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## **Gender and Politics in Kenya: A Retrospective Account**

**Author:** *Clara Momanyi (Ph.D),*

*Catholic University of Eastern Africa France.*

**Corresponding author:** *Clara Momanyi (Ph.D)*

### **Introduction**

Development is a term that can refer to many things depending on how it is used in different contexts. Since it is people who initiate development, then society is thought to be developed when it takes care of its members, both men and women. Besides, when it creates opportunities for its members to earn a fair reward for their labors, and enables them to participate in the decisions that affect their lives, then that society is thought to be developed. In addition, a society can be termed as having developed when it provides for those that are vulnerable and disadvantaged, while respecting the civil and political liberties of its members. After the 1995 World Summit for Social Development (WSSD) in Copenhagen, world leaders realized that in order to foster development, there was the need to put people at the center of that development. This includes both men and women, since they contribute immensely in their nations' wealth. It also means that radical changes needed to be made especially in those countries that do not fully involve women in the development process. Such countries needed to change predominant ideologies and social structures that prohibit equal participation of both men and women in developing the nation.

The 21st century agenda for African Women's empowerment, for example, is an initiative aimed at consolidating all the International Declarations and Action Plans accomplished in the World and Regional Conferences for purposes of putting up

strategies to empower women. The main objective is to have women participate fully in development just as men. Yet despite the fact that majority of African countries, including Kenya, have ratified various United Nations Conventions supporting women's empowerment, their representation in politics and governance is minimal. Participation in politics is a basic human right, and a responsibility of all Kenyans irrespective of whether they are men or women.

In Kenya, women form the majority of voters but few present themselves as aspirants for political office. Besides, among those who contest, very few become members of parliament. It is also a fact that Kenyan women fully participate as voters, yet their numbers in parliament are not significant as compared to men. There are basic reasons why this situation presents itself not only in Kenya but Africa in general.

This chapter discusses in brief the concept of gender as it is sometimes misunderstood when it comes to issues dealing with men and women. It also strives to relate patriarchy and politics of gender as this symbolic order controls gender relations and assigns roles to societal members leading to their unequal representation especially in civic and elective positions. It also underlines gender dimensions and the political landscape of Kenyan men and women since the advent of multi - party politics in 1992. This was after the repeal of Section 2(a) of the Constitution which heralded multi – party democracy and with it, the jostling of party positions and representation in elective posts for both men and women. Hence, the chapter is basically premised on participation of men and women in national elections. The chapter concludes by giving recommendations and suggestions with regards to gender equity in politics and the need for fair play when it comes to decision making policies that affect the development of both men and women. It also suggests institutional frameworks including social measures that need to be put in place to enable women participate on an equal footing with men in politics.

### **Theoretical Perspectives**

Several theories have been advanced in relation to the advancement of women across the ages. Some theories have delved into patriarchy, capitalism, industrialization and social transformations to try and explain the gender imbalances in world societies. The social theory assumes that gender is the axiom, the one that holds one's identity. Under the umbrella of the social theory, there is also what is known as the sex-role theory where people learn from the established social institutions and where they are supposed to behave in ways that are socially

acceptable and appropriate to their sex. Hence, it recognizes the dichotomy between men and women where men are known to be aggressive and women are passive. However, these theorists forget to see that gender itself is a social construct and one that is informed by our subject positions.

The Marxist theory, on the other hand, advocated that women would achieve equality with men when the means of production were collectively owned by men and women. This theory has been proved wrong over time. Equally, radical feminists who advocated radical means to achieve gender equity by trying to use feminine sexuality and working towards an androgynous culture have failed to achieve gender parity in many aspects. In addition, theories advanced by feminists like Firestone (1972), Millet (1977), Steady (1981), Kristeva (1986) and Ogundipe-Leslie (1984) to mention but a few, have challenged the patriarchal symbolic order controlled by men. They object the approach where the phallus is the signifier of sexual difference and where men control the social institutions (Weedon 1991, 49). As much as feminists have tried to deconstruct this social order, it still continues to order our lives. This is because for centuries we have internalized this dichotomy and it might take a while before complete gender parity is attained in our social institutions. Confronting these patriarchal tendencies that have been established through centuries of social conditioning will need the concerted efforts of both men and women.

