

Women in Politics
and
Public Decision Making

By

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Working Paper No. 2

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FORWARD

The Association of African Women in Research and Development (AAWORD) is committed to action oriented Research. It is an association which believes in addressing the status of African women and looking for ways and means of promoting the same.

Dr Nzomo's paper is therefore a major step in the direction of the Association. Her paper which in a scholarly manner gives a perspective within which to address the issue of women's participation in politics and decision making positions is crucial. It challenges men and women in this country and elsewhere to think about gender and society and to appreciate the struggle women have to go through in order to exercise their rights and responsibilities in society.

The fact that the paper has provoked and continues to provoke debate is a healthy sign. All our daily newspapers, Sunday papers and magazines have highlighted this paper. Maria has become a household name and both men and women have responded either with admonition or hostility or just in a defensive manner. This is healthy and women must keep their agenda alive until gender based discrimination becomes history.

AAWORD believes that information is power and is committed to not only providing information to encourage public debate but also to see to it that the debate is translated into action.

Maria is currently the chairperson of the National Committee on the status of women and a member of the executive committee for AAWORD.

Wanjiku Mukabi Kabira (AAWORD)

Introduction

"Progress in the area of political participation for women --- remains slow. In almost all countries, women have the right to vote on paper, to be eligible for election, appointment to public office, and to exercise public functions on equal terms with men at local national and international levels. In most countries, women participate only marginally at the highest levels of decision making"¹.

"The higher one goes in either party or the state hierarchy, the fewer women there are, and when women are found in policy making and administrative positions, they typically hold 'soft' positions."²

"A government has yet to stand or fall on its policies towards women."³

The principle of equality of men and women, as enshrined in the United Nations Charter; the majority of national constitutions; and numerous international instruments such as the Universal Declaration on Human Rights (1948), the Covenant on Human Rights (1976), the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (1979) and the Nairobi Forward-Looking Strategies (1985), provide generally accepted standards of legal equality between men and women. The awareness of those standards was significantly raised during the United Nations Decade for Women (1976-85); although to varying degree, depending on the region, cultural and education background of women and the socio-political climate in the country. With or without the United Nations Conventions and declarations on behalf of women, it goes without saying that, full and effective participation is a responsibility of all citizens. Effective

solutions to international, national and local problems can best be achieved only when citizens can exercise their equal human rights to participate fully in the decision making process. Indeed, it is imperative that any society that claims to be just, democratic, representative and progressive, must of necessity ensure women's significant presence and participation in the high level public policy decision making positions. Furthermore, it is now generally accepted that women constitute a key national resource, whose ideas, creative solutions and concern for cohesiveness of the social fabric can help change the quality of life and society at large. But to do that, their participation in public decision making roles is essential, but despite all the official national and international declarations affirming the legal rights and equality between men and women, everywhere, the women remain severely discriminated and deprived of their right to influence decisions which determine the present and future of society. Even in countries with the highest percentages of women in decision-making positions in the legislative and executive bodies, such as the Scandinavian countries, the participation of women in the top echelons of private boards, companies and other influential institutions is extremely low. For example one study notes that even in the highly of industrialised countries of the North such as Britain, women make only 7% of the senior managers in industry, 5% of the undersecretaries in the civil service, 3% of university professors and 2% of vice chancellors in British universities. In Australia, women occupied 5 out of 35 positions in the Australian Council of Trade Unions in 1989, while only one of the 80 members of the Business Council of Australia was a woman. In the United States of America, there are some 17% women in the legislature, 0.5% on the boards of corporations that control much of the country's economy and only 9% on the executive committees of the American Federation of Labour. Indeed, in 1989, only 3% of top

American and 8% of top British managers were female. For Europe as a whole, there are only 11% women in the top echelon. (V. Willis, 191: 5-6)

Today, there are only eight elected women heads of state of government. While we are encouraged by the fact that the eighth Prime Minister of France, assumed her office in 1991, we should note that so far there have been only 8 heads of state in history. In fact, there have been a total of only 18 elected women heads of state or governments in world history and of these, all but two are still alive. In 1989, less than 4% of the ministerial positions world wide were occupied by women. In that year, there were no women ministers at all in 90 countries. Most of the women ministers occupied the portfolio of 'social affairs', which is a stereotype in itself. The situation at sub-ministerial decision-making level in government is, of course, better. If assistant ministers, departmental directors and other higher civil-service decision-makers are included, the percentage of women in decision-making rises to an "impressive" 5% on average. (Sellami-Meslem, 1991:2).

The paucity of women in politics and public decision making positions is therefore a global phenomena. Throughout history, men have monopolised and dominated strategic decision making positions. Indeed, women who, in the past have wielded great political power in their own right were so rare that they have acquired a legendary status. It is also interesting to note that the majority of women who have in recent years held the highest offices of state, have initially derived at least part of their political legitimacy from their association with a prominent male politician. Mrs. Peron of Argentina, Mrs. Bandaranaike of Sri Lanka, Mrs. Indira Gandhi of India, Mrs. Corazon Aquino of the Phillipines, and Benazir Bhutto of Pakistan, just to name a few, were

propelled to power through this association. A few however, such as Margaret Thatcher of Britain, have risen to a position of political prominence despite the absence of such political affiliation.

