Struggles and Success in Engendering the African Public Sphere: Kenyan Women in Politics

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Abstract

This article examines the place of Kenyan women in politics. To achieve this, the article investigates: the strides made by Democracy in Kenya, if Kenyan women have made the desired difference, how Kenyan men and women have embraced democracy and the women’s vital voices in the public sphere. It is argued here that Kenyan women have not fully embraced the political life due to the patriarchal nature of the society which locks out women from the public sphere, and mainstream political parties which only reserve junior leadership positions for women. All political avenues such as the Centre of Multi-party Democracy, The Electoral Commission of Kenya (ECK), the Judiciary, Affirmative Action Kenyan Chapter, Parliament and the Mainstream political parties will be the centre of focus to unveil the position of women in the public sphere. The article is encased under Marshall’s (1996) theory on citizenship which states that all citizens possess three kinds of rights: basic civil rights, political rights and social rights. Kenyan women citizens have all these rights and therefore, the right to enjoy the public sphere. Secondary sources of data will be used to develop the article from which conclusions and recommendations will be drawn.

Key terms: African Public Sphere; Kenyan Women; Decade for Women; Democracy

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Introduction

The contention of this article is that the political life of Kenyan women has been a tearful and heart-rending tale. It is a tale of sweat and blood; a story of fear and humiliation but also a story of hope and determination. Physical and psychological bashing, mental trauma, maiming, rape, sexual harassment, death and name calling mark the story of Kenyan women (Lamb, 2002). Their plight is made worse when they venture into the murky waters of male–dominated politics. In a fiercely patriarchal society, women have endured decades of humiliation, ridicule and violence. Since colonial times, women have been humiliated in many ways-
killed during Mau Mau struggle and the state of emergency. When some women such as Wangari Maatha ventured into the public sphere, their voices were drowned by tantrums of scared men who trivialized and ridiculed them in private and in public. Ironically, the same folks who condemned Wangari Maathai and other women whom they did not like kept on shouting and pretending to demand for rights of the women folk. the accusations against women who politically active were many, and senior politicians belittling them as people with small brains and as divorcees.

Since independence in 1963, Kenyan women have played a marginal role in Kenya’s political life even though they make up 52% of the country’s population. The 1985 women’s conference in Nairobi aimed at reviewing the state of gender relations at the end of the United Nations Decade for Women (1975 - 1985) and the Platform for Action Beijing conference in 1995 was to implement the declaration for women empowerment. Much has been achieved since then. The universal declaration of human rights states that everyone (men and women) has the right to take part in the government of his/her country. The empowerment and autonomy of women and the improvement of women’s social, economic and political status is essential for the achievement of both transparent and accountable government, administration and sustainable development in all areas of life. The power relations that prevent women from leading fulfilling lives operate at many levels of society from the most personal to the highly public (Alinsky, 1970). Achieving the goal of equal participation of women and men in decision making provides a balance that more accurately reflects the composition of society and is needed in order to strengthen democracy and promote proper functioning. Equality in political decision making performs a leverage function without which a real integration of the equality dimension in government policy making is not feasible.

In this respect, women’s equal participation in political life plays a pivotal role in the general process of the advancement of women as it is not only a demand for simple justice or democracy but also a necessary condition for women’s interests to be be taken into account. Without active participation and incorporation of women’s perspective at all levels of decision making, the goals of equality, development and peace cannot be achieved. Democracy entails numbers; consequently, since women are the majority in Kenya, then their involvement in democratic development is vital.