The author quite agrees with Nzomo (2003) when she states that these approaches have failed to see that it is the oppressive traditions and policies that have continued to push women to the domestic sphere. It is the symbolic patriarchal order that has continued to legitimize privileges that men enjoy, give them power to control political discourse and perpetuate the socio-political systems that bring about gender inequality.

### **The Concept of Gender**

Gender is a dynamic concept which has been given a variety of meanings depending on the prevailing situations. For example, in many Kenyan political discourses, the word gender often becomes synonymous with those of the female sex. Generally, in everyday conversation when people talk about gender, they ordinarily refer to women. This then removes its credibility to confront discriminatory practices that perpetuate gender inequality between men and women. For purposes of this discussion, we need to understand the concept before we look at the political landscape of Kenyan politics since the latter revolves around it.

Historically, the term was mostly used in 1970s when feminists from the western world used it to explain differences in the social relations between men and women. For example, Kessler and McKenna (1978) emphasize that all the differences between men and women are the products of social meanings. Their arguments, therefore, lay bare the distinct differences between sex and gender. In the 1980s, the term was entrenched especially at the Nairobi Women Conference of 1985 and later at the Cairo Conference of 1994. It was also significantly used during the Beijing Women Conference of 1995 and it was through these women conferences that the term was used to refer to discussions relating to men and women. In essence, therefore, gender can be defined as the socially determined differences between men and women. It is different from sexism because while the latter is a biological concept, gender is a social construct. We can also define it as socially constructed sex irrespective of whether it is male or female. Kiruki (2010, 71), for example, describes it as a metaphor that is rich in roles that are intertwined.

He states that gender exerts pressure to all of us in our everyday lives, reminding us of our gendered subject positions that create power differences between men and women. These differences are manifested through roles and behaviors, attitudes and values. Gender roles are usually learned and internalized within the culture of the individual. It is also important to understand that while discussing gender, we should not treat it as a fixed concept. Indeed, as Lombardo (2009) states, concepts have no fixed or essential meaning but are usually shaped by political goals and intentions.

Gender is a social power where relationships between men and women are governed and controlled through a social system that also assigns their roles in society. Hence, gender relations are a social phenomenon that is present in many world societies including the Kenyan society. However, what is significant in the different roles between men and women is that they can be changed depending on the needs and aspirations of the society. They are not inborn neither are they fixed. Male and female attributes are, therefore, socially constructed and can be changed for purposes of posterity and development.

## **Patriarchy and the Politics of Gender**

The patriarchal system which has often been defined as a system of power relations in society is where men have authority over women. The system has established structures that exclude women from participating in decision-making processes. In Africa, for example, gender disparities, patriarchal ideologies and socio-cultural structures that subordinate women and glorify men have for centuries excluded the former from governance and fair treatment when it comes to human rights. As Steady (1981, 35-36) observes, women have continued to be shackled by their own negative self-image and by centuries of internalization of patriarchal ideologies. Indeed, as Kabira and Muthoni (1994, 5) states, 'for centuries women have been buying peace to maintain this patriarchal order while surrendering their power and basic human rights willingly'. Kenya is basically a patriarchal society where for centuries, gender subject positions have evolved that identify roles along gender lines.

In this chapter, the author discusses how gender and social relations play into our day to day politics and position us to make decisions that have everything to do with our subject positions. As mentioned earlier, the issue of political significance of gender gained prominence in the 1970s. This is when the patriarchal system of imbalance of power between men and women was being challenged. It was also when prejudices about women and politics were being challenged by feminist thoughts. This debate continued right up to the 1980s and gave rise to a new field of political studies where gender and politics gained prominence. Prevailing feminist political scientists and theorists, for example, came to realize that political science as a discipline had ignored this important issue (Bryson, 1992). It was important because over half the world population which comprise of women was being ignored when it came to political participation. In fact, the Women Liberation Movement (WLM) which began in 1960s also contributed to this prolonged debate which then led to political mobilization of women the world over.

