

**2010 CIPE YOUTH ESSAY CONTEST
THEME: WOMEN AND PARTICIPATION**

WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN THE KENYAN SOCIETY

Introduction

A wise lady¹ once said “*There never will be complete equality until women themselves help to make laws and elect lawmakers.*” This statement was made in reference to the political role of women in the United States during the 19th Century and easily applies to the political role of women around the world today including Kenya. Women constitute over 50% of Kenya’s population, but the majority of them are among the illiterate and poor in the country. A number of them are still affected by customary laws and practices that have long since being declared as harmful cultural practices². My essay aims to critically analyze the role of a young Kenyan woman in the Kenyan society and what empowerment means to her, the barriers she faces, steps that the Kenyan government and other non-governmental organizations have taken to enhance the participation of women in government and possible solutions that would increase the participation of women, both young and old in the Kenyan society and in the current reform processes.

Brief History on the Role of women in Kenya

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

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

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

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

Colonial Kenya; (1890-1963) Women were affected by the alienation of land experienced by most Africans. However, women appear to have been more personally affected by this land alienation. This is because as women lost access and control of land they became more economically dependent on men. This led to an intensification of domestic patriarchy, reinforced by colonial social institutions. Land alienation reduced the economic independence enjoyed by women by compromising their economic productivity. As colonialism continue to entrench itself in African soil, the perceived importance of women's agricultural contribution to the household was reduced as their vital role in food production was overshadowed by the more lucrative male-controlled cash crop cultivation.

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

Currently, the 10th Kenyan Parliament since independence has been noted as having the highest number of female legislators. There are 16 elected and 7 nominated women members of parliament out of the 222 members of parliament.

Empowerment for the Kenyan Young Woman

Empowerment is a process by which we appropriate resources, assets, skills, capacities, opportunities and all the elements that favor, enrich and strengthen our life at the individual and collective level. The notion of empowerment allows women

to analyze and unlearn the oppression that marks their lives. There are three dimensions of empowerment.³

a. Personal Dimension,

Empowerment supports development of a sense of one's self, individual ability, and capabilities. A woman achieves this by recognizing her vital strengths, expanding and using them as personal resources, developing a sense of individuality and confidence and thus eliminating the conditions that oppress her.

b. Close Relationships dimension;

Empowerment provides the ability to negotiate and influence the shape and form of relationships (e.g. with family, spouse, friends or colleagues), the conditions in which they develop and the decisions taken within them.

c. Collective dimension

Empowerment enables people to work together to make a greater impact than would be possible individually

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

In Kenya currently, political empowerment for the young woman means that she will vote in the 4th August 2010 Constitutional referendum. Empowerment for the young Kenyan woman is thus a process where she is economically independent and

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

fully aware of her rights and the resources at her disposal to enable her to voice her concerns about her community and government thereby rendering her politically empowered.

Barriers Facing the Young Kenyan Woman

There are several barriers that stand in the way of participation for the young Kenyan woman. These barriers can be classified into political, social and Economic barriers.

a. Political Barriers

As earlier mentioned, the 10th Parliament (2007-2012) has the highest number of female legislators in Kenyan history. However, the percentage of female legislators is only 10.4%⁴. Women's Participation in political processes is limited in several ways;

i. Voter Registration and Voting

Women face a wide array of challenges;

- The high level of Illiteracy makes it difficult for women to understand voting options. In marginalized communities of Kenya such as the Maasai, the Samburu and Turkana of Northern Kenya, young girls are not sent to school by their parents as their fathers believe that it is a waste of time and money to educate a girl child only for her to be married in the end. The Maasai men consider it a worthy investment to educate the boy child instead.
- Family Voting; this is the scenario where women are led to the voting booth by their male relatives or husbands. This hugely constricts their freedom to vote for whoever they please. Having had the opportunity to work with grass root women from Maasai and Meru communities of Kenya, I have heard shared experiences of the Loita Maasai women who informed me that their husbands retained their national identity cards (a pre-requisite when voting) and only released the document on the voting day when they would accompany them to the polling station.

⁴ If the current Kenyan harmonized draft constitution passes in the August 2010 referendum, the percentage of women in parliament will increase to 29.4%

- Campaign Funding- Raising sufficient resources to contest elections is extremely difficult, particularly for women who often lack established funding networks.
- Lack of Support and Security; In Kenya, women who run for political posts face a lot of opposition from the society, (both male and women,) and most opt to drop out of the political race. In the 2007 Kenyan general elections, a woman⁵ who was running for a parliamentary seat in Meru's North Imenti Constituency dropped out of the race after she was attacked, tortured and physically assaulted by young men during her campaign trail.

b. Social Barriers

- Female Genital Mutilation

Cultural impediments such as the practice of FGM as a rite of passage in some communities, stigmatizes and traumatizes young girls for life.

- Forced Early Marriages

When young women are married off to men old enough to be their fathers, they lose their independence in the marriage union. They have to abide to the wishes of their husbands even if at times they are oppressive. Such women hardly exercise their freedom of movement or association and as a result can not participate in the nation building process.

Among the Loita Maasai for example, women are not allowed to address men at a public baraza⁶. Some women face down when speaking to their own spouses.

c. Economic Barriers

- Lack of business know how

Most women lack entrepreneurship skills and have no idea how to successfully run a business. This renders them economically handicapped and they can not afford to participate in any forum of the society.