Democracy and development are two sides of the same coin and both can only thrive in a political environment that delivers services to the people – one bent on social justice. Kenya today has 140 registered political parties and one would, therefore, argue that democracy thrives in Kenya. This is on the contrary. Reforms which started after independence in 1963 are necessary to correct the past malpractices against women. As one Kenyan politician William Ruto stated, “Democracy is a system that ensures that those in the minority have their say while those in the majority have their way.” It is in the light of this statement that we resonate here that though Kenya has made steadfast democratic growth; she has not made any remarkable gender-based strides in the democratic space. While Kenyan men have their way, Kenyan women have no say in democracy. The repeal of section 2(A) of Kenyan constitution in 1991 transformed Kenya from a one party state to a multiparty state and one would expect that multiparty democracy would inculcate new values, ideologies and leadership in individual political parties in Kenya. Kenyans had high expectations that political leaders will build democratic – institutions of governance in Kenya. In this case therefore, democracy should be “people driven” and not “individual driven” (Kabeberi, 2008). However, most of the Kenyan political parties are individual driven thereby leaving out women from leadership or keeping
them in junior peripheral positions. Hence, multiparty democracy has not assisted Kenyan women politically. Why is it that the Kenyan woman is still marginalized almost fifty years since independence? Why are women underrepresented at all levels, in parliament, in the cabinet, in the civil service despite claims of pursuit of gender parity in Kenya? What efforts has the government put in place to ensure that women enjoy equal opportunities and rights as men in Kenya? What structures and institutions have been put in place to ensure that this is possible? These are the issues that this article seeks to grapple with.

Kenyan Women’s Voices in Political Power

Women have directly suffered at the hands of state security apparatus. Their tears and blood eventually drew shocking attention when tired and angry mothers stripped naked at Nairobi’s Uhuru Park in 1991. The act, viewed as a curse on the then KANU government came from mothers demanding the release of their sons and husbands detained for political reasons. The venue of the stripping act, an abomination in African culture, has since been named “the freedom corner.”

The 1995 Beijing platform which acts as a pointer to equality between men and women has never been implemented. Many political observers state that the Beijing platform of action adopted at the United Nations conference on women will never be implemented by a male dominated government in Kenya. This is because the platform “scares men out of their wits” since the tenets of Beijing document touch on the raw nerve of man’s superiority in the society (UPS, 2010). Therefore, despite the efforts of the Nairobi and Beijing (1995) Women conferences, working towards fairness in both genders politically, especially in leadership opportunities, and Kenyan women’s participation in decision making is mostly peripheral. There are also development problems especially HIV and AIDS that affect women differently from the way they affect men (UPS, 2010). Thus, there are gender inequalities which cannot be addressed by clan difference or economic differences but by socio-cultural differences between men and women. Currently, no law explicitly defines the rights and status of women in Kenya and this has been widely blamed on the poor representation of women in parliament to articulate women rights. This, therefore, exemplifies that Kenyan women have not fully embraced political life.

As more Kenyan women run for and are elected to political office, they continue to encounter numerous barriers to their full political participation. Even with their increased representation, women remain vastly outnumbered by men in government and other institutions that comprise the political system. Although Kenyan women may be reaching new heights of political power, old attitudes and stereotypes remain and women who become powerful are frequently ridiculed as if there is only one proper role for political women – to support systems behind political men. This explains why while profiling former Justice and Constitutional Affairs minister Martha Karua in 2008 after she was appointed to the cabinet, one Daily Nation columnist described her as being “the only man in Kibaki’s cabinet.” This was because of her willingness to stand up for President Mwai Kibaki. This is a stereotype – an expression to recognize women who are really tough politically. Even Indira Gandhi of India used to be described like that, just to appreciate her astuteness (Ibid.). The minister’s approach had earned her what may – in an ironic twist – still be the intimate compliment for a woman politician in Kenya: being described as a man (albeit with tongue in cheek). This implies that only men are to be associated with such qualities. What a better way to describe a woman with similar qualities?
For a woman candidate, it is good to be a man. This is mainly in patriarchal societies where men are the custodians of powers. Power is traditionally believed to be the province of men while women are seen as exercising power primarily at home. Women are stereotyped as holding the “power behind the throne,” as if women’s power comes primarily from their presumed manipulation of men and as if women’s primary political role is to remain invisible and out of public view. A case in point is the role of the “First Ladies/Lady” (a term laden with sexist connotations). Public images of the “First Lady” show her in traditional woman’s roles – volunteering at social organizations, promoting volunteer work, being an advocate for human issues and supporting her husband, even if at the expense of her own interests. The persistence of this helpmate image is all the more obvious when some First Ladies try to act otherwise. For example, Andersen (1997:282) states that when Hillary Rodham Clinton was appointed by the president to lead the nation in health care reform, she was publicly ridiculed and hauled as out of line for trying to share power with her husband. Soon thereafter, her advisors tried to soften her image and a new Hillary Clinton appeared in the press – a woman whose primary interests were children and whose identity was most often described in terms of her hairstyle!

