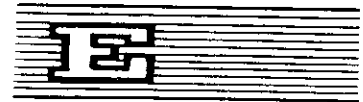




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THE ROLE OF WOMEN NGOS IN THE COLLECTION, MANAGEMENT  
AND DISSEMINATION OF INFORMATION: THE CASE OF KENYA

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## I. Introduction

1. Women Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) by their very nature are expected to advance the interests of women in all aspects of their social, economic and political existence. Unlike government organisations, Women NGOs are better placed to advocate for and influence policy and societal changes in favour of women and other disadvantaged groups in society. In this connection, Women NGOs are expected to serve as an important vehicle for collecting data on gender issues, managing such information and disseminating it to the relevant users.

2. It hardly needs to be emphasized that women's advancement and empowerment cannot be achieved in the absence of relevant information on their situation and strategies of dealing with that situation. Relevant information is therefore necessary to promote the social and economic welfare of women. Women also need information on how to empower themselves, as they struggle to dismantle the patriarchal structures that are at the root of their subordination.

3. This paper therefore proceeds on the premise that gender information should do more than simply contribute to the improvement of social welfare needs of the family to which a woman belongs. Information should also contribute to the sensitization of society about the need for gender equality in all aspects of life. Information should also play a conscientization and awareness raising role among women, thus helping them to recognise their common oppression as women, and to develop a sense of solidarity that can overcome their class and cultural divides. Information should also assist women to gain greater control over their lives as well as contribute to raising their level of self esteem and self-confidence. In other words, relevant information disseminated to women should have an empowering impact.

4. Proceeding on this basic premise, the paper attempts a modest survey of what some of the major/local women NGOs in Kenya are doing in the field of data collection, management and dissemination to the relevant users. The paper also identifies the information gaps where they exist and also suggests some of the ways in which such gaps could be filled. The women NGOs included in this survey are KANU/Maendeleo Ya Wanake Organisation (hereafter KANU/MYWO), National Council of Women of Kenya (hereafter NCWK) and the Green Belt Movement (hereafter Green Belt). Although the Women's Bureau (hereafter WB) is a government machinery for women, it is included in this survey since it is charged with the role of coordinating all women NGOs in the country, as well as collecting, managing and disseminating relevant information on women of Kenya. The survey thus begins by examining the role of the WB.

## 2. Introduction

5. The WB of Kenya was established in 1976. As noted above the WB is charged with the enormous responsibility of coordinating all women programmes in the country. In this sense the WB can be viewed as a powerful and important institution for advancing the course of women in Kenya. In another sense however the WB is a fairly powerless institution for women in that: (i) it still holds the low status of a division within the Ministry of Culture, and Social Services; (ii) it is underfunded<sup>1</sup>; and (iii) it cannot afford to criticise the laid down government policies or push for radical policy changes in favour of women.<sup>2</sup> The WB therefore largely coordinates and implements policies and programmes that have already received prior government approval.

6. It is in this context that the role of the WB in the collection, management and dissemination of information on women needs to be understood.

## 2.2 Data Collection

7. On paper the WB has a very ambitious programme of data collection. Indeed three out of the twelve units comprising the WB set up, focus directly on some aspect of data collection. There is thus: (i) Statistics Unit whose objective is to create a data bank on women in development. This unit has even got two micro-computers to facilitate the development of the data bank. However, this noble goal has so far not been realized. The Statistical Unit has only managed to compile a chart entitled "Women of Kenya, Facts and Figures" and to update two previous publications on Women of Kenya. (ii) The Training Unit purports to develop and produce training materials for rural women to be used by trainers of women groups. And (iii) Research and Evaluation Unit is supposed to collect data on women's activities in the country and to assess the achievements, shortfalls and bottlenecks of women's programmes. The Unit also purports to analyse the findings of research done on women's activities and to extract useful information for policy formulation. Again these noble objectives have not been attained. The WB has not even formulated a Women in Development (WID) Policy which it could recommend to the government to be incorporated into the National Development Policy.

