

## **Women and Political Leadership among the Abagusii in the Post-Colonial Era; Kenya**

1. Some Josephine Chemutai

2. Eric Maangi PhD

3. Tinega Charles PhD

*School of Social Sciences  
Department of Languages and Humanities  
Mount Kenya University, Kenya.*

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### **Abstract**

This study explored the marginalization of women in political leadership among the Abagusii community from 1963 to 2015. The trend on elective political positions in Gusii region show that, women have not been getting equal opportunities as their male counterparts. The study was conducted among a sample size of 422 respondents who were interviewed. Archival sources were used as well as secondary data from books, articles published in journals and periodicals, unpublished articles and newspapers. The purposive sampling technique was used to get representatives who were conversant with the problem under study. The study was guided by the feminist theory and employed the historical method of research. The data was analyzed and presented descriptively. The major purpose of descriptive design used in this study was to describe the state of affairs as it is on people's attitudes and opinions. The findings of this study reveal that women in Kenya and Gusii have been marginalized since independence as they remain under represented, oppressed and subordinated. Marginalization of women among the Abagusii community is attributed to cultural factors, stereotyping of women, economic factors, and political barriers, lack of husband support, stigmatization and gender-based violence. The recommendations of the study were change in cultural perception towards women, gender equality awareness, emphasis on women empowerment and amendment of political party policies this will bring gender equality in leadership among the Abagusii.

**Key Words:** Marginalization, Political leadership, Post-colonial era, Women

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### **I. INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY**

Women have been isolated in political leadership in Kenya despite the attainment of independence where efforts to create gender equality have borne minimal fruits. In Gusii, where women form more than half of the population, marginalization is depicted by the fact that no woman has ever been elected from the 1<sup>st</sup> to the 11<sup>th</sup> parliament with only a few being nominated meaning that majority only participated as voters. It is therefore the scope of this study to explore how women have been marginalized in Gusii and identify some of the challenges.

#### **Background to the study**

Women participation in politics globally has been low over time as compared to men creating a need for strategies towards the recognition of women's political, economic and social equality. International agreement and conventions such as the 1995 Beijing Platform emphasize that women's equal participation in decision making is not only a demand for justice or democracy, but also an important condition for women's interest to be taken into account (Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing, 1995).

The current global average of women in parliament at 19.5% falls below the stipulated target of 30% to be achieved by 2005 as set in the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action. Nevertheless it is worth noting that the percentage of women in parliament has increased as reported by the Inter-parliamentary Union (2012), to 19.8% in 2011 up from 19% in 2010.

In developed countries of the United States of America and United Kingdom, the differences in men and women political engagement are persistent (Burns, 2007). Similarly, according to the Inter-parliamentary Union report (2012) the United State of America ranks 78<sup>th</sup> in the world in the female representation in the

parliament with only 16.8% of women in the lower house and 17% in the Upper House while the United Kingdom is ranked 55<sup>th</sup> where the percentage of women in the lower house is 22% while that in the Upper House is 21.9%.

With a 17.9% for both the lower and the Upper houses of women in parliament in Asia (IPU 2012) it is a paradox that women who form half the population, have poor representation in policy making bodies and even though there have been substantial improvement in recent decades, only a small number of women rise to position of political leadership (Iwanaga, 2008). India, one of the longest democracies in the world only has 11% of women parliamentarians in the lower house and 10.1% in the Upper house ranking 106<sup>th</sup> in the world representation of women in parliament (IPU 2012).

In Africa, six countries: Burundi, Mozambique, Rwanda, South Africa, Tanzania and Uganda have achieved the critical index of 30% or higher women representation in their national parliaments because they recognize the importance of equality between women and men in decision making (Sirleaf, 2010). Rwanda for instance, has made a global mark in the women's parliamentary political participation with the highest number of women in parliament at 56.3% by placing a gender quota system by the highest level of leadership by the Government of Rwanda (Mutamba, 2005). In addition, Tanzania has been actively involved in increasing female representation by setting a 30% benchmark for women in parliament in 2000 that progressed to 36.6% representation in 2010 (Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Development, 2013).