The above scenario explains why in 2002, the United Nations (UN) developed a set of eight “Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)” which represent a commitment by government to key development and targets. Efforts to address gender inequality are reflected in goal 3 of the MDGs - to “promote gender equality and empower women”. Although the target for this goal focuses on education, the indicators include the proportion of seats held by women in national parliament – a sign that women’s political participation is seen as central to development and Kenyan women are no exception. Since 1969 when Kenya had its first woman parliamentarian, the 9th parliament had the highest ever achieved level of representation by women in Kenyan history with 18 women out of the 222 members in parliament. This however, falls drastically short of the United Nations target of achieving 30% representations of women in politics by 2005. Highlights of the African Regional Congress of Women in Politics 1995 concluded that such statistics, in Kenya as well as in Africa, are indicative of the limited decision making roles given to women in this region as well as the need to support girls’ education and women’s more active participation in politics. It is therefore important to analyze the political scene for gender imbalances, identify the problems that hinder women’s active participation in politics, and suggest the way forward to help alleviate the dismembering of women from the national assembly and their marginalization from decision making roles once they enter into parliament. Only when women fight hard against these problems are they going to ascend to power and be able to articulate their grievances, there is no short cut to it (G21 Africa – Kenyan Women in Politics.mht) Here at home (Kenya), the current First Lady – Mama Lucy Kibaki is a volunteer spearheading the implementation of Affirmative Action particularly so the rights of the girl child, the fight against female genital mutilation (FGM) and early marriage and education for girls. She is also in charge of the less fortunate children in children’s homes and she leads the fight against HIV/AIDS pandemic besides sexual violence on the girl child (Affirmative Action Kenyan Chapter).

The wives of the Prime minister and the Vice President on the other hand are paid responsibility allowances every month because of the critical role they play in portraying a good image of the nation’s family values. The spouses are expected to engage in various activities for the public good, besides playing the role of hostess during various public and official engagements of their husbands (Daily Nation, Friday August 22, 2008).
think women might be reaching new heights of political power, the message is clear: some women can move into politics, but it is still a man’s world – where women are not expected to exercise equal power (ibid.).

While appreciating that women participation in politics is crucial, we must not overlook the cultural and social dynamics including history which have influenced lack of effective participation. Due to prevalent poverty and inequality; participation in politics is at the bottom of hierarchy of needs of majority of African women. Without political power and knowledge, this state of affairs will continue indefinitely. Regrettably, having women representation in Kenyan parliament has very little to show in overall women empowerment. Benefits continue to be reflected at the top - for example women legislators supported a bill to reward sitting members of parliament “a take home cash benefit” while basic social programmes continue to be neglected. It has been argued that Kenyan MPs are the highest paid in the world – yet not one woman leader has spoken against the “blatant rape” of communal resources. Advocating for increased woman representation in the legislative is one thing; living upto the expectation of emancipating the women regardless of their social status is another. So far this is still wanting. This situation has led by women regarding their minimal participation in Kenyan politics.

Constraints to Kenyan Women’s Participation in Politics
Okombo (2001) observes that language plays a crucial role in African development discourse- it brings about human development in the democratization process. However, women are said to encounter problems entering the political arena due to the derogatory language used against women aspirants (Ghai, 2002). A good example is Charity Ngilu the Kitui central MP and Minister for Water Development during the 1997 elections. Ngilu was the first Kenyan woman to contest for presidency and there was the “Ngilu wave” which the age-old attitudes among the men were not comfortable with. Hon. Ngilu had a great challenge facing the then ever-powerful president Moi. According to Grignon (1990:6), “the men could not imagine being led by a woman.” This is the challenge that all women face generally. Derogatory language was used against Ngilu during the campaigns. For example, she was nicknamed “wiper” a label that later transformed to “viper” by her opponents. “Viper” was a term used to portray Ngilu as a monster and hence an inappropriate choice for a presidential candidate (Ndambuki 2006).