## 2.3 Management of Information

8. The WB operates a small library. Most of the 284 publications listed in the library catalogue consist of an odd assortment of books, old magazines, conference papers and journals on the women question. There does not seem to have been a conscious effort to collect and organize information in that library. Indeed, most of the information contained in the library seem to have been collected during the 1985 women's decade conference. The library also contains little that testifies to any serious research on women done under the auspices of the WB. And

yet, the WB gives so much emphasis to research and data collection in the statement of its objectives. Quite clearly, the information contained in the library was not consciously and systematically gathered to cater for the needs of any specific users.

9. Ideally, the library should serve as an information centre for researchers and other members of the public seeking data on gender issues. However, this library is currently only accessible to researchers with prior government research clearance. Because of this red tape and the fact many people are not even aware of its existence, it is mostly without users.

#### **2.4 Dissemination of Information**

10. The WB has an **Information Communication Unit** whose chief role is to disseminate various types of information pertaining to WID activities in the country. This has been done through training workshops, publications (newsletters and brochures) seminars, mass media and posters. A good example where most of these methods of dissemination have been employed is the **Women's Rights Awareness Project (WRAP)**. This project is jointly sponsored by the WB and the Kenya Public Law Institute (PLI). The essence of WRAP is to create public awareness of women's legal rights (and obligations). The public is for example made aware that violence against women is a crime punishable under existing laws. The objectives of WRAP are being implemented through three task forces that cover (i) violence against women; (ii) community-based legal education and (iii) law reform and lobbying.

11. WRAP has perhaps been one of the most important information projects that WB has so far undertaken. This is so because many women remain exploited and oppressed by society primarily due to their ignorance about the law and their legal rights. For example, the issue of violence against women is a serious one in Kenya, and yet many women continue to be battered, raped, tortured, humiliated, without seeking legal address. Although this may in part be due to social-cultural factors, lack of awareness that any form of violence is a crime punishable under statutory law, is also an important factor. One would therefore hope that the WB would employ all its informational resources to make the WRAP programme a success.

12. The WB is also trying to strengthen its information dissemination role through the development of a profile of all women NGOs in the country. The major objective of this profile is to inform women, especially those at the grassroots, of the services available that could support their individual and group activities.

#### **2.4 Information Role of the WB: An Assessment**

13. The brief survey above reveals that, although on paper the WB has a very comprehensive information structure, the practice

indicates a wide gap between intent and performance. Thus, although the WB has up to five information units, staffed with hired experts and consultants and equipped with two micro-computers and a library facility, it has been unable to meet even its own information objectives. Indeed, the WB capacity is grossly underutilized. Some of the consultants I interviewed stated that their expertise was underutilized; and the library staff were basically idle, as there are no library users and no new data to be organised. As noted above, very little research and data collection has been carried out under the auspices of the WB. The library does not even have information on the activities of the key women NGOs in the country.

14. As noted above, the WB conducts training workshops for leaders of women groups. However, no research or follow ups have been carried out to evaluate the effectiveness of the information disseminated by the group leaders to the rest of the women.

15. Except for the joint WRAP programme with PLI, there is little else to suggest that the WB coordinates its own activities with those of other women organisations and individuals working for women. This is despite the fact that the WB has an NGO Unit whose main task is to coordinate the work of women NGOs and work closely with them to avoid duplication of efforts. The information contained in the WB newsletter is inadequate and unlikely to prevent the duplication of efforts in project and research activities.

16. Furthermore, the WB being a government organisations, it has been well placed to prepare and present to the government a comprehensive WID policy. So far the WB has only produced documents praising the government for its commitment to WID issues and highlighting the achievements of the WB in promoting the interests of women of Kenya.