The new Kenya constitution (2012), promotes the participation of women and men at all levels of governance and makes provisions for proportion representation. In addition each of the 47 counties are required to send one women representative, creating a female representation within national assembly parliament of 16%. Despite all these efforts, women are still marginalized in elective political positions as compared to their male counterparts as demonstrated in Gusii; Kisii County has a population of 1,152,282 million; where 550,464 are male (48%) and 601,818 female (52%), while Nyamira County's population is 598,252; 287,048 are male (48%) and 311,204 female (52%) according to 2009 census report. It is a paradox that no woman has ever been elected to the national assembly from Gusii region since independence even though they form more than half of the population. Hence it is clear that deeply rooted and persistent obstacles still hinder the progress of women and their participation in the process of decision making in politics.

The study therefore analyses this marginalization of women in political leadership in post-colonial Kenya particularly among the Abagusii and will be a starting point in seeking solutions to the problem.

### **Statement of the problem**

Political leadership facilitates development and empowerment of individuals through structures and processes where decisions regarding the use of resources in the society are generated by both women and men. Women however are under-represented in political leadership in Kenya, despite the fact that the new Kenyan constitution promotes the participation of women and men at all levels of governance where, article 81b of the Kenya constitution (2010) provides that 'not more than two-thirds of the members of elective public bodies shall be of the same gender'. What the constitution does not provide for is the methodology to be used to ensure implementation. However, among the Abagusii this percentage has not been achieved in elective public offices because no woman has been elected to the national assembly from Gusii region since independence. Currently in the thirteen constituencies in Gusii; both Kisii and Nyamira counties, all the elected members of national assembly, governors and senators in the two counties are male hence it is clear that deep lying and persistent obstacles still deter the progress of women as compared to their male counterparts. Therefore the researcher has been provoked to find out why women have been marginalized in political leadership among the Abagusii community and in turn seek solutions to the problem.

### **Objective of the study**

The study sought to explore how women have been marginalized in the post-colonial period among the Abagusii.

### **Scope of the study**

The study was conducted in Kisii county located in western part of Kenya, 50Km East of L. Victoria. Kisii County has a population of 1,152,282 million, according to 2009 census report.

The period 1963 up to 2015 was chosen because first, it is long enough to provide a deep insight into the study on the marginalization of women among the Abagusii and second, it represents a period of political freedom post-colonization.

## **II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The historical method of research was used in this study as informed by Cohen and Manion, 1994:45, this is an act of reconstruction undertaken in the spirit of critical inquiry designed to achieve a faithful

representation of a previous age. This was the most appropriate method for carrying out the study since it helped the researcher compile a systematic and coherent account of the events under investigation. The study employed descriptive design which according to Orodho and Kombo, 2002, is useful when collecting information about people's attitudes, opinions, habits or a variety of education or social issues.

The research population was derived from 422 respondents purposely selected to be interviewed on the premise that one was above 18 years and eligible to vote, those who once held political office, current office bearers, those that had participated in an election, but lost or had campaigned for candidates. Therefore, purposive sampling technique was used in this study to identify the actual respondents to be interviewed who had sound appreciation of the subject.

Utilizing both primary and secondary data, data collection for primary data was done through the use of both interviews and questionnaires enhancing reliability where, the ten respondents were interviewed in Ekegusii, Kiswahili and English languages while the questionnaires were divided into various sub-themes and historical periods under investigation. Whereas, secondary sources for this study were published materials collected from, Moi University Main Margaret Thatcher Library, University of Kabianga Library, Kisii University Library, Kisii Public Library, Nairobi University Library, Kisii County Government, and key government departments. Content analysis was used to analyze data and the results was presented descriptively. All the ethical procedures were followed where the researcher requested for permission from key informants by sending them advance letters explaining the purpose of the study.

### **Theoretical framework**

This study used the theory of patriarchy an offshoot of radical feminism and gender theory where gender, as a theoretical construct was employed in the analysis and interpretation. Feminism attempts to identify relations between men and women by questioning, challenging and recognizing the existence of women oppression and aims at developing strategies to better gender relations. Feminism does not only deal with issues of justice and equality, but also offers a critique of male dominated institutions, values and social practices that are oppressive and destructive.

Radical feminists insist that women's subordination does not depend on other forms of domination, such as class rather, it is deeply embedded in individual psychos that is more difficult to change than class. Even though feminists share the same idea in terms of what gender oppression and women subordination might mean, they differ widely in terms of analyzing its origin and what constitutes women's liberation (Shulamith Firestone, 1970).