Nzomo (2003) states that the apparent political silence by women in the 2002 elections must also be understood within the structural impediments that women globally and at the national level continue to face as they seek to participate in all areas of politics. Numerous studies on women’s participation in politics and public decision making globally indicate that the electoral playing field has always been tilted heavily in favour of men, more so in countries like Kenya, which are highly patriarchal and lack a democratic constitution and electoral laws to facilitate free and fair electoral process. Thus, the people’s social roles and responsibilities are central to their experience of citizenship in terms of electoral political participation. Kenyan men and women roles and status vary from society to society.

However, majority of the women take a far greater role in home- making and care work and participate less in formal politics and even less in wage earning activities. The issue of women’s lesser status and men’s superior status is so deeply ingrained in patriarchy and this makes the relationship seem natural to women themselves. Hence, there is need for struggles for gender equality to redress the imbalance in power and resources between Kenyan men and women. There is need, therefore, for the Kenyan society to change – evolve out of the patriarchal nature and institutions of society and accommodate women participation in politics. After all,
culture is dynamic and should change with time. All people should meaningfully participate in the democratic space, instead of making it patriarchal.

Patriarchy in the Kenyan society is an organized social structure whereby men as a group hold more power than women – men are given power and authority over women. The men control the law making process and the institutions that implement the law. They hold institutional power. In this case patriarchy involves the many social institutions that regulate and determine the nature of women’s lives (Andersen, 1997:284). There are many cases of Kenya women (wives) who are assaulted by their husbands because they refused to follow their husband’s party and candidate of choice during the campaign and election period.

In line with patriarchy is the family institution in the modern society. The women have been relegated to the private sphere and most men to the public sphere. As long as the women’s national social role consists in reproducing the private sphere of the family, motherhood and marriage, women’s access to the public sphere of work, decision making, law making, knowledge production, culture production and politics remain minimal. As individuals and as groups or class, women do not enjoy equal liberties, parties and opportunities in the public sphere as compared to those enjoyed by most men. Thus, the democratic ideal of “a good political life” is only nominally attained by Kenyan women.

A closer look at the 2008 cabinet reveals that women are still under represented in the cabinet as shown: apart from Hon. Martha Karua who was the Minister for Justice and Constitutional Affairs, the other members of Parliament and who have cabinet positions are: Hon. Charity Ngilu – Minister For Water and Irrigation, Dr. Sally Kosgei – Minister for Agriculture, Prof. Margaret Kamar, Minister for Higher Education, Science and Technology, Dr. Naomi Shaban – Minister for Gender and Children Affairs, Hon. Esther Marugi – Minister for Special Programmes, Hon. Beth Mugo – Minister for Public Health, Hon. Wavinya Ndeti – Assistant Minister for Youth and Sports, Hon. Elizabeth Ongoro – Assistant Minister for Nairobi Metropolitan Development, Hon. Jebii Kilimo – Assistant Minister for Co-operative Development, Hon. Cecily Mbarire – Assistant Minister for Tourism and Hon. Margaret Wanjiru – Assistant Minister for Tourism. before she was edged out on party loyalty issues, Prof. Hellen Sambili served as Minister for Youth and Sports, and acting minister for Higher Education. This is only a token representation of women in decision making, yet at the same time it is a considerable increase over the years of independence. This is the reason why we resonate here that Kenyan women have not embraced democracy and Kenya has not made remarkable strides in the democratic space especially in gender balance. The political space is hostile to womenfolk.

**Violence against Female Candidates**

A culture of electoral violence that tends to be harsher towards female than male candidates is another reason for fewer Kenyan women in politics. As elections draw closer, normally there is an escalation of election violence against women. This is a sad phenomenon that continues to plague women’s participation in politics. Some women aspirants are beaten and attacked by groups and gangs causing serious harm to the women with more being insulted and threatened through emails, text messages, phone calls or even face to face verbal threats. Men have for years used violence as a tool of frightening people from the public sphere.