## **2.5 Suggestions for the WB**

17. (i) The WB staff need to be highly sensitized and highly committed to the advancement of women through information.
- (ii) The WB library needs to become an information centre. Conscious effort must be made to at least acquire as much of the locally available data on women as possible. The research and evaluation unit should make a conscious effort to seek such information from universities, colleges and other research institutions as well as individual researchers. Most importantly, the information available in the library should become more accessible to users, without the red tape that now exists.

- (iii) The WB needs to play its coordinating role more aggressively and purposively in the field of information in order to minimise on the duplication and maximise on complementarity of efforts among NGOs.

### 3. KANU/Maendeleo Ya Wanawake Organisation

#### 3.1 Introduction

18. Among the sixty or so women NGOs operating in Kenya, KANU/MYWO is the largest in terms of both membership and number of women groups affiliated with it. Formed in 1952 as MYWO, it became the first local NGO charged with the responsibility of mobilizing women throughout Kenya, especially those in the rural areas.

19. From its inception KANU/MYWO's activities were oriented towards social welfare, laying great emphasis in the role of women as "home makers". KANU/MYWO has been consistent in its pursuance of this objective, as well as in its cultivation of close links with the government, as well as in its cultivation of close links with the government, despite its NGO status. Until early 1987, KANU/MYWO's links with the government were informal but have since been formalised when it merged with the ruling party - KANU - to form KANU/MYWO. At the moment therefore, it is not clear whether or not KANU/MYWO has lost its NGO status, thus becoming a government organization, like the WB. What is clear however is that its close political link with the government has shaped the character and orientation of the organization - hence its social welfare orientation and unwillingness to take a radical position on the women question.

#### 3.2 Data Collection

20. KANU/MYWO is not strong on data collection. It mainly implements rural/women projects, many of which do not involve prior feasibility studies. The only significant data collection effort carried out under the auspices of KANU/MYWO, took place during the period just before the women's decade conference. It was at that time that this NGO started a biannual newsletter: Maendeleo Newsletter, which was published from April 1983 - February 1985. In addition, KANU/MYWO also started a monthly journal publication - Woman's Voice - First published in April 1985 and was also discontinued in June 1985<sup>3</sup>. The contents of these two publications reveal that if they had survived, they would have had the potential to become an effective channel for information sharing and awareness raising among women throughout the country, on issues pertinent to their condition and status.

21. Another publication that was prepared to coincide with the 1985 decade for women conference was a monograph: Projects:

A profile in Development, which details the objectives and achievements of the organisation.

22. The most recent publication of KANU/MYWO is another monograph, launched in March 1989, entitled: Women and Housing in Kenya's Urban Areas. In my view this latest publication is the most well researched document so far to be produced under the auspices of KANU/MYWO. The study provides detailed statistical and other empirical data that clearly highlight the seriousness of the housing problem as it affects urban women in Kenya. The study is especially useful as it provides gender segregated data that compares the situation of women with that of men. Most importantly, it underscores in no uncertain terms that decent shelter is a women's right and urges the Kenya government to implement the objectives of The Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies with specific reference to housing and settlement.

23. In addition to publications, KANU/MYWO also develops some training materials for use in training courses and workshops conducted for trainers. Such materials consist of booklets with illustrative pictures, posters and slides. The subjects covered include: nutrition, health, family planning, home economics and income generating projects.

### 3.3 Data Management

24. KANU/MYWO has a small library located at the headquarters premises in Nairobi. Like the WB library, this one also seems to have been created without any prior assessment of the needs and the target users it was going to cater for. Hardly anyone uses the library not even the staff of the organization within the premises. It also seems that many of the would be users do not even know of its existence. At any event, the library does not have much to offer in way of information on gender issues. Apart from the publications of the organisation, many of the data stored therein seem to have been gathered during the 1985 women's decade conference.

### 3.4 Data Dissemination

25. KANU/MYWO's target group is women at the grassroots, most of whom are illiterate. Consequently, this NGO does not rely primarily on published information to communicate with this target group. The major method of disseminating information is through demonstrations primarily conducted at the sites of the projects - the "learning by doing" approach. However, this method of skills training is preceded by training courses and workshops for trainers, who are primarily government extension workers. The latter serve as the transmission link, through which project information is disseminated to women at the grassroots. Though the publications cited above, KANU/MYWO also disseminates information to the literate public, government and donor agencies.