WLM was not only a large scale social movement, but a powerful political force affecting political parties which were predominantly male, state corporations where decision-making processes were male dominated, economic organizations and even attitudes which were gender biased. WLM had capacities to mobilize large numbers of women of the world who were previously politically inactive due to what has been discussed as the patriarchal symbolic order. Women then became a political constituency who were agitating for political rights and recognition of their positions in the various gender-blind social institutions that worked against their participation. This agitation led to political integration of women especially in political parties and in elective processes. However, what should be noted here is

that women as a constituency are not a uniform political group because there are various groups of women in different countries who have both similar and different interests. For example, the agitation experienced in Europe cannot entirely be the same as that which is experienced in Africa due to differences of class, race, religion and nation states. Even within Africa, the various countries experience different political scenarios and different gender perceptions. The current study of gender and politics which is a field within political science is informed by feminist political consciousness and also by women's behavior. We can, therefore, state here that gender became politicized in the 1970s and has continued to be an important debate especially in modern day politics.

In Kenya, the patriarchal nature of the society has not yet accepted women leadership as evidenced in various social and political institutions. There are not enough supporting mechanisms put in place to create a level playing ground for both men and women to rise above social stereotypes (Nzomo 2003, 7). Forces of patriarchy which permeates in the various social institutions seem to have colluded to keep women out of public sphere especially their involvement in politics.

Gender inequalities have continued to negate the principles of basic rights, freedom and justice as expounded in Chapter 2 of the Kenyan Constitution. Critical decision making power continues to indicate gender power imbalances even after the new Constitution (2010) was promulgated. We only need to have a critical look at the structures in place, for example, in political parties and local council wards to know the existing gender imbalances. The age old patriarchal ideologies and socio-cultural structures have continued to give credence to undemocratic systems of governance where men are favored by existing cultural traditions. Indeed, as Kabira and Nzioki (1994, 70) observe, there is need to 'focus on the dynamic relationship between men and women...there is need to address the cultural constraints, sexism, discrimination and gender inequalities' for purposes of development. This chapter, therefore, gives a retrospective account of the political participation of both men and women in Kenya and an overview of gender relations at play in the political games which have been witnessed since the advent of multiparty politics.

### **Gender Dimensions and the Political Landscape: An Overview**

With the repeal of Section 2 (a) of the Kenyan Constitution in 1992 and the onset of multi-party democracy, more women expressed desire to participate in active politics. In fact, the multi-party political trend in Kenya has continued to push a number of Kenyan women into the political waters to fight for elective posts against

men. From 1992, political parties continued to advocate for constitutional review, a process that led to the formation of the National Executive Committee (NEC) and the Inter Parties Parliamentary Group (IPPG). It is these developments that heralded the process of constitutional review which later culminated into the new constitutional dispensation in 2010. Most of the political parties have been and continue to be dominated by men. In fact, their formation and the propagation of their agenda are male driven. However, due to the campaigns for constitutional review, women have also been busy agitating for equal representation in party positions. Men know the voting power of women since they are the majority. Ignoring them would be tantamount to losing their political grip in the areas where they operate. Therefore in the party politics of 1990s, the leadership of these parties began to address women's concerns as a strategy for future credibility and sustainability.

In the 1990s also, women were agitating for political inclusion not only in the political parties but also in elective positions. They went as far as developing a women's election manifesto to guide the electorate and political leaders whose majority were men, on what Kenyan women wanted. However, as the results of the consecutive elections would show, politics is about power coupled with aggression and ruthless honesty. The majority of women have not learnt the power games men employ to edge them out. Besides, the patriarchal symbolic order of the Kenyan society has not really accepted women leadership and this is evident in the national and civic election results Kenya has witnessed so far. Let us now interrogate the politics of gender at play in the several national elections that Kenya has had since the onset of multi-partyism.