In 1992, 1997, 2002 and 2007, violence deterred women out of the electoral process. Many were beaten, harassed, sexually abused and displaced in the politically instigated violence
that engulfed the country during the four general elections. Physical violence limits women’s capacity to gain contact with voters and sell their policies during campaign rallies, public meetings and meet-the–people tours. Violence undermines their participation in presidential, parliamentary, civic, and party leadership (KHRC, 2002). Despite this reality, history shows that election violence against women in Kenya goes unreported and unpunished. The electoral violence meted on women during the election period sees many women drop out of the political race. It disempowers women economically and psychologically and also discourages many “would be aspirants.” For example, threatening text messages to a woman aspirant read: “tutakukatakata kichwa tuweke kwa gunia na tukutupe kwa damp site” – we will cut your head into pieces, put it in a sack and throw you in a damp site.

Some survivors were admitted in hospital and some vowed to continue to push forward regardless of the challenges and called upon the president, members of parliament and political parties to make peaceful elections a key ingredient of the election campaign process. The Electoral Commission of Kenya has no machinery to prevent election violence. Some aspirants had their businesses vandalized and their goods stolen while others were chased away from their rental houses by marauding youth aligned to men aspirants.

A few cases in point here are the 2007 women aspirants Flora Igoki of Meru who was beaten, sustained serious injuries and was put on a neck brace; Orie Rogo Manduli a contestant in Kasarani was attacked and hospitalized at the Nairobi women’s hospital; a woman legislative candidate Ms Alice Onduto, a parliamentary aspirant for Lugari Constituency who lost in the nominations was shot dead while on her way home in Nairobi’s South C estate on 1/12/07” (Penninah Ogada, Women’s Participation in the 2007 General Elections in Kenya, 2007-12-19, Issue 333 in Lugari, Western Kenya was shot dead in Nairobi; while a local aspirant in Taveta, Ms Martha Kibwana was attacked at her gate and left for the dead with deep cuts on the face and neck. The only 2007 woman presidential aspirant Nazlin Umar received death threats and was even frog matched from a meeting by rowdy supporters of an opponent in Kisumu, western Kenya. In the words of Njoki Wainaina, a political analyst and founder of African Women Development Communication Network (FEMNET), electoral violence against women in Kenya is a symptom of a much bigger problem by some men who are still steeped in the patriarchal world of their great grandfathers, inspite of all the advancements the Kenyan society has made. Women have become a real threat to the patriarchal power system and their male opponents will use every trick in the book against them (mhtml: file://K:worldYMCA Women’s News Articles Unit Established to respond.mht;mhtml:file://G:/POLITICS – KENYA: - A call to Arm Women Candidates with more than…). Even student elections at universities in Kenya have been for decades embroiled in violent politics similar to those seen at the national level – but as peace takes hold more female students are giving student politics a shot.

Male Patronage in Politics in Kenya

Being successful in politics requires, among other things having the support of party leaders. If these leaders do not encourage women to run for office, there is little likelihood of women’s success as politicians. In Kenya just like in other African cultures, women are regarded as belonging to the kitchen. This kind of socialization makes it hard for many men to fathom the idea that they can share the same platform with a woman.

According to the Gender and Governance programme in Kenya, female political aspirants are economically challenged as compared to their male counterparts. Whereas male politicians
have convoys of cars or helicopters with several of their supporters in their wake, female aspirants rarely have that kind of economic muscle. If they are blessed, they will be seen in old cars that “beg for surgery.” This has made elections a lucrative business where the only people who venture into and thrive are the wealthy men and few wealthy women.

Thus, campaign financing is one area where Kenyan women are at a structural disadvantage, relative to men. Political campaigns are notoriously expensive and Kenyan women who as a group have lower incomes than men and fewer economic resources are not likely to have the financial resources necessary to mount expensive political campaigns. In line with this, G21 AfRICA on Kenyan Women in Politics states that economic disparities favour men over women in politics.