### 3.5 The Information Role of KANU/MYWO: An Assessment

26. Since KANU/MYWO's target is the women at the grassroots, it is quite appropriate that great emphasis should be laid on communicating with the women through project participation. However, there are at least two problems associated with: (i) the approach employed in measuring impact and (ii) the objectives of the information disseminated.

27. Firstly, a very superficial approach is employed, in some cases, to determine the effectiveness of the information disseminated. For example, in the case of family planning, my survey revealed that one of the key measurements employed to gauge the level of success of the programme is the level of demand of contraceptive pills, condoms etc. in a given area. Clearly, a high demand of contraceptive devices may not necessarily mean that the community has accepted the idea of small families. Furthermore, the level of understanding about the proper use and the various side effects accompanying the use of each of the contraceptives may be minimal. It is therefore important that information disseminated through such projects should be followed by thorough evaluation studies to assess the socio-economic impact.

28. Secondly the bulk of the information collected and disseminated by KANU/MWYO only address the social welfare issues. It focuses on how women can become better mothers and nurses, better wives etc. In other words, the welfare focus of KANU/MYWO information to women, tends to reinforce women's traditional roles and their subordinate status. Thus for example, an income generating project is viewed as a means to income to meet the welfare needs of the family: food, clothing, shelter, education of children etc. Rarely is such a project viewed as a means to a woman's economic independence and hence greater control over her life. Indeed, such income is rarely spent on a woman's own self improvement or reinvested back into the project. Another example is the Maendeleo energy saving project. Here, women are taught how to construct and use energy saving stoves, so that: (i) they can reduce the incidence of children getting burnt and (ii) save on time to allocate to other domestic and agricultural tasks. I would argue that such women projects should also be a means for boosting women's self-image, by projecting their personal achievements through the projects. If therefore a woman acquires the skill to construct an energy saving stove, she should be encouraged to appreciate her own achievement and hence raise her level of self esteem.

29. I am therefore arguing that, there is gap in the information communicated by KANU/MYWO through its projects and through some of its publications. There is no information whatsoever on awareness raising of women; for example, on the need to gain greater control over their lives; the need to assert their



socio-economic and political rights and the strategies of challenging their subordinate status.

### **3.6 Suggestion to KANU/MYWO**

30. (i) More emphasis should be laid on empowering women through projects rather than simply meeting the basic welfare needs of their families.
- (ii) The organisation should commission experienced gender researchers to carry out evaluation studies on the projects being implemented, in order to assess the effectiveness of the information disseminated through the projects.
- (iii) More studies of the calibre of the 1989 housing study cited above, should be carried out, to sensitize and raise public awareness about the seriousness of the women's situation in the country.

## **4. National Council of Women of Kenya**

### **4.1 Introduction**

31. Founded in 1964, NCWK was like MYWO, constituted to be a nationally based organization with the primary objective of coordinating all other local women NGOs in Kenya, including at the time, MYWO. Unlike MYWO whose national stature and leadership role among women NGOs in Kenya has in recent years been greatly boosted primarily by state support, NCWK's role seems to have been gradually diminished as the women's decade came to a close. Nevertheless some of the organisations closely affiliated to NCWK notably the Green Belt Movement have gained national and even international prominence, as will be shown further below.

32. Unlike many women NGOs in Kenya, NCWK only initiates but does not hold on to projects. Its approach is to pass on projects to be run by relevant member organizations. For example NCWK initiated a water project in 1975 and later passed it on to a member organization - KWAHO. Similarly, the Green Belt movement was initiated as a NCWK environmental and energy project and later became an independent movement, although it maintains its affiliation to NCWK.