Earlier in the 1988 elections, queue voting was introduced and it had its effects also on the voting patterns of women. The most glaring fact about this kind of voting is that one cannot hide who he/she is voting for. The system laid bare voters' preferences and this led to mistrust. For example, there were men who controlled the voting preferences of their wives and could even order them not to queue behind a female candidate or even a male candidate they did not prefer. The performance of women during the 1992 multi-party elections improved but not to the expectations of many. This is because out of the 188 parliamentary seats contested for, only 6 of them were taken by women. There were a total of 70 women contestants in those elections where the majority lost.

Most people expected the number of women elected to parliament to rise due to the introduction of multi-party system, and the subsequent lobbying which was done by various women groups. However, this was not to be. Patriarchy demands that both men and women will support a system that ensures peaceful coexistence. Hence in this case, men who are the wielders of power will work hard to ensure that subordinate groups accept the status quo.

However, it should be noted that Kenya has been undergoing democratic transition since the 1990s. This includes the rising gender awareness and civic education being offered to citizens in different forums prior to the 2005 and 2010 Kenyan constitutional referenda and the events preceding the 4th World Conference of Women held in Beijing, China in 1995. These greatly sensitized Kenyan women. The Post-Beijing activities carried out by civic organizations, NGOs and some government ministries also encouraged more women to join active politics. The government realized the need to nominate one woman to parliament in 1995. So it can correctly be argued that the Beijing activities solicited such a response, although minimal.

During the 1997 general elections, there were 50 women candidates who accounted for only 5.7% of the total candidature. It was also during these elections when for the first time in Kenyan history, 2 women vied for the presidency: Mrs. Charity Ngilu and Prof. Wangari Maathai. However, although they failed to capture the presidency, it was evident that Kenyan women were changing their attitudes about political leadership and likewise Kenyan men were starting to become more tolerant where women leadership was concerned. After the elections, only 9 women joined the National Assembly as against 213 men. The women accounted for only 4.1% (Women's Bureau 2000, 39). However, out of the 9 women, 4 were elected and 5 nominated. This means that women's participation in politics still remained low despite the fact that women voters were and still are the majority. In that parliament, there was no female cabinet minister, except one assistant minister who was pushed to the Ministry of Culture and Social Services.

In the local authorities, women have not fared any better. Since independence, few women continued to be elected as councilors as the following table for the 1992 Local Authority Members shows:



<b>Authority</b>	<b>Women</b>	<b>Men</b>	<b>% Women</b>
County Councils	24	1,005	2.3
Urban Councils	2	165	1.2
Municipal Councils	15	339	4.2
City Councils	4	51	7.3
Town Councils	5	226	2.2
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>1,786</b>	<b>2.7</b>

*Source: Supervisor of Elections – A.G.’s Chambers.*

Electioneering is usually associated with spending cash to woo voters, something which most women cannot afford. Lack of financial and material support, let alone moral support prevent many women from joining politics as compared to men. Tribalism also became rampant especially during the onset of multi-party politics. This is because most of the political parties formed had tribal orientations and people seemed to join parties of their choice based on this tendency. Women were and have continued to be on the receiving end because while they fight gender discrimination, they are also confronted by the ghost of tribalism. These are some of the restrictions that limit women’s involvement in politics as compared to men.

However, organizations like the Maendeleo ya Wanawake, Women Political Caucus, the National Commission on the Status of Women (NCSW) and the contributions by FIDA have been lobbying for increased women representation not only in parliament but also in national decision making bodies. Although most of these women oriented organizations do not sponsor women candidates, they serve as incubators for women aspirants where they can receive training such as leadership skills which they need to negotiate the rough and discriminative political terrain.

In fact, the efforts of such bodies led to an increased number of women parliamentarians in the 2002 elections as compared to the previous elections. Nzomo (2003:11) calls the 2002 elections ‘a political watershed from the 40 years of post-colonial Kenyatta and Moi regimes under KANU’. Awareness campaigns, voter and civic education including human rights activism gave many women the urge to take a plunge in political waters to seek elective positions. While men parliamentarians were still the majority in these elections, women managed to clinch 9 positions in parliament while 8 of them were nominated.

The introduction of the Affirmative Action Bill by a member of parliament (Beth Mugo) also saw 1 more woman being nominated to parliament. This amounted to 7.1 % of women in parliament, a small percentage still which could not make a great impact as compared to the number of men parliamentarians.