Women's struggle for gender equity has made some major achievements thus far, but has still many hurdles to overcome. Despite the achievement of universal suffrage, increased education and incomes for women and greater participation in public life, women everywhere remain marginalised and grossly under-represented in those areas of public life, where important decisions and policies are made. And yet women form at least half of the population of all countries of the world and perform many important productive and reproductive roles. Because of their incidence in the population, women make up at least half of the electorate in all countries. By their numbers, women have the capacity to decide on the political leadership. But women are not often elected to political office and very few are put up as candidates. But why is this so? Is it because women do not put themselves forward? Or, is it because women voters believe that men can represent their interests adequately? Is it because male political leaders see no advantage in making an effort to recruit, select, and elect women leaders? Presumably all of these factors are interrelated and must be explored. In an attempt to answer these questions I will examine briefly in the next section, some perspectives on barriers to women's participation in public life.

Barriers to Women's Participation in Public Roles

Literature on women in politics and other public, decision making roles, reveal dominant factors which create barriers for women advancing towards and in top decision making

positions.

The most important barrier identified in almost all literature is the socio-cultural beliefs and myths, which form the training most men and women are exposed to from childhood. The sex-stereotypes and gender segregation in employment and allocation of roles in private and public life are primarily a product of the early socialization process, the indoctrination of the societal environment. In this regard, many women's "hang ups" and lack of confidence in their ability to competently execute public leadership roles, arises from this socialization which is insubordinating in nature. Another aspect of the socio-cultural constraint to women's participation in high level decision making takes the form of multiple roles. In the African context for example, socio-cultural traditions tend to assume that women's public roles are secondary and are just an additional activity to their "primary" (domestic) roles. Literature on women is replete with the woes of the "double day" that working career women have to bear, especially in Africa, where support services are few or absent, (Stitcher and Parpart, 1990, A. Imam et al 1985; Boserup; 1970 and B.J. Dorsey et al; 1989). And even where support services exist, they do not alter the existing unequal gender division of labour. In other words, socio cultural attitudes die hard. For example, Parpart (1990) notes that given the existing gender division of labour, there are no easy solutions for a woman who wants to succeed in her career: "Most working women juggle harried schedules - but there are few solutions except the drastic ones of having fewer children or becoming single, separated or divorced in order to reduce time spent on husband - care" (p.6). Kaufman (1985) shares a similar viewpoint. She states that "Even when women have been able to achieve high-pay, high prestige positions within the professions, the costs of such success have been high. Many have had to give up or

delay marriage, family and significant relationships. Those who have not given up family have had to add to their demanding career commitments, the major responsibilities of managing home and child-care tasks" (Freeman: 1984: 366). In the United States for example, 90% of executive men have children by age 40 compared to only 35% of executive women (Willis: 1991: 23). A 1987 UN study further notes that even on the rare occasions when a woman has fought her way into a top decision making position, further barriers are often erected which contribute to disempowering her and eroding her effectiveness in the position.

This problem is again explained within the sex-role socialization theory. In this respect, it is argued that because people rely on stereotypes to evaluate observed behaviour, there may be perceived conflict between the behaviour that the high position requires and the behaviour generally expected of women (UN: 1987:35). And because most leadership positions are filled by men who are used to relating to women as mother, sister, daughter or secretary-assistant, many professional male managers may never have had a woman "boss" as top executive. And due to the deep rooted traditional beliefs about the subordinate role of women in society, both men and women may find it difficult to accord the top female public decision-maker the respect and cooperation she requires to be effective.

Related to this is the isolation that comes from being the only one, or one of the very few highly placed women in a senior decision making capacity. The 1987 UN study cited above notes that, "Women are isolated in all high managerial positions, even in those so-called female professions such as nursing. Not only does this "token" managerial status cause loneliness, it can result in decreased effectiveness" (p. 37). Another study, (Willis: 1991) advances a similar view about

the minority behaviour of women in high positions in public life. The study argues that minorities such as women, who are successful in a male world, absorb the dominant culture to such an extent that they tend to disassociate themselves from other women, to underrate their success and to perceive any discrimination they meet as a result of their own shortcomings. A lone woman in a high office cannot therefore be expected to bring distinctly female values to her office. She therefore suggests that to effect fundamental change to the dominant male culture in politics for example, it would require a female **critical mass** of at least 30-35%. Her argument is that if the minimum female critical mass in politics was attained, this would bring more emphasis on family matters, the environment, equality between the sexes, policies to deal with child care, and violence against women, with child care and family issues taking priority (Willis:1991:5).

In addition to the attitudinal dimensions arising from socio-cultural engineering, lack of access to adequate quality and quantity of formal education in itself acts as a major barrier to a women's advancement to top decision making level. Research has shown that the more education a woman has, the more likely she is to be employed. Moreover, women's occupational advancement is more closely linked to their educational attainment than it is for men. Men use their educational credentials for entry to jobs and then rely on job-related experience for advancement. For women however, formal credentials remain critical throughout their working lives (Freeman: 1984:238). In political terms therefore, individual resources which include education, personal income, age, marital status, number of children, view of the spouse for example, are important determinants for the woman's participation in politics.

Another factor which is viewed as important is the political systems as it can promote or hinder women's political activity. For example, the party structure can impede the participation of women. Information about politics can be disseminated through channels that men have more access to than women not to mention the language of politics which can be a decidedly male jargon which appears alien to women. Political ideology can reinforce the traditional division of work by gender, with politics being linked to the activities of men rather than women (Haavio-Manm et al (eds); 1985:48).