The imbalance between the extensive work done by women and the limited rewards means poverty for them thus, they cannot influence the masses for political clout. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) for example, reports that women do 80% of agricultural work yet access only 5% of credit in loans. Political campaigns being expensive, only the rich are able to afford them. Here then one is forced to ask: “how can Kenyan women get into parliament if they do not have the money to oil their campaign machinery?”

Generally therefore, politics in Kenya have been diluted by wealth without which one cannot go far. This is one barrier to women’s participation that must be overcome. Due to poverty, women are vulnerable and lured with petty bribes to vote for the most generous contestants financially. Their poverty gets modified come election time – thus, feminization of poverty is crucial for politics whether for women or men aspirants. Women’s dual roles in work and the family put them at a disadvantage in running for political office. As long as women hold the primary responsibility of family care, it is difficult for them to meet the time energy requirements of political office.

Numerous studies have shown that women’s family obligations, including the availability of child care, interfere with their ability to take on political jobs. One’s strong spousal support is a prerequisite for women to seek public office – thus there is a conflict between parental roles and marital roles and career opportunities for women (Martin & Glaine (1990). G21 AFRICA – Kenya Women in Politics concurs with this view when it states that women’s access to technology and media also influences their political profile. The other problem is the non-identified roles and responsibilities for women in politics and also their domestication which creates conflicts of balancing the private and the public. So much has politics interfered with the private lives of women who choose to go into it that parliament has been referred to as the “graveyard of marriages.”

According to the Gender and Governance Programme in Kenya women hold a measly 8% of parliamentary seats, despite comprising more than half the population. The ratio of female to male parliamentarians in the 9th parliament (by 2002) is shocking 1:12, the lowest in east Africa. Rwanda a country with less developed economy holds the world record with a near 50-50 parliamentary representation of women in legislative posts; Liberia even while emerging from the ravages of civil war delivered Africa’s first democratically elected female president, Ms. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf.

Heeding to the pressure, neighbouring Uganda and Tanzania have increased women’s representation in their parliaments to 24% and 15%, respectively, using constitutional provisions for affirmative action. This suggests that while male dominated parliaments of successive regimes in Kenya have taken special care not to offend ethnic sensibilities they have totally disregarded women’s needs and aspirations. Thus, legal hurdles exist and the constitution and its
reviewing process possess challenges for women seeking political office. The existing electoral laws also offer official and non-official detriments to women aspirants both formally and informally. Section 82(4) of the constitution of Kenya discriminates against women in matters of adoption, marriage, divorce and inheritance of property at the time of death of husband thereby economically crippling women. Informally, however, minimal reforms have ensured that half of all nominations by political parties will to implement them as seen in the nominations of MPs in the last general election in 2003. The law may be there but there is no clause to ensure implementation on penalties for failure to do so. It was hoped that with enshrining multipartyism in the Kenyan laws, women leadership was going to increase at the grass root level.

Multiparty politics were introduced and owned in societal organization/local level with ideas being articulated and people mobilized at the local level. However, there are no women leaders or representatives in the formation of these parties at the local level. Kenyan women, therefore, have not fully embraced political life of this country because though there is good talk/promise (good public relations) in terms of women in party manifestos, but in reality there is nothing for women. This is explicit in nominations where women are shut out – given a raw deal. The political parties are not true to their manifestos and promises to women. They hold them hostage politically despite their being the bulk of voters. They are not given leadership or running positions other than being voters (Centre for Multiparty Democracy, Kenya). However, examples from Rwanda, Uganda, South Africa, Liberia, Tanzania and Sweden among many others show that there are strategies to cope and overcome gender based incapacitation from politics. At this point, it is worthwhile examining the strides made by Kenyan women in the democratic sphere since independence in 1963-2007.

Kenyan Women’s Performance in Politics: 1963 – 2007

Nzomo (2003) notes that since Kenya’s independence some 40 years ago, women’s performance: in the area of parliamentary electoral politics has registered marginal but gradual increase in the number of women MPs. The only exception to this trend was in 1997, when women’s performance in electoral politics dropped, despite the fielding of a woman presidential candidate. The number of elected women MPs moved from zero in the first post-colonial government to six in 1992 and then dropped to four in 1997; it rose again to nine in 2002. The number of women parliamentary aspirants improved from seven in 1963 to over 200 candidates in the 2002 parliamentary elections, while the number of women nominated MPs increased from zero in 1963 to eight in 2002.