Why affirmative action? In Kenya this is a proactive and positive step towards achieving gender equity in the political arena as well as in decision making organs in the country. Affirmative Action is well described by Wanyande (2003, 50) when he states that it is a 'body of policies and procedures designed to eliminate employment discrimination against women, ethnic and other minority groups with the objective of redressing past discrimination'.

The affirmative action policy so introduced in the constitution witnessed an increase of women representation in parliament, for example, from 10% in 2007 to 20% in 2013. In 2007 elections, there were 207 members of parliament elected where the female candidates elected were 15. Although women had marginal presence in parliament as compared to men, their continual involvement and participation in political processes assured them hope for better gains in future.

When we examine the results of the 2013 general elections, it is possible to note that although the men still hold the majority of seats in both the parliamentary and civic positions, women registered a higher number of representatives compared to the previous years. There were 68 women in the National Assembly and 18 in the Senate, bringing a total of 86 elected and nominated women in parliament out of 416 parliamentarians. The National Assembly has 349 members while the Senate has 67 members. This means that women constitute 21% in the bicameral parliament, definitely a higher percentage compared to the previous elections, thanks to the provisions of the new Constitution (2010) where more women came in as representatives from the 47 counties as members of parliament. The expansion of nomination slots for women in political parties and the one third gender rule as stipulated in the Constitution boosted their numbers in parliament.

However, the public domain still remains a male sphere where male ideologies reign supreme irrespective of the constitutional provisions concerning gender equality and human rights (Chapter IV of the Constitution). Most male politicians play down women positions in leadership and it is therefore possible that they may overlook even the Constitution especially on the one third gender rule.

The country also seems to be in a dilemma of sorts because if more women are nominated to parliament to satisfy the 30% clause, the move will over burden the

tax payer who will have to be taxed more to cater for salaries and remuneration of this new group of politicians. This may also not be sustainable in an economy that is not expanding fast enough. On the other hand, the author believes that women should not be tied down to the 30% threshold.

Who said that they cannot be represented beyond this as long as they fight it out with men and establish the right strategies using their numbers to rally behind their fellow women aspirants? At the moment, there is a bill in Parliament referred to as the Best Loser Bill (2015) which seeks to have more women in the parliament. The Bill is aimed at assisting women who lose in elections by having them nominated into parliament. The onus is on women parliamentarians to lobby for their male counterparts to pass the Bill to make it easier for women to enter parliament.

The author believes that both men and women can equally participate in politics given a level playing ground, but does not also believe that women can be assisted to achieve gender parity with men through tokenism. Although affirmative action has had a positive impact in women political participation especially through nominations into parliament and senate, Kenyan women should not embrace tokenism. The latter can have a negative psychological impact on women political aspirants who may want to believe that in order to attain gender equality, women must be handed posts on a silver platter. This will also kill the spirit of competition and fair play.

The author also believes that women must come together to form a strong political constituency so as to address gender disparities in all spheres including politics. Unlike men, women form a critical mass that can confront the existing stereotypes by changing the mind-set of the populace especially through the few that get elected to parliament or in local assemblies. These can work hard to change the patriarchal attitudes and cultural ideologies that militate against gender equality for the benefit of all.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has discussed briefly the concept of gender in order to understand how it has been misunderstood by various groups especially when discussing the participation of both genders in development and politics. A discussion of the role of patriarchy and how it plays in gender politics has also been advanced so as to understand clearly how this symbolic order influences the politics of the day. The alienation of Kenyan women from politics and an overview of the election results from the advent of multi-party politics to date have also been discussed including the gender dimensions at play in Kenyan politics. Following this discussion, a number of recommendations and suggestions have been outlined here below:

- Most Kenyan women live in the rural areas and this is where the vote baskets of political aspirants are situated. Many of the aspirants, especially men, capitalize on these women because they are able to penetrate their self-help groups and woo them. This being the case, women political aspirants who also have affinity to their grass root colleagues need to carry out serious campaigns while addressing gender imbalances in the political sphere. They need also to fight it out with men without waiting to be nominated into parliament or in local authorities just because they could not make it through the ballot.
- It is a fact that men do not need to form organizations to fight for their course. However, women need these mobilization tools to inspire and support one another. The popular fallacy that ‘women are their worst enemies’ should not be entertained but should be viewed as a counter-development strategy which has been used over time to further discriminate and subordinate them. For purposes of having their presence felt in the country, elite women who are aspiring for political positions need to desist from holding most of their meetings in city or town hotels where the majority of those living in the country side cannot attend. These women will not vote for their fellow women because they have not been given civic education needed to change their mind sets or attitudes about voting for their fellow women. Even those that get elected into such positions should prove to others through their active participation in parliament, senate or county assemblies that they can fight for their rights and solve the myriad of problems they face. Although attitude change takes a long

time, women will continue to vote for men if they see no tangible results that can improve their lot from women politicians.

- Although the Constitution demands the application of the 1/3 gender rule in all civic and political appointments, the Implementation of this clause is proving a herculean task especially in parliament due to the fact that there were no sufficient mechanisms put in place to realize it. It seems that there will be gender imbalance in the elective offices for a while due to the bias Kenyans have on electing women. The author believes that proper mechanisms have to be put in place in future elections so that this clause is realized without taxing wananchi more to accommodate more women so as to satisfy this clause.
- Political parties need to come up with structures that can take on board gender balance in party appointments. For example, the involvement of women is minimal because the majority of these parties are male dominated. Once they embrace the principle of inclusivity, women will ultimately gain entry into the electoral and political decision making structures so that they can play their roles on an equal footing with men.
- A lot of civic education is needed in Kenya in order to change the socio-cultural attitudes of people especially when it comes to women participation in the public sphere. This chapter has hinted that culture, rural/urban barriers, lack of resources and gender stereotypes have continued to prevent women from participating in politics on an equal footing with men. It may take time to achieve gender parity in politics but ultimately, positive results will be achieved through the concerted efforts by government and institutions.
- Due to the fact that women political leaders are disadvantaged in the political power games, they need to mobilize their fellow women in counties in order to have a common purpose. They need to educate them to elect women who can articulate their issues in the electoral offices. By so doing, they may succeed to 'decolonize' the minds of most women who have been brought up to believe that men are the ones who should be in politics and not women.
- The awareness of gender differences especially in politics among the men folk can also be achieved through education. This is an important step towards

addressing gender concerns in politics and gradually accommodating women's views in the political decisions.

- In parliament, men should also take their women colleagues as partners and not objects of ridicule or subordinates as has been witnessed in previous parliaments.

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**About Author;**

*Prof. Clara Momanyi is a professor of Kiswahili in the Department of Kiswahili, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, The Catholic University of Eastern Africa. She holds a Bachelor of Education degree in Kiswahili and History from the University of Nairobi, a Master of Arts degree and a PhD both in Kiswahili literary studies from Kenyatta University. Prof. Momanyi has served in national boards as director and has translated both national and international documents and policies into Kiswahili. She is a member of several Kiswahili national and international associations and served as a member of editorial boards in academic journals like RUWAZA AFRIKA, Journal of Contemporary Discourse in Language, Literature, Culture and the Arts, Egerton University, CHEMCHEMI, a Journal of the School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Kenyatta University and KUMEKUCHA, a Journal of the Faculty of Arts in Catholic University, among others. She has also peer-reviewed articles for other publications in both English and Kiswahili. Prof. Momanyi is a Kiswahili literary writer who has published widely in the area of Kiswahili novels and short stories, and has widely published academic articles in national and international journals. In 2006, she was awarded the Fulbright Senior Scholars Program where she did a postdoctoral research on Teaching Kiswahili as a foreign language in USA. In 2007 she was also recognized by Ford Foundation International Fellowship Program for promoting leadership for social justice. In 2010, she received presidential commendation as the Elder of the Burning Spear (EBS) in recognition for her efforts in the development of national language, culture and human rights. Prof. Momanyi is also a researcher especially in the area of gender, culture and history.*