The second most important barrier arises from the first namely, the policy and the institutional framework governing gender division of labour, terms and conditions of employment and promotions. Since men have traditionally dominated policy making and the institutional structuring, it is the male ideology that is reflected in policy structures all institutions. This ideology rests on the domestic roles of motherhood and housewife. Public tasks, especially those involving governing and important decision making are assumed to be suited for men who possess the appropriate "natural" credentials for leadership tasks, namely toughness, aggressiveness, decisiveness, risk-taking and self confidence.

In specific reference to women's participation in politics, another barrier cited is lack of adequate money. The argument is that many women are poor and even the wealthy ones, may not be independently so. Hence they may not be able to afford the enormous amounts of money required to fund an electoral campaign (Willis: 1991:22). The overall argument then being made in much of the literature on this subject is that socio-cultural, political, educational, legal and organisational factors are related to the level of participation of women in political and bureaucratic decision-making

positions. Duverger (1975) summarises the constraints to women's political participation appropriately:

"If the majority of women are little attracted to political careers, it is because everything tends to turn them away from them; if they allow politics to remain essentially a man's business, it is because everything is conducive to this belief; tradition, family life, education, religion and literature. The small part played by women in politics merely reflects and results from the secondary place to which they are assigned by the customs and attitudes of our society and which their education and training tend to make them accept as the natural order of things (Duverger: 1775: 129 and 130 c.f. Freeman: 1985:402.)

Given the existing man-made barriers to women's political participation, most of the literature on the subject suggests that as a matter of strategy, the development of a strong women's movement in each country, in an attempt to overcome obstacles to participation. Women need to support and work for each other to overcome systemic discriminations. Even where gender equity policies are in place, women need to monitor their implementation as complete reliance on the good will of policy makers and employers many of who are men, may bring some reforms but not fundamental change. (Willis: 1991:24).

The Kenyan Case

Bearing in mind the universal barriers to political participation identified and discussed above, we now examine the Kenyan case, under four broad areas of women's participation in public life.

1. Parliamentary and party politics
2. Women's Organisations
3. Public Employment decision making
4. Trade Union Movement.

The Participation of Women in Parliamentary and Party Politics in Kenya

As elsewhere in the world, participation in national politics in Kenya requires that one is a member of a recognised political party as well as an eligible voter who can contest a political office. All women of eighteen years and above have been eligible to vote and contest for elective political positions since 1963 when Kenya attained her independence. Kenya African National Union (KANU) has been the ruling party since independence. However, between 1963-1969, Kenya had two opposition parties in succession. Following the proscription of the Kenya Peoples Union KPU in 1969, KANU remained the only political party, although the constitution of Kenya continued to allow for a multi-party political system until 1982. It was in 1982 that Kenya's constitution was amended to make the country *a de jure* one party state. Since then anyone wishing to vote or contest any political office must of necessity be a member of KANU.

Many women from the grassroots to the national level are members of KANU, and participate as voters in the national electoral process that takes place approximately every five years. Many studies done on the electoral politics in Kenya affirm that women form the majority of voters, but very few present themselves as candidates for political office and even fewer succeed in becoming members of parliament (MPs). For example, between 1965-1969, there was not a single woman member of parliament and the government did not

nominate even one token woman as a symbol of affirmative action. In November 1969, the first woman was elected into the National Assembly and one more nominated to sit in the legislative body, along with eleven male nominated members. Thus, of the total elected members of parliament between 1969-1974, women formed 0.56% 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 and by implication, lack of inclusion of women's concern in the legislative agenda. Table 1 below details this scenario between 1969 -1983.

TABLE 1: MEMBERSHIP OF THE KENYA NATIONAL ASSEMBLY BY YEAR OF ELECTION AND GENDER, 1969 -1983.

Year of Election	No	ELECTED MEMBERS		NOMINATED MEMBERS				
		MALE	FEMALE	MALE	FEMALE			
		.%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
1969	154	99.35	1	0.65	11	91.67	1	8.33
1974	152	96.82	5	3.18	10	83.33	2	16.67
1979	155	98.10	3	1.90	11	91.67	1	8.33
1983	157	99.37	1	0.63	9	81.82	2	18.18

Original Source:

Supervisor of Elections: Attorney General's Chamber
1985, also cited in Republic of Kenya, Women of Kenya
(Nairobi July 1985) p. 42

At present (1991), out of 188 elected and nominated members of parliament, there are only two women elected MPs, and one nominated woman MP. Of the three women MPs, only one sits on the front bench as an Assistant Minister for Culture and Social Services. 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 only woman assistant minister has consistently been appointed to serve in the ministry of Culture and Social Services. Within the KANU party hierarchy, women have had even more difficulties participating at the national executive level. Indeed, until 1989 when the KANU secretariat created the position of the Director of Women and Youth Affairs, no woman had ever been elected or appointed to any of the national executive positions within the ruling party. Women's involvement in KANU was relegated to that of mere rank and file members or officials of the low key KANU Women's Wing. Representation of women in the national executive of KANU may however, increase, if the government implements its pledge made to women in February 1990, to the effect that, "the KANU Maendeleo Ya Wanawake Organisation (MYWO) will soon be represented in the party's national governing council and the national executive committee" (The Standard, February 9, 1990: 2). But so far this pledge has not been implemented.