Following the landslide victory of the 2002 elections, the immediate challenge for the winning party, National Rainbow Coalition (NARC), was to form a government of national unity. This would ensure not only broad based participation in decision making by all the diverse communities of Kenya, but would also respond to the need for gender equity and justice in representation and participation in all key political and other public decision making.

From a gender perspective, the new decision making structures are a mixed bag of gains and losses for women. For example, comparatively speaking, women’s presence in the cabinet has improved from zero up to 1974 when Dr. Julia Auma Ojiambo and thereafter, to one assistant minister for ministry of culture and social services, except for the period 1994 – 1997 when Kenya had one full and the first woman cabinet minister. For the first time in 40 years, women have secured 6 ministerial positions. However, they lost out on some of the quantitative gains under the former president Moi’s regime, especially in the appointment of permanent secretaries (PSs). Whereas in the last Moi 1997-2002 the civil service was headed by a woman
and an additional six women were PSs, the current government under Mwai Kibaki, the civil service is headed by a man and has only three women PSs. Furthermore, the principle of 1/3 women’s representation in all decision making bodies, is still a far cry, as demonstrated by the fact that by March 2003, the representation of women in key government posts was as follows: cabinet 3 out of 23; assistant ministers 4 out of 24; permanent secretaries 3 out of 24 and ministerial directors and equivalent positions 3 out of 17 (ibid).

Judith Achieng (1998) argues that Kenyan polls leave women more marginalized. Years of hard campaigns and activism by Kenyan women for equal participation in the political process were dampened following President Daniel Arap Moi’s failure to appoint a woman to fill ministerial post in his new 25 member cabinet in 1998. Even the post for the minister for Women and Youth Affairs went to a man, Maalim Muhammed, and the only woman to win a seat in the ruling party KANU Mwarere wa Mwachai was appointed an assistant minister in the same ministry.

The absence of a woman minister meant no woman sat in the government cabinet. Muhammed’s appointment angered a cross-section of Kenyan women and one woman stated: “women’s problems are usually handled better by a woman, not a man.” In this case, therefore, Kenyan women failed to make an impact during the 1997 polls. Out of the 50 contestants only four women made it to the 200 member parliament. This explains why Hon. Beth Mugo bitterly complained stating: “from the composition of parliament, it looks as if there are no women in the country…. Kenyan women are respected in the international arena and it is very embarrassing that they are hardly represented in their own parliament”. Hon. Charity Ngilu of the Social Democratic Party (SDP) the only female presidential candidate was widely expected to give president Moi a run for his money finished a poor fifth in the polls but managed to retain her Kitui central parliamentary seat. “It is hardly believable that we only got four seats when we were most prepared for better representation in the government”, said Caroline Masika, a business consultant in Kenya.

Some have laid the blame squarely on the 26 political parties whose structures they say impede women’s participation in politics. According to the national communion on the status of women (NCSW), “the few women who managed to go through the election process were not provided with adequate party support and they were intimidated and subjected to violence”. The dismal performance is also due to lack of sensitization among women to vote for more women representatives. One Ongudi Juha said, “with their numbers, women had the capacity to decide on their political leadership” which never happened. Women make up 52% of Kenya’s 30 million people. Others think women’s performance was undermined by poll irregularities which saw many candidates across the country cry foul – especially rigging. However, the electoral commission of Kenya (ECK) Chairman refuted these allegations.

Several women groups and non-governmental organizations held numerous civil and voter workshops to educate women on their rights both as contestants and voters. However, the political tide was not in their favour – Ngilu lost her presidential bid, while world famous environmentalist and Nobel Peace Laureate Prof. Wangari Mathai lost both the presidential and parliamentary race. Kenya’s first and only cabinet minister Nyiva Mwendwa lost her bid for parliament at the party nomination stage.