### **4.2 Data Collection/Management/Dissemination**

33. NCWK is primarily an advocacy organization, whose main objective is to sensitize and mobilize women around issues pertinent to the attainment of equal rights with men. For instance, in 1987, NCWK attempted to mobilize women of Kenya around

a legal case which questioned the right of a woman to bury her dead spouse<sup>4</sup>. This attempt failed primarily because many women assumed that the burial case was simply about whether customary or statutory law should prevail.

34. NCWK's failure in the case cited reflects on a basic institutional weakness in its advocacy programme. NCWK has no formalised educational programme for sensitizing women about major issues affecting their lives. No national seminars or workshops are even held to debate and discuss various issues affecting the rights of women in Kenya. Furthermore no serious research has been carried out to create a data bank on the major gender issues that require advocacy and hence sensitization of women and society at large.

35. NCWK then operates on ad hoc basis. Thus when an issue comes up for public debate and NCWK feels that there is need for a collective response by women of Kenya, their mobilization begins without any prior sensitization.

36. This NGO has thus been relatively weaker than KANU/MYWO in terms of data collection, management and dissemination. Unlike KANU/MYWO, it does not even have a library facility. It has however published a few pamphlets and brochures, describing the objectives and achievements of the organization. It also used to publish a bilingual quarterly journal titled: Kenya Women Journal/Mwanamke Wa Kenya. This journal was however discontinued in 1984, reportedly due to financial constraints.

#### **4.3 The Information Role of NCWK: An Assessment**

37. From the above survey it is quite clear that the informational role of NCWK is quite weak due to lack of an institutional system of data collection, management and dissemination. However, if an institutionalised information framework was created, this NGO could become an important vehicle for empowering women. This is so because unlike other women NGOs whose major objective is social welfare, NCWK plays an advocacy and lobbying role for women's equal rights with men. This organization is therefore in a good position for using information to sensitize and mobilize women in their struggles against patriarchal and class based oppression.

#### **4.4 Suggestions to NCWK**

38. (i) There is urgent need to strengthen its advocacy programme through the collection of relevant data on major gender issues that require concerted lobbying.

- (ii) There is also urgent need to incorporate an awareness raising programme in its advocacy efforts.
- (iii) Seminars and workshops should become a regular component of the advocacy programme.
- (iv) Publications should assume a more prominent role in information dissemination.

## **5. The Green Belt Movement**

### **5.1 Introduction**

39. As noted above, the Green Belt is an energy/environmental oriented organization. It was formed in 1977, as a project of NCWK and became an autonomous organisation in 1984. The major activity of the organization is tree planting and management. Among the many objectives of the Green Belt Movement is:

- (i) to raise public awareness on the relationship between the environment and the energy, food, unemployment and population crises.
- (ii) to promote a positive image of a woman's personality by projecting her leading role in national development.
- (iii) to make tree planting an income-generating activity especially for women.

### **5.2 Data Collection and Management**

40. Data collection is not a major activity of the Green Belt. The movement has however produced a number of brochures and two booklets, that publicise the activities and achievements of the Green Belt.

41. The data on and about the Green Belt is stored at the Green Belt headquarters offices in Nairobi. As the movement has no library, such information is only made available by the project coordinator, on request.

### **5.3 Data Dissemination**

42. Information about the Green Belt is disseminated through educational and training seminars and workshops conducted at the project sites, the mass media, personal discussions and meetings with individuals wishing to establish tree nurseries, personal letters and various application forms that are mailed to potential members. The coordinating role of the Green Belt staff has been crucial in information dissemination to the grassroots. The work

of the staff has in turn been facilitated by liaising with relevant government institutions, such as the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources and the Office of the President.

#### **5.4 The Informational Role of Green Belt: An Assessment**

43. Much of the information collected and disseminated by Green Belt focuses on the why and how of tree planting and management. Information available from the Green Belt coordinator, Prof. Wangaii Maathai - suggests that public response to this programme has been quite positive<sup>5</sup>. Many communities in Kenya have taken up tree planting as an income generating activity and a source of fuel.