⁵ Flora Igoki Tera, an ODM Kenya Parliamentary Candidate

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

- Lack of funds

Other women simply lack the capital to finance their projects

- Lack of a viable market

Kenyan Maasai women are known for their expertise in making beautiful beadwork. However, they lack the market to sell their products due to lack of marketing skills and restriction of expansion ideas. They sell beadwork in an already saturated market

What is the Kenyan Government and Civil Society Organizations doing?

1. Kenyan Government

The Kenyan government in a bid to enhance women's participation in government have come up with several projects to economically empower women. The Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Development introduced the women enterprise fund in 2006. The principal objective of the fund is economic empowerment of women. Women Enterprise Fund loans reach the target beneficiaries through partner financial intermediaries and directly through Constituency Women Enterprise Scheme.

The Ministry of Youth affairs also introduced the Youth Enterprise Development Fund⁷ in June 2006 as a strategy of addressing youth unemployment in Kenya.

The Kenya Youth Parliament is a youth led, youth based organization whose main object is to harness the creative and collective aspirations of the Kenyan youth with a view to placing them at the forefront in defining the youth agenda as well as to shape and influence the direction and outcome of national debate and discourse on issues affecting the nation at large and the youth in particular. They are currently involved in creating awareness among the youth on the Kenya Agenda 4 reforms

2. Civil Society Organizations

In Kenya, there are several non-governmental organizations formed with the main agenda of socially, economically and politically empowering women and girls from the grass root levels. Some of these organizations include;

⁷ www.youthfund.go.ke, (Accessed on 14/06/2010)

- **FIDA Kenya**⁸; This is an organization that was formed in 1985 to improve the legal status of women in Kenya, improve access to justice for women in Kenya, advocate for reform of laws and policies with regard to women's rights and enhance public awareness on gender and women's rights issues. A lot has been achieved in this regard and could not have been possible without FIDA Kenya's efforts.
- **Caucus for Women's Leadership**⁹; this is a legally registered national network dedicated to building women's leadership in Kenya. They work with all women, irrespective of their cultural, religious, political or socio-economic background. They do this by establishing structures at the grassroots, which act as platforms where women can build their leadership skills. Caucus has established women regional assemblies as a model of ensuring women's participation in leadership at all levels of decision-making.
- **Amani Communities Africa**¹⁰; this is a non profit organization formed in 2001 with the main aim of building capacities of communities to resolve conflicts constructively using dialogue, mediation and nonviolence, enhancing access to justice through human rights education and strengthening of community governance and justice systems and Increasing capacities of communities to effectively participate in good governance, reform and democratization processes. ACA is committed to empowering women socially as well as economically

Possible solutions and way forward

The following are the solutions which in my opinion would enhance women's participation in government and the Kenyan Society;

Overcoming Political Barriers

1. Including women in the constitutional making process. The harmonized draft constitution of Kenya that may or may not be passed at the August 4th 2010 referendum has catered for the interests of women socially as well as politically. This has been made possible due to the inclusion of women in the constitutional making process. The concept of affirmative action has been

⁸ www.fidakenya.org, (Accessed on 14/06/2010)

⁹ www.kwpcaucus.org, (Accessed on 11/06/2010)

¹⁰ www.acafrica.org, (Accessed on 13/06/2010)

introduced and should it pass, women's participation in the Kenyan society will increase.

2. To curb the problem of Family Voting, the government ought to establish separate polling places for men and women and to conduct voter education by scheduling sex-segregated trainings. These trainings will facilitate voter education for women about their opportunity and responsibility to vote and for men about the need for gender diversity in a strong democracy. This will also ensure that women are not in any way coerced into voting for candidates that their spouses or male relatives prefer.
3. On the issue of campaign funding, the civil society can assist where an organization is established to raise funds for women running for office. Such an organization can seek funding from both international and national donors whose areas of interests are politically empowering women. In Kenya, we are grateful for the work done by Caucus for Women's Leadership who have set an example for organizations that wish to politically empower women.
4. Capacity building for female candidates can be carried out by the government and Non Governmental Organizations. They can recruit and train women across the political spectrum, then equip them with confidence and skills to run for office
5. Capacity building workshops to emphasize the importance of girl child education can be carried out by educated young women across the country. These young women will act as role models for the rural girl child who has never set foot in a classroom and will be pass a message to the girl's stubborn parents on the importance of girl child education.
6. Decentralized entry points into the political arena should be utilized. As grassroots leaders, women often benefit from decentralization because it can create positions that enable them to gain political experience locally. Local women can run for posts such as councilors in their wards and slowly climb up the political ladder.

Overcoming Social Barriers

1. Harmful cultural practices such as FGM and early child marriages should be done away with. Several non-governmental organizations are already engaged in conducting human rights education at the grass root level

highlighting the dangers of the practice and offering alternative rites of passage. Amani Communities Africa is one such organization. Its work among the Loita Maasai linked them up with SAFEMAA, a community based organization that is fighting the practice of FGM and offering the community alternative rites of passage.

Overcoming Economic Barriers

1. To tackle the barrier of lack of business know how and lack of funds, government and local non-governmental organizations ought to carry out sensitization workshops on the existence of both the youth and women enterprise funds and how women both young and old can access these funds. Similarly, capacity building workshops on Leadership and entrepreneurship skills should be conducted for the grass root women.

Conclusion

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

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

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