The outcome of the 1997 elections meant under representation of women for five more years and little attention from government. The small number of women in parliament meant pressing issues pertaining to women rights could be delayed. By then there was no law explicitly defining the rights and status by women in Kenya and this has been widely blamed on the poor.
representation of women in parliament to articulate such rights. To correct the disparity, Mugo who was the president of council for economic empowerment of women in Africa, appealed to Kenya’s six major political parties to nominate only women to parliament to give it a “semblance of gender equity”. If all the parties were to heed Mugo’s appeal, the number of women MPs would have increased to 16.

Nzomo (2002) further argues that lack of a common women’s political voice for most of the year 2002, a year of critical political transition reduced women’s chances of better performance at the 2002 polls and subsequent political developments. In fact the relatively better than expected performance that women registered can largely be attributed to the NARC party euphoria since it increased the winning chances of both its male and female candidates. However, going by the statistics of the 2002 – 2003 parliamentary years, women had a 5.6% out of the 17% MPs who brought motions to the house. 94.4% women MPs contributed to motions as compared to 90.5% of males. Here, the level of women’s contribution surpassed that of their male counterparts. In terms of points of order raised by MPs, women had 61.7% compared to 69.7% males. Despite their critically limited number in parliament, women parliamentarians matched their male counterparts in activities in the august house (G21 – AFRICA-Kenyan Women in Politics.mht). The 2002 women’s participation in electoral and reform politics demonstrated that there has been inadequate learning from past setbacks and a lack of consolidation of gains built on past achievements.

During the run up to the 2007 general elections, many organizations had talked to women about the importance of participating in decision making for the good of the country. This is exemplified by president Kibaki’s pledge that 30% of all public appointments and elective positions were to be reserved for women. Raila Odinga on his part had promised 50% to go to women if he was to win the presidential elections. All their pledges have not seen the light of day. 15 women successfully won parliamentary seats to the 10th parliament thereby increasing the percentage of women from 4.2% in the 9th parliament (2002) to 7.1% now. The total number of women in the 9th parliament was 18 – 9 elected, 9 nominated while the current 10th parliament has 20–15 elected, 5 – nominated, the highest number ever witnessed since independence. Many women thrived in local councils in the 2007 elections.

The Grand Coalition Government of PNU and ODM with Mwai Kibaki as the President and Raila Odinga as the Prime Minister has 13 women in the cabinet with 7 full ministers and 6 assistant ministers. The Kofi Annan led negotiating team for Peace had 2 women out of the 6 team members; the Kriegler commission on the causes of Post-election Violence and the Waki commission on Justice and Reconciliation had no women members. On average, women hoped to change the cause of women in Kenya and to strike a blow for women in line with the United Nations Millennium Development Goals achievable by the year 2015.

The Way Forward in Enhancing Kenyan Women’s Political Performance
In the writers’ view, to improve Kenyan Women’s electoral performance and especially to strengthen their political participation in all spheres, there is need to device strategies to redress their marginalization. These may include affirmative action programmes removal of stereotyped culture, frequent women attendance at social and political gatherings where political information is likely to be shared, development of political professionalism and power incumbency retention rate. The Kenyan woman should embrace a common goal that will unite them in their diversity for the promotion of a gender agenda in the country’s governance and democratization process.
Conclusion

This article started with the premise that Kenyan women have come a long way in the political sphere. It proceeded to showing that despite cultural biases based on patriarchy, they managed to secure substantial gains in the said area. Despite the improved electoral performance by Kenyan women candidates and the government’s subsequent marginal efforts to exercise affirmative action in parliamentary and public sector appointments and nominations, it is a fact that the gender agenda remains a major unfinished business that requires the attention of both men and women. The Kenyan women themselves need to articulate, challenge, and seek to influence the social, political and economic environment for the benefit of their lot. They need to undertake coalition building, governance capacity building, economic empowerment, networking and development, cultural re-orientation and pushing political parties to formulate, implement and evaluate new policies on women’s role in politics as well as allocating quotas to women’s representation. Above all, the engendering of men in the society who support women’s participation is an agenda that female politicians should work hard at. This means that women have to work extra hard to achieve adequate representation in Kenya’s power structure. Otherwise, as it is, they have not fully embraced the political life of the country.

References


