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*The Mother of Warriors and
Her Daughters: The Women's
Movement in Kenya*

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WHEN WE WERE FIRST approached about writing on the women's movement in Kenya, one question emerged in both of our minds: Is there a women's movement in Kenya? When we considered this, we simultaneously answered, "No." After more reflection, we began to ask, "If there is no women's movement, what is this intense activity going on around us of women's group meetings, workshops, seminars, and even individual women agitating for women's rights in the courts, in the media, and on the streets?" We were thus faced with the dilemma of deciding whether a women's movement does exist in Kenya and, if so, what it implies in the Kenyan context.

Our conceptualization of a conventional definition of a movement, emphasizing a common objective, continuity, unity, and coordination, led to our initially negative reaction on the question of a women's movement in Kenya. It is true that the Kenyan context has always been characterized by women's active participation in activities aimed at improving the status of women in all spheres of development. These activities are manifested in individual efforts, self-help groups, occupational associations, nongovernmental organizations, business enterprises, and social welfare activities, among others. In fact, women's group efforts are so vibrant that researcher and writer Patricia Stamp once described them "as the source of the most radical consciousness to be found in the countryside providing

K E N Y A

GENERAL

type of government: Republic
 major ethnic groups: Kikuyu (21%); Luhya (14%); Luo (13%); Kalenjin (11%); Asian
 language(s): Swahili (official); English and multiple tribal languages
 religions: Protestant (38%); Catholic (28%); Muslim (6%); indigenous
 date of independence: 1963
 former colonial power: Britain

DEMOGRAPHICS

population size: 26.5 million
 birth rate (*per 1,000 population*): 44
 total fertility (*average number of births per woman*): 5.4
 contraceptive prevalence (*married women*): 33%
 maternal mortality rate (*per 100,000 live births*): 170

WOMEN'S STATUS

date of women's suffrage: 1963
 economically active population: M 90% F 58%
 female employment (*% of total workforce*): 39
 life expectancy M 60 F 64
 school enrollment ratio (*F/100 M*)
 primary 95
 secondary 78
 tertiary 36
 literacy M 80% F 58%

women with a basis for resistance to exploitation.”¹ This vibrant activity is equally evident in urban settings, where women from all walks of life transcend individual, cultural, class, tribal, religious, and other barriers to identify issues of common concern and design strategies to address them.

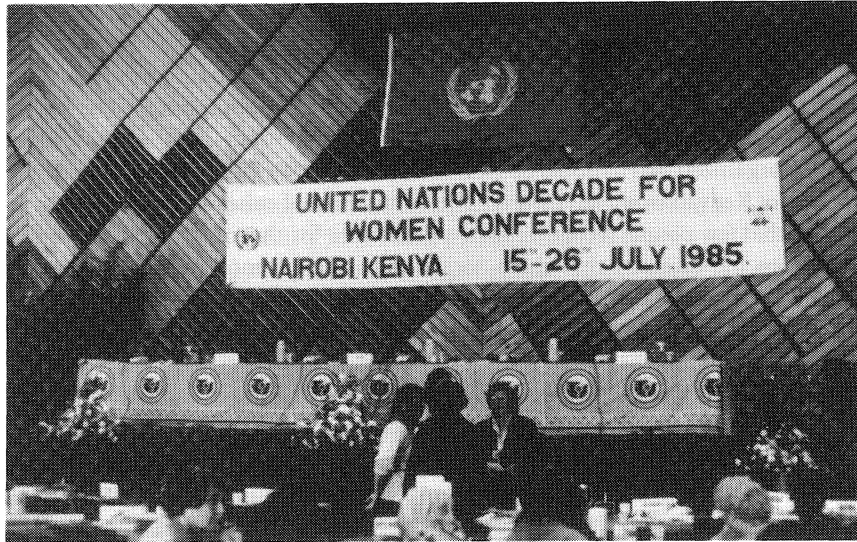
However, these efforts are often uncoordinated and fragmented, with individual women or women's groups developing specific structures and agendas in response to local situations. This approach to the movement often beguiles both women themselves and the rest of the public into believing that the women's

movement either does not exist or is insignificant. In a few instances the movement has manifested itself as being coordinated and cohesive. This occurred during the social and political upheavals of the 1950s, when the whole country was agitating for political independence from colonial domination. The same cohesiveness was apparent during the democratization process of the 1990s, when women organized two national conventions to map strategies for the future development of Kenyan women. However, these moments of cohesiveness have been so limited that few people recognize their significance for the movement as a whole.

Perhaps the diversity that characterizes the women's movement is a strength rather than a weakness. In a social context where tribal, class, educational, and geographical differences make the identification and pursuit of common issues of concern difficult, it seems realistic to highlight this heterogeneity and strategize accordingly rather than operate under an illusion of homogeneity, which in reality *does not* and *cannot* exist in the Kenyan context. Janet Burja underscores this point by asserting that "we cannot belabor the fact that women cannot be thought of as a single category, even though there are important and occasionally unifying struggles in which they engage."² For Diane Margolis, the major strength of the 1985 United Nations Third World Conference on Women held in Nairobi was "recognizing and accepting that women have different perspectives, issues and priorities and strategizing to meet these needs."³ The diversity that characterizes the women's movement in Kenya does not in any way detract from the strength of the movement. On the contrary, it helps stimulate the movement's activism and creativity.

