact that women are highly disadvantaged as the majority of them are poor and are not independently wealthy and (iv) campaign strategies and issues, that a woman can exploit to enhance her chances of winning an election, in a political environment coloured by male values and standards. Besides the 60 who attended the workshop, many more women candidates are expected to join these 60 before the end of 1992, in order to attain something close to a critical mass of women in the next parliament. (Daily Nation, July 12 &

18, 1992:2; Standard 12 July 1992). In the meantime, the women representatives from all over the country have endorsed Prof. Wangari Maathai as the women's choice for a presidential candidate in the forthcoming elections.⁵ This is, in itself, an indication of the seriousness and ambition behind the Kenyan women's struggle for political empowerment. But to sustain this momentum and achieve the political objectives of the women's agenda, there is need to build and support a common lobbying forum or pressure group that can in turn serve to enhance the capacity of women candidates to win the forthcoming civic and parliamentary elections.

My assessment of the current political situation is that, although women have organised various pressure groups with the major objective being to advance women's political participation, there is yet to emerge a well coordinated strategy, common vision and cohesiveness. Kenyan women's struggle for empowerment has tended to be constrained by the absence of a strong women's movement and by the emphasis on social welfare objectives and neglect of economic and political empowerment goals. It is of greatest urgency and importance now to create unity in diversity between the numerous women's groups, organisations and individuals. Only if women adopt a common strategy, informed by a common vision, can they effectively lobby for adequate representation in decision-making positions and influence change in the policies and structures that perpetuate their subordinate status.

Conclusion

It can not be overemphasised that the new democratisation process under way in Kenya could again marginalise women, just as the earlier struggle for independence, unless women themselves seize this opportunity to challenge and seek fundamental changes in their subordinate status, by penetrating the decision-making centres of power and control. Women must, therefore, ensure that they attain high level and adequate political and public decision-making representation by committed women and

⁵ See for example, Sunday Standard and Sunday Times, Nairobi, July 19, 1992.

gender sensitive men of their choice in the envisaged democratic arrangement. This is the only way women can be assured of influence in the designing of future national development policies and programmes. It is also the most effective way of ensuring that laws that discriminate against women are repealed or removed from the statute books altogether.