Constraints to Parliamentary/Party Participation

The paucity of women in the national political decision making positions described here is, as pointed out earlier, not unique to Kenya. Indeed, these factors namely: socio-cultural attitudes, low levels of education, and economic

status which are often cited as constraints for women's participation in politics at the global level are also applicable to Kenya and hence are not a major focus of the analysis in this paper. It is my view however, that, in the Kenyan context, the role of the established male dominated political system (state) is one of the most critical factors in understanding the very low levels of women political participation in parliamentary and party arenas. In addition, the nature of the women's movement which I discuss in a subsequent section, is also crucial in understanding the dynamics of women's participation in public life and decision making in Kenya.

It is common knowledge that in a largely patriarchal world, there are no cases where men have given up without a fight the privileged positions they have historically enjoyed as the authoritative decision makers in the private and public sphere of their countries. While in the private domestic sphere men may concede sharing some decision making roles with women in the public, especially the political arena, the male gender employs every possible strategy to keep women out. This is the situation that prevails in Kenya, whereby, even when a woman surmounts all the typical socio-cultural and economic constraints to participation, she still has to prove to be better than the men candidates to gain entry into parliament. And if she does enter parliament, she is likely to be allocated a position of relative powerlessness. And being overwhelmingly outnumbered by men, her loudest voice is treated like a whisper and hence ignored.

As noted earlier, between 1964-1969, there was not a single woman member of parliament in Kenya. This was not because there were no women who contested parliamentary elections. There were a few: the most notable documented case being that of Mrs. Ruth Habwe - a former chairperson

of Maendeleo ya Wanawake Organisation. Mrs. Habwe had demonstrated leadership abilities, backed up by a relatively good education. She also had the courage to stand for political elections while other women were still content with being mere voters. She failed to become a member of parliament primarily because the male dominated KANU denied her support. And when she decided to contest the elections as an independent candidate, she was consequently suspended from KANU (Wipper 1971 (b) 1476). Later, the government justified its failure to nominate any woman to parliament by arguing that women were not yet qualified for political office - a hardly convincing excuse given the fact that the male politicians themselves had just entered political office for the first time. At any event, women were depending on the government to allocate them special seats (Sunday Post, Aug. 1964).

This caricatured image of women's unfitness to hold decision making positions has been used repeatedly to keep women powerless and justify the perpetuation of their subordination and exploitation. Indeed some Kenyan politicians have in the past gone as far as blaming the women for their subordinate status. Thus one Kenyan minister while closing an International Women's Year seminar found it appropriate to tell an all female audience that: "I am forced to believe that the woman is lazy in her mind. She is too lazy to think. You women think and believe that you are inferior to men. This is what it is all about. It is a psychological problem and 99.9% of women suffer from it" (Sunday News. May 25, 1975: 1; also Nzomo. 1987:123)

To some extent, it may be true that some women do suffer from an inferiority complex, born out of years of socialization for subordination. But it is a gross exaggeration to put the figure at 99.9%. The majority of women in Kenya no longer

regard themselves as inferior to men. Indeed their basic problem is lack of opportunities where resources continue to be disproportionately controlled by men, through the latter's domination of the machineries applied in the allocation and distribution of these resources. The point to be underscored therefore is that, men employ the outdated socio-cultural excuse, as a ploy for excluding women from political and other public decision making positions. Ultimately, the objective is to keep women in a subordinate status. As Obbo (1984:4) has noted:

"the need to control women has always been an important part of male success in African societies."

Ruth Habwe also advanced a similar explanation for the male resentment to her parliamentary candidature.

"I am aware of the difficulties which men face when they consider the possibility of women gaining political influence. They harbour the inevitable fear that men being superior to women, if women reached the same level, they would fall from the exalted status they have exploited for so long" (Sunday Post August 23, 1964 and Wipper, 1971 a: 465).

Despite women being the majority of voters in Kenya, they do not sponsor or lobby for fellow women candidates to represent them in parliament. This is in part due to the nature of the women's movement, discussed below. It is also due in some cases to male control over their wife's voting preferences. This was particularly the case during the last general elections in Kenya when the queue voting method was employed. A husband could then successfully order his wife and other members of his family, not to line up behind a female candidate. Mrs. Agnes Ndetei one of the

elected women members of the current parliament affirmed this to have been her experience.

"My experience in the field was that a lot of women do not have the final say, especially at home as to whom they should vote for. I had a woman who was badly battered by her husband and she had to run away from him simply because she was going to vote for me. I confronted many other cases where women were not free." (Daily Nation 30 April 188:6)

The only other elected woman MP in the current Kenya parliament echoed Mrs. Ndetei's sentiment and summarised her experience as follows:

"If men find it difficult to come to parliament, the women's situation can be explained by paraphrasing a biblical saying, "it is easier for an elephant to go through the eye of a needle than for a woman to come to parliament." (Daily Nation 30 April 1988:6)

The male politicians response was merely to dismiss the two women's concerns, by stating that women's representation to Kenyan parliament is good enough (ibid). Others expressed doubts about Mrs. Ndetei's capacity to discharge her duties as an MP (The Standard April 19, 1988:11).

While male domination of the political system as well as the decision making structures is generally a major determinant of women's chances of political participation in parliament, it is still the case that few women present themselves as candidates for parliamentary elections. In the last general elections in Kenya for example, only four women stood for elections. Here, it needs to be remembered that it is men

who control the political structures for elections recruitment, principally in the only political party KANU. In this regard, solid party or other group support is vital for potential candidates to feel confident about contesting a parliamentary seat. The paucity of women candidates may also be due to a combination of factors which include:

- women's multiple roles that consume all their time and energy.
- lack of adequate money capital to invest in the election campaign, given that very few women in Kenya are independently wealthy due to the patriarchal system of property ownership.
- lack of interest in politics at national level; and,
- lack of support from an interest group such as the women's organizations. The latter have the potential to form the basis for enhancing women's political participation, if they could overcome some of the structural problems which are discussed below.

Political Participation Through Women's Organizations

Although Kenyan women have no cohesive women's movement with a common vision, there are numerous women's organizations some of them dating back to the colonial era. Given the fact that the channels for political participation through political parties and other government machineries are closed for the majority of women, sex solidarity groups form the major forum for political expression and participation. Many of these women organizations however have social welfare as their major objective. But

though basically welfarist in nature, these associations can also be viewed as political, if conceived as "collective strategies in which individual women combine resources to cope with changing structures-structures that increase women's need for cash while disproportionately excluding them from acquiring it as compared to men" (K.A. Staudt: 14). So far, the sex solidarity of women's groups as they operate outside the political system do not sponsor women candidates to political office though they serve as good training ground for the few women who have participated in politics because the groups operate outside the political systems. Through their participation in these groups, these elite women receive training in information net-working, citizenship, ethics and character building (Smock, 1977:11)

Major national women's organizations such as the Women's Bureau, KANU/MYWO and the National Council of Women of Kenya-by virtue of the role bestowed upon them-are expected to provide leadership and guidance to other women's organizations affiliated to them. They should indeed spearhead the formation of a cohesive women's movement capable of influencing national decision making processes and lobby for women's representation in the political arena. But, the fact in the Kenyan context is that the national women's organizations have largely been ineffective in empowering women and in facilitating increased participation of women in public decision making bodies. The male dominated political system has succeeded in co-opting the conservative leaders within the women's organizations, while marginalising the radical ones. Patricia Stamp (1989:69-70) argues that this is not entirely an experience unique to Kenya but is the common phenomena in African countries whereby, nationally sponsored women's organizations such as the MYWO serve as safe show cases of the government's formal commitment to women's interest and allow them to co-opt national

feminist efforts and ideology. In most cases, the organisations are deeply divided between the elite women who run them and the alienated local women who are not served. "(ibid.)

For example, events between 1989 to the present, regarding KANU-MYWO and Prof. Maathai's Green Belt Movement clearly illustrate the point that national women's organisations in Kenya are manipulated and politically controlled to enhance and legitimize the male dominated status quo. Those women's organizations that are acquiescent, are accorded formal support and made to feel special and powerful in comparison to those which hold different views. Furthermore, such acquiescence gives legitimacy to any punitive measures meted out to those women who challenge the status quo. It is within this context that we should understand the conduct of the outcome of the first KANU - MYWO national elections held in October 1989 to elect its own officials. The male politicians were officially not supposed to interfere with the elections. But as it turned out, these elections provided the opportunity for the key male politicians in the government to ensure that their wives, sisters and friends, just to name a few examples captured the leadership of this women's organisation. Despite ordinary women's cries of "rigging" and "male interference", the powerlessness of the majority of women in this organisation was once again affirmed (Kenya Times October 31, 1989:16). The sentiments expressed in all the three local daily newspapers, were succinctly summarised in the Weekly Review:

"From the very beginning, whether we were dealing with simple problems of an election time-table or the eligibility of those who should vote, the plain fact has been that Kenya women have little or no say in what

the election process was all about. Infact, the original idea of merging MYWO with the ruling party was not taken by women but men leaders in the ruling party. Since then, women have become mere pawns in a political game that is aimed at benefitting the male player. Women in Kenya are in danger of becoming appendages of men, with their fate determined by men with little or no reference to women". (The Weekly Review November 3, 1989:1)

Despite the blatant interference by male politicians in these elections, the government congratulated the women of KANU - MYWO for successfully conducting their own elections and assured them of a hegemonic vis-a-vis women's organizations. The KANU national chairman, Peter Oloo Aringo assured the women leaders that, "KANU - MYWO would remain supreme on matters relating to women's development to avoid conflicts and duplication of duties among women leaders and KANU - MYWO officials". (The Standard, February 9, 1990:27. 2). He further promised them that KANU would appoint two KANU-MYWO representatives to serve at the governing council and the National Executive of the party. Another government minister went as far as sounding an alarm on his male colleagues, to the effect that, the KANU - MYWO women could now grab power from the men any time:

"I will strongly advise my parliamentary colleagues to be aware that women in Maendeleo ya wanawake Organization will soon be standing against them in the next general elections. We (men) should be aware that we are sitting on a time-bomb that can explode any time where women had been in position of leadership, they were known to be hard, decisive and very difficult to deal with." (Professional Lady,

These statements of women's power need to be taken cautiously as they could make women develop a false sense of power and hence complacency, thus deflecting them from struggling for substantial influence in decision making positions in the party and government. The KANU - MYWO for example, should for example insist that the party should honour its 1990 pledge to the latter's representation on the governing and executive positions in KANU. In this connection, Wipper, has stressed the fact that the male politicians are not keen on sharing power with women and hence the promise of women's representation in the decision making positions of KANU, may never materialise, unless women themselves push for it"

"as practising politicians bent on keeping themselves in power, they were not about to allocate resources needed for other goals to a group seen as powerless and hence of no immediate threat to their positions. Their tactics - ceremonial affirmation, tokenism, verbal ploys, and promoting the conservative elements - have apparently subdued a potentially disruptive movement." (Wipper, 1971 (b), 468 -479 and 1975: 12).

Furthermore, the strategy of focusing on one or two women's organisations and denying it to others, is likely to weaken and further fragment an already divided and fragile women's movement in Kenya. The conflicts and rivalries that have been so common among the leadership of the national women's organizations are likely to increase, thus postponing indefinitely, the development of a relatively cohesive women's movement that could form the basis of effective women's participation in public decision making institutions.

The experience of Maathai and her Green Belt Movement especially during her 1989/90 confrontation with the government over an environmental issue, further affirms that Kenyan politicians are not receptive to criticism, especially from a woman who challenges state decisions. Unlike in the past, where Maathai had challenged the state and society on issues of gender equity and social justice, in 1989, she was opposing the government's decision to build a skyscraper in the middle of one of the largest recreational parks in the middle of the city of Nairobi. Her opposition was based on a genuine environmental concern that clearly cut across gender, class or race. But when she decided to seek a high court injunction to restrain the government from implementing its decision, the entire membership of parliament descended upon her, attacking her personally as a "sentimental frustrated divorcee" who has no credentials or mandate to challenge a state decision. What was a national issue was then reduced into a personal, gender issue between Maathai and male members of the political system. Significantly, there were no women who came out openly in support of Maathai's course. Indeed, some women's groups affiliated to KANU - MYWO held a demonstration to condemn and to disassociate themselves from her action (Daily Nation December 15, 1989). This show of disassociation coming from fellow women, gave legitimacy to the punitive measures that were then meted out to Maathai and her Green Belt Movement (Daily Nation December 15, 1989 and January 9, 1990). The only solid show of support for Maathai came from international environmentalists and the external donors of the project who vindicated her by refusing to fund it (African Business, March 1990: 49). It seems therefore that, while the merger of MYWO into KANU has enhanced state support by the large female constituency under Maendeleo, it has also facilitated the disempowering of other women's organizations, especially those that have a record or history

of militancy within their leadership ranks, among them, the National Council of Women of Kenya, (NCWK) and the Green Belt Movement.

In general, therefore, while women in Kenya are highly mobilized into groups, their effectiveness at the national level is minimal. They remain marginalised and unable to penetrate high levels of power and central decision making. On this score I share the view of Parpart and Staudt, that: "While organizational affiliation is high among women, their gains from pressurising states have been minimal." (Parpart and Staudt 1989: 1). Indeed, as other studies have shown, the typical response to women's policy issues by African governments in general is to scapegoat them, by deriding and punishing pregnant schoolgirls, castigating women prostitutes for ruining the moral fibre of society and stigmatizing women who are divorced and/or are single parents for having lost sight of African Customs (Staudt: 1981:9-10; c.f Nzomo, 1987 and 1991 (a) and (b).

That women's groups and organizations have failed to make an impact on the national political decision making arena, is best exemplified by their passivity on issues and policies that directly affect their status and welfare. Examples include:

1. The abolition in 1969 of the affiliation act that required fathers of illegitimate children to provide some financial support to their offsprings. (East African Standard, June 17, 18, 19, 1969).
2. The "Law of Marriage and Divorce Bill," that has twice come up for debate in parliament and been defeated by the male dominated parliament, without any significant protest

from women.

3. The retention of the law that continues to deny housing allowance to married women in public service.
4. Lack of provision for paid maternity leave. (Ghutto, April 1976: 53).

Other gender issues over which Kenyan women have failed to respond to include;

1. The 1986 government directive that women teacher trainees who got pregnant refund government money spent on their education.
2. The 1987 Wambui Otieno's protracted legal battle, seeking to be granted the right to bury her late husband (Daily Nation, May, 1987 and VIVA 1987:16-17 and 36). The latter case presented a good opportunity that Kenyan women could have seized to insist on the harmonization of Kenyan laws, into one set of laws, to avoid future manipulation of the new contradictory customary and common laws that are conveniently used to victimise women. Significantly, it was only Wangari Maathai who came out forthrightly in support of Otieno's case. Wambui however did not reciprocate in 1989, when Maathai was herself under siege over the environmental case cited earlier.

Another issue that the women of Kenya, especially the women MPs could have proposed improvement is the

government's meagre financial allocation to women's programmes, many of which have failed to take off due to lack of adequate financial and technical inputs. In this context, it is significant to note that between 1978 and 1988 the government allocated to women's programmes the equivalent of 0.1% of the total government expenditure. In the meantime, the Government's grants to women's groups have continued to drop significantly from 3.3 million Kenya shillings in 1986, to 2.6 million shillings in 1987 and to 1.7 million shillings in 1989. (Nzomo 1989: 15 and Economic Survey 1990: 181).

It is apparent from the above analysis that the political environment in which women's organizations operate, is a major constraint to their effectiveness. In addition, the constitutions upon which these organizations are based, do not permit them to engage or get involved in matters deemed to be political. This further constrains their political participation. This was the reason cited for MYWO's failure to sponsor women candidates to elective political positions:

"We at Maendeleo would like to actively support all the women candidates we feel deserve to go to parliament. But as Maendeleo (MYWO), we are non-political and cannot therefore be involved. I can only support candidates as an individual and my one vote cannot do much." (The Standard, September 16, 1983: 12-13. see also Nzomo, 1987: 124 and 1989:15)

The ineffectiveness of women's attempts at political participation under the umbrella of national organizations should not be construed to mean that women of Kenya have not been active political participants at other levels or on other issues both in the past and present. Women in Kenya

often employ informal channels of political expression. Firstly, as noted earlier, sex solidarity groups are used to achieve socio-economic needs that women fail to obtain through the formal political mechanisms. Secondly, women at the grassroots, have a long history of political participation, dating back to the pre-colonial era for instance, when women actively participated alongside men in the struggle for political independence. While some women went with men to the forest to fight colonial armies, others provided strategic backup as food and accommodation providers for those fighting in the forests, and yet others converted their homes into armouries for storing guns smuggled from the colonizers. For women as for men, the major issues then were national political liberation and the creation of a democratic society. At the level of gender and class a democratic society has yet to be attained.

Furthermore, in the post-colonial era and despite the socio-economic and political constraints already noted, a few courageous women have kept the fire burning, acting as it were on the voices of the silent majority. For example, Wangari Maathai's persistent and courageous crusade for women's rights, social justice and environmental conservation, is recognised internationally, as evidenced by the many prestigious awards she has received in recent years. Such courageous women need moral support; not isolation, by all persons committed to social justice and gender equity.

In addition to the scattered voices of protest from individual women, a few women groups have devised ways of converting their group power into political power which they then efficiently utilise to extract resources out of male politicians in return for political support. A good example is women's groups in Kiambu district of Kenya, where one

study has shown that the "Harambee" movement has become the focus of reciprocal support between the women's groups and the local MP. The study explains that in some constituencies in that district, women group support or lack of it in an electoral campaign, may mean the success or failure of a candidate to enter parliament.

"The decision of a group of women to 'get up and dance' for a candidate means that they intend to vote for the person in question. This is how these women express their political preferences." (ECA, 1972, cited in Wamalwa 1987:8)

In some cases however, it is difficult to assess the extent to which women are benefiting, in the course of trading favours with male politicians, and the extent to which they are being used to achieve broader political goals of a local MP (VIVA: December 1989; 25 and 38).

Women Participation in Public Employment Decision Making

In Africa, the concept of "housewife" is a misnomer as there are extremely few women (if any) whose sole activity is confined to the private/domestic sphere alone. Most women, including middle class women, play many diverse public roles, in addition to the domestic ones. The problem however, is that many of these roles, be they in the waged "modern" sector or the non-waged sectors, are undervalued and highly marginalised. In other words, the majority of women in Africa actively participate in the public sector of their economies and contribute significantly to the GNPs, but without the benefit of decision making power.

In Kenya, a 1988 study showed that between 1967-1984, 80% of all women in formal employment were concentrated in two industries, namely agriculture and services. Even there, women were concentrated in low paying, routine and de-skilled activities. In 1982 for example, 93% of all persons engaged in secretarial work were women (Zezeza, 1987:60). Indeed, only 20% of women in Kenya are employed in the formal sector. The rest of the women are either, small scale agriculturalists or are making a living in the ubiquitous informal sector. The latter is the melting pot of all women who cannot find employment opportunities elsewhere.

I have argued elsewhere that whatever position women occupy and whatever role and status women are accorded in contemporary Africa is to a significant extent determined by the quantity and quality of formal education they have access to. Indeed, that women remain underprivileged and under represented in all important decision making positions in the African Society is primarily a function of the institutionalised and structural bias in the educational system, which ensures that the amount and type of education made accessible to the majority of women is inappropriate and/or inadequate for participating or occupying hegemonic positions in public life (Nzomo, 1987:188). This argument remains valid as there are many problems to be overcome before sexism in the curricula and gender equity can adequately be achieved.

However, it is no longer true in 1991 to argue that there are no qualified women to occupy key decision making positions. Although they are relatively fewer women than men with a high level of education, significant progress has been made. In 1989 for example, about 30% of the students who completed the sixth year of high school were female and almost the same percentage qualified for admission to one of the four public universities in Kenya (Economic Survey,

1990:74). The problem therefore goes beyond the amount of education females have obtained. It appears that there are certain subtle barriers in the employment structure that discriminate against women, regardless of their level of their education especially in jobs that carry power and authority. To redress this trend, it would require among other things deliberate affirmative action on the part of the government.

The presidential appointments of a number of women to some key decision making positions starting from the early 1980's, is an example of affirmative action. Thus the first woman judge of the high court was appointed in 1982, the second in 1986 and the third in 1991. In 1983, two women were appointed to head public parastatal organizations and at least 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 Mission to Britain and the second one as Kenya's representative to the Nairobi based United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), replacing another who had earlier resigned from this post. And in 1987, the president appointed the first ever permanent secretary in the Ministry of Commerce and Industry (Daily Nation, June 2, 1987:1)

There is no doubt the positions listed above to which women were appointed, carry authority and decision making power. What is in doubt is whether the women appointees have used these decision making platforms to influence national policies in a manner that can benefit other women who do not have such a platform. It appears that many of these appointees have not. There is no evidence that these women for example, have even attempted to appeal to the government

to remove the many legislations that discriminate against women on such issues as, 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 speak out about 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, the only time in recent years that women leaders have publicly come forward and taken a position on a national issue with a gender dimension, was on the St. Kizito tragedy. Significantly, the St. Kizito murder and rape cases, received condemnation from a wide cross section of the Kenyan society although without due attention being given to the gender dimension of the rapes and the broader issue of violence against women. Therefore, women leaders should go a step further and seize the opportunity presented by the St. Kizito case and insist that relevant laws be amended or created to ensure the protection of women against violence by men. They should also initiate training programmes to sensitize the public on gender issues and the merits of gender equity.