For instance, Shulamith Firestone (1970) points that women subordination is rooted in their biology rather than their reproductive physiology, arguing that only with the advanced technology such as 'test tubes babies', would women achieve equality and no longer depend on men. While other radical feminists argue that women are biologically superior to men because of their ability to give birth, some argue that it is not the sex differences that should concern feminists but the social norms that devalue female biology like male dominance over women's fertility and sexuality on women's bodies. Men are considered to be the enemy and are exempted from their movement with a belief that women's issues are part of a general revolutionary struggle that one could not change the system within the established economic and political system and institutions. Radical feminists put sexuality, reproduction and patriarchy at the center of political arena where the conventional assumptions with regard to the women's place in society are challenged.

The relevance of the feminist theory is that it promotes equality for men and women in political, economic and social spheres. It attempts to understand and critique the role of gender in social relations, at the same time it focuses on women's ability to maintain the equality which is the basis of this research.

## **III. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Marginalization of Women in Leadership Globally**

According to Sir Leaf, (2010), limitation of women political participation is not only in Africa but global. (Clinton-Rodhan, 2003; Neumann, 1998; Mathaai, 2006; Thomas and Wilcox, 2005; Wanjohi, 2003), observed that women participation in leadership and management brings a different perspective of political leadership. Epstein et al, (2005) and Neumann, (1998) both asserted that processes of decision making are of great concern to women leaders. Khan, (2010) and UNESCO, (2006) observed that illiteracy and low levels of education is a must disempowering factor for women's development. Bannerjee, Sidhartha, (2012) noted that female politicians face gender stigma from male members which undermine their ability to reach leadership role.

### **Marginalization of Women in Africa**

Dele Meiji Fatunla (2011), noted that there is continued dominance of political life in Africa by men which is not good for the continent. This is supported by Odhiambo (2006) who argues that African women are

discriminated against from birth. Although women's governmental representation in Uganda has increased, Ugandan women still suffer from unemployment and little or no access to healthcare. (Goetz A.M, 2002). According to Cole (2011), representation of women in leadership and decision making remains a major gap in Africa and that there still exist some gaps that needs to be covered as women in politics continue to face varying impediments. Gordon and Gordon (1996), observed that with the advent of colonialism in Africa men gained political advantage as customary sources of female power were ignored. This is corroborated by Tripp (1996), who asserted that the prohibitive cultural attitudes against women involvement persist among both men and women. This is reflected in voting patterns and attempts to suppress women's assertion of their political rights and views. Agbalajobi (2009), found that most customs often prefer sending the male children to school over the females and this has marginally increased the illiterate women and stiffen their competition with their male counterparts in politics.

### **Marginalization of Women in Kenya**

Onsongo (2000) and Kamau (2007), observed that restriction of movement of women in the early stages of colonial rule created male breadwinners and a sense of powerlessness among women, which continue to affect their participation in public decision making. According to Kanogo (2005), women were not expected to combine marriage and career. This is corroborated by Mathaai (2006), who noted that these contradictions continue to affect women's careers and how work places and politics are structured. Oduol (2008) and Omtata (2008), suggest that Kenyan women lack adequate training on political matters that can enable them participate effectively in the political field.

According to FIDA (2012), pregnant girls continue to be expelled from schools. This is supported by Omtata (2008), who noted that retrogressive cultural and traditional practices impedes the quest for women's leadership in Kenya. Omtata (2008) and Tripp (1996), cite poor socialization as the double burden syndrome to the girl child in Africa.

### **Post-Independence Women Leadership in Kenya**

#### **Women representation under the late President Jomo Kenyatta**

The poor representation of women persisted into independent Kenya (Kabaji, 1997 and Kabira, 1998). Between 1964 and 1969, there was no single woman member of parliament in Kenya. In 1969, the first woman was elected into the national Assembly and one was nominated to sit in the legislative body. Between 1969 and 1974, women formed 0.56% and 5% of nominated members respectively.

#### **Women representation during the late President Daniel Moi's regime**

Women representation in politics at the time was still minimal especially because the organizations dealing with women's issues were mostly headed by men (Nzomo, 1998). By 1985, Kenya had not yet created full ministries for women. Moreover, the 1992 election results proved disappointment of Kenyan women in both the opposition parties and the ruling party, KANU did not have any consideration to the inclusion of women in almost all positions of the party hierarchy (Oduol, 1993).