The women's movement is not a recent phenomenon in Kenya. Its origins lie in the precolonial period, when women formed self-help groups and work parties to assist one another during periods of economic and social stress. This tradition of forming women's groups to consolidate efforts for addressing problems has carried forward into the contemporary period. As a result of socioeconomic and political changes occurring in Kenyan society, the women's movement now faces a number of major challenges. Kenyan society is still characterized by overarching patriarchal dominance and repressive sociocultural practices. Women are divided based on educational, economic, and geographic differences. Finally, the state and donor organizations have tended to be a co-optive and divisive influence.

In examining the evolution of the women's movement in Kenya from precolonial times to the present, we consider the women's movement to be synonymous with the emergence of women's groups. After providing a brief overview of Kenyan political and economic history and its impact on women, we examine these group activities at three levels: the women's group movement, largely rural and grassroots in nature; formal women's organizations; and the actions of individual women. We discuss the role played by the dominant patriarchal structures and existing sociocultural practices in shaping the women's movement. We analyze the extent to which the state has undermined these efforts by manipulating those in



In 1985, Kenya hosted the conference marking the end of the United Nations Decade for Women and the parallel Non-Governmental Organization Forum, drawing more than twenty thousand women to Nairobi.

leadership positions and interfering with the autonomy of existing organizations. We examine the role of donor agencies and Western development approaches in shaping the movement. Finally, we assess women's efforts to empower themselves at the personal level.

Background: The Social and Political Context

The country now known as Kenya encompasses diverse ethnic groups and geographical features. Along the coast its ports have supported an extensive and sophisticated trade economy for centuries. Its fertile highlands encouraged colonization and continue to support extensive cash crop production. However, it is estimated that only about 20 percent of Kenya's land is suitable for intensive agriculture. Much of the rest is semiarid and can support only periodic grazing. Distinct societies developed in these diverse conditions; this diversity has at times led to bitter tribal competition and conflict, which remain a dominant feature of Kenyan political and social life.

As European influence in the region increased, these distinct and often conflicting groups were brought together as a British protectorate in 1895 and annexed as a colony in 1920. The temperate climate and fertile soil of the highlands drew large numbers of European settlers, who appropriated land for large plantations, which primarily produced coffee and tea. The colonial administration instituted a series of laws and policies to ensure adequate cheap African labor to support large-scale plantation production. Both men and women initiated organized protests against these policies and the appropriation of their land and independence. A number of smaller protests culminated in the guerrilla independence war of the 1950s that came to be known as the Mau Mau war.

After an experimental period of shared rule, Kenya gained independence in 1963. Jomo Kenyatta, a Kikuyu leader and head of the Kenya African National Union (KANU), became president. Sometimes bitter struggles for leadership occurred in the new nation, and loyalty to rival political parties closely followed tribal lines. Although there was official provision for multipartyism, Kenyatta effectively silenced any opposition. His ability to quell the opposition and concentrate power within his own Kikuyu ethnic community led Kenyatta to become one of the most powerful leaders in Africa. In spite of his often repressive tactics and their lingering legacy for the country's political development, his reign, which lasted until his death in 1978, was marked by relative peace, political stability, and economic prosperity.

KANU continues to dominate Kenyan politics under Kenyatta's successor, Daniel arap Moi. Moi moved swiftly to consolidate his position by amending the constitution to legitimize a one-party state, silenced all dissident activity, and strengthened KANU's power. He effectively controls all three branches of government, his words and directives are law, and he brooks no opposition. The recent movement for democracy and the official emergence of multipartyism in 1992 have done little to alter this situation.

For women, this increasingly repressive political climate has clearly not been conducive to challenging state policy or organizing protest. However, the women's movement has built on many of its strengths to overcome the legacy of patriarchy. Women have continued to build on their traditional modes of organizing to galvanize into an increasingly powerful economic and political force.

Collaborative Effort: A Strategy Against Cultural and Patriarchal Dominance

In traditional times women cooperated and mobilized themselves to assist one another through self-help groups; membership was based on friendship, kinship networks, and common need. Work parties were formed to perform crucial labor activities within the household and on the farms, especially during peak agricul-



Kenyan women have a long tradition of working cooperatively in farm production. In the community of Kanyaa, women farmers work together cultivating maize and millet.

tural seasons and during illness and childbearing,⁴ thus providing a form of maternity and sick leave. This tradition of community self-help was practiced by ethnic groups throughout much of Kenya,⁵ providing a firm foundation for women's self-help activities and a strong women's movement.⁶

The formation of women's self-help groups evolved as a coping mechanism in male-dominated societies whose patriarchal structure ensured that most women did not have adequate access to and control of resources, including land, cattle, and other