44. Public responsiveness to Green Belt has been measured by simply counting the number of trees planted and their rate of survival. However no data has so far been collected to assess the extent to which Green Belt has promoted a positive image of a woman's personality. Maathai in her book on the Green Belt, has attempted to expound on the need for women to develop a positive image of themselves<sup>6</sup>. It is doubtful however whether many of the illiterate women at the grassroots are as clear as Maathai about the linkage between an energy/environment project and their own self esteem as women.

#### **5.5 Suggestion to Green Belt**

45. The organization should develop information that would help raise women's awareness of the linkage between tree planting and the enhancement of their self image and esteem. This information gap can be filled through educational workshops, seminars and informal discussions with women participating in this project.

### **6. Conclusion**

46. The foregoing survey reveals that many women NGOs in Kenya are involved in various degrees and forms, in data collection, management and dissemination. However, the quality of such data, the methods of management and dissemination, vary greatly between and within organizations. Information gaps and shortcomings were therefore identified in all the NGOs surveyed.

47. At the level of data collection, there is need for more action oriented research to evaluate and assess the effectiveness of the information disseminated through project activities sponsored by various women NGOs. At the moment, all we have are the NGO's own self evaluations, which emphasise on the achievements rather than shortcomings of their efforts. Independent research could help fill this information gap. In this connection, women NGOs need to work closely with research institutions, especially those that are already known to have women studies programmes. A

good example is the University of Nairobi, whose Institute of African Studies has a women studies project. In addition, there are many competent individual researchers at all the Kenyan universities and colleges, who would be capable and willing to carry out such evaluation studies.

48. At the level of data organization and management, a major weakness exists, both at the level of the quantity and quality of information available, as well as the accessibility of such information. My suggestions therefore is that there is need to implement proposals made previously by this writer<sup>7</sup> and Mathangani<sup>8</sup> among others, on the urgent need for the establishment of a women's information and documentation centre in Kenya. Such a centre would solve the problem of inaccessibility of information stored in exclusive NGO reference libraries. It would also facilitate the organization and management of all existing information on women. The problem of duplication of research efforts would also be solved. Furthermore, the centre would provide a forum where women of diverse backgrounds could meet and exchange ideas through workshops, seminars and informal discussions.

49. I stated at the beginning of this paper that information on and for women should have an empowering impact on them. This survey has indicated that information handled by women NGOs in Kenya has not served to empower women. Instead, in some cases, such information has tended to reinforce women's subordinate status. This in my view is a serious informational problem that needs to be addressed, as we search for more effective ways of disseminating information, especially to women at the grassroots.

## REFERENCES

1. For instance, between 1978-1982, the Kenya government allocated to women's programmes the equivalent of 0.1% of total government expenditure for that period, while government grants to women groups dropped from 3.3 million Kenya Shillings in 1986 to 2.6 million Shillings in 1987.
2. Women leaders have on occasions been warned by the government against advocating for women's rights. In this connection, one senior member of staff of the WB was demoted in 1988, for stating on T.V. that there was no equality between men and women in the field of education in Kenya.
3. The reason given for the discontinuation of these publications was financial constraints.
4. The entire court proceedings of this case were compiled into a booklet published by the Nation group of publishers, under the title: S.M. OTIENO: Kenya's Burial Saga, May 1987. See also, "SM: Wambui's Defeat is defeat for Women", in, ViVA (Nairobi), June 1987, pp16,17 and 36.
5. See for example, Wangari Maathai, The Green belt Movement (General Printers Ltd., Nairobi, 1987)
6. ibid; pp 17-19.
7. M.Nzomo, "Research priorities and Support Needs for Women of Kenya" Paper presented at an OSSERA workshop on Research Priorities and Support Needs for Women in Eastern Africa, Nazareth, Ethiopia, October 1986.
8. M. Mathangani, "Womens Development and information", in, Kenya NGO. organising committee, Forum '85 Report pp 14-15.