#### **Women representation during President Mwai Kibaki's era**

The number of elected women members of parliament rose from four in 1997 to nine in 2002. More women were nominated to the 2003-2007 parliament than any other time in Kenyan political history (Nzomo, 2003). The end of Kenya African National Union and the political uphill did not help to change the gender insensitive male political culture in any decisive manner (Kamau, 2010).

## **IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

This study found that women marginalization in political leadership traces back to both pre- colonial and colonial times. In the pre-colonial period, the indigenous Gusii society was patrilineal where homesteads were only led by men (Monyenye, S.1977) and women were responsible for the entire housework (Kanogo, 1987). During the colonial period, Gusii region women lost their authority and public importance as colonialists deemed it necessary to educate and employ the men (Okemwa, 2002). The traditional roles of women consequently rose while men benefited from cash crop farming with an average of £100 per annum (KNA/DC/KSI/5/3; 1943-1955).

Even after independence, despite women contribution to the independence struggle, women still lack recognition in the political arena (Shvedova N. 1998) and remain marginalized, oppressed and subordinated. In Kenya for instance, there was no single woman elected or nominated in the first parliament of 1963-1969 where Grace Onyango was the first to be elected in 1969 during the second parliament of 1969-1974. Although there is progress in women representation from the 1<sup>st</sup> to the 11<sup>th</sup> parliament, where elected women rose from none to 37 respectively, the political tide was not favorable. For instance, Charity Ngilu lost her presidential bid, world famous environmentalist, Wangari Maathai lost both the presidential and parliamentary race. Kenya's first and only woman cabinet member, Nyiva Mwenda, lost her bid for parliament at the party nomination stage. These

outcomes meant years of under-representation; thus issues affecting women would receive little attention. (Mwangi, S. 2008. Yambo, D. 1994 attributes this to the stereotyping of women where, married women candidates were accused of neglecting their families for personal gains, widows were accused of having been the cause of their husbands' deaths and divorced women were accused of having loose morals. While male candidates concentrated on petty issues as the appearance and marital status of female candidates, women concentrated on issues such as lack of clean water, inadequate health facilities, education and the agricultural sector.

This study found that Gusii region constituencies never elected a woman MP not even a nominated one during the 2002 and 2007 elections respectively, and this meant no woman from Gusii region held a ministerial position. Further the study established that there were other women who stood for elective positions in 2007 from the Gusii community but never made it to parliament. These included Mrs. Margaret Atogo and Ms. Magdalene Mwebi who stood in Kitutu Chache Constituency but lost to Hon. Richard Onyonka, Prof. Mary Gesicho ran for Nyaribari Chache Constituency seat but lost to Dr. Robert Monda, Carren Magara who wrestled the South Mugirango parliamentary seat against her brother Omingo Magara but she also lost to her brother though later he lost the seat to his opponent due to a petition in Kisii Law Courts.

Gusii region has no elected or nominated woman in the national assembly, only one nominated woman Senator Janet Ong'era and the two women representative Alice Chae and Mary Otara from Nyamira and Kisii counties respectively. This is a clear indication that in the region women are still highly marginalized in the elective political positions despite the one third gender rule constitutional provision (African Woman and Child Feature Service, 2013).

Gusii region in particular, women are still highly marginalized in all elective public bodies. In the county assemblies in Kisii County there was only one woman elected member of county assembly against 44 men, while Nyamira had two women elected member of County assemblies against 19 men, this shows that women representation in Gusii region is still challenged.

## **V. DISCUSSION**

The research established that since independence up to early 1980s no woman from Gusii region was elected to parliament. Moreover, the gaining of independence in Kenya did not change the status of women, women remain marginalized, oppressed and subordinated even though they participated in the struggle. Though women form more than half of the Gusii population, the region is still challenged in terms of representation in political leadership.

Factors attributed to the marginalization of women in political leadership among the Abagusii community included: the cultural factors which continue to preclude them from public decision making, gender roles in which women and girls are expected to be in the kitchen and children's upbringing, stereotyping of women where women are portrayed as weak vessels; lack of resources as many women may not be able to mobilize enough resources to compete with their male counterparts; political parties also play a big role in marginalizing women in Kenya and finally, women lack support from their husbands and other women as well and are stigmatized. In addition, women being considered a 'weaker sex' are more often targets of political violence.

## **VI. RECOMMENDATIONS**

This study recommends a change in cultural perception towards women, gender equality awareness, emphasis on women empowerment and amendment of political party policies that will bring gender equality in leadership among the Abagusii.

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