Understandably, women in top decision making positions in Kenya as elsewhere, remain few and their minority status impinges on their effectiveness. There should be some indication that they are at least making some attempts to initiate change, however modest. But the situation at present suggests that individual women in public decision making roles have not significantly influenced social change in favour of the majority of the disadvantaged women in Kenya.

We have noted from the preceding analysis the paucity and marginalisation of women in parliamentary and party politics, their disempowerment within women's groups, and their passivity in public executive roles. The only other potential

channel of political expression and participation would seem to be the Trade Union movement, in which, as I explain below, women's performance has been dismal.

Women in the Trade Union Movement

Kenya had at least 33 trade unions by 1988. Women's membership in trade unions has always been low. In at least four unions there was no female membership by 1985. Even in the few unions where women's membership was relatively high (up to 30% of total membership), women did not hold leadership and/or decision making positions. Zeleza summarises this situation:

"If women's share of trade union membership was low their representation in national trade union leadership positions was pathetic. In 1985/86 women took a mere 3.1 per cent of trade union positions, up from 2.1 per cent in 1970... Of the 33 unions on the register in 1985, 17 had never had a woman on their executive board at least since 1970". (Zeleza, 1988: 129 and 131)

Zeleza's study clearly shows that because of the low representation of women in the trade unions and decision making positions therein, females have been unable to challenge the many forms of discrimination and harassment they encounter in the area of employment. And not surprisingly, male trade union leaders ignore or belittle the employment issues of specific concern to women, such as sexual harassment, promotion, housing allowance and time off. (Zeleza, 1988: 126). The sex-stereotyped attitudes of men towards women's leadership has been a major barrier to women's participation in executive positions in trade unions. Zeleza's study notes that when a group of Kenyan male trade

unionists were asked in a 1986 interview whether they could elect a woman to the highest position (of Secretary General) of the national umbrella organisation of all trade unions, their response was typically sexist:

"the question caused laughter, some of the men covered their faces in disbelief." But at the same time they agreed that women in the paid labour force had problems which the unions have not handled adequately. In the elections the men did not deem it right to have the spare ribs" by their side (Zezeza: 87:132)

This study also suggests that men may not only be blinded by the gendered socio-cultural prejudices that they have internalized, they may also be feeling threatened by the potential power women represent, which if given institutional legitimacy, could destroy the structure of male dominance (Zezeza: 128). Furthermore, this study confirms the view advanced earlier, in respect to the ineffectiveness of only a few high ranking women:

"Women trade union leaders were too few to have much impact on trade union policy/formulation and implementation. There can be little doubt that the vast majority of women who sought office and got elected were unusually ambitious, dynamic and dedicated individuals who were deeply committed to trade unionism and the wider struggle for women's equality. But their numbers were struck against them."

It would seem therefore that the trade union movement has to date not served as an effective instrument for women's participation in decision making that affects both their

Conclusion

The above analysis has argued that, while women of Kenya participate in public life in various capacities, few of them occupy important political and other public decision making positions. The few who do are often unable to make an impact whether in the public sector or in the trade union movement. The women's groups movement is where Kenyan women excel at the level of organizing themselves into groups. Although there are some socio-economic gains that accrue from membership in these groups, these organisations have failed to become an effective lobbying forum capable of sponsoring women candidates to represent them in parliament. In other words, the numerous groups remain divided and lack a common vision and strategy that would enable them to attain unity in diversity, due to the social-economic factors discussed earlier. However, women's groups in Kenya, especially those engaged in income generating activities have received significant publicity in the local media, especially the government owned television network. Though the actual material benefits from women's projects have been minimal and the projects have increased women's workload, the publicity received has given women public visibility and confidence to continue their struggles. Apart from the media, researchers doing studies on gender issues are playing an important role in raising public awareness on the rights and status of women in the country. Kenyan women researchers, especially those working under the auspices of the Association of African Women for Research and Development (AAWORD) for example, are playing an active role in highlighting and bringing into public focus the different areas of concern, and priorities for Kenyan

women that policymakers should address. In a recent issue of the association's newsletter, the major event highlighted was the horrifying incidents of rape victims, many of them young girls under the age of 12 (AAWORD NEWS KENYA 1991: 9, 14, 15). A special issue of the Newsletter focussing on the St. Kizito tragedy was also published.

Recommendations

Given the major issues addressed above, the following recommendations are suggested as possible areas where policy and societal interventions could facilitate women's greater participation in politics and public decision making:

- i) A concerted effort by women to get greater representation by women of their choice at the political decision making levels. Women must be participants in the legislative body in large enough numbers for their concerns to be heard and be registered on the national development agenda.
- ii) Greater efforts must be made to create unity in diversity between the numerous women's groups. These groups remain weak because they lack a common vision and strategy that would enable them to act in unison, lobbying for change in the policies and structures that perpetuate their subordinate status.
- iii) Training programmes should be created to conscientize and sensitize the society at large about the linkage between gender equity, development and democracy (Nzomo: 1991 (b)). The few women in the media, academia, legal and other professions that

have spearheaded the promotion of change at the national level need encouragement and support from other women.

- iv) Women in waged employment should seek greater and more effective participation in the trade union movement, in order to influence policy change in the discriminatory employment practices that obstruct their professional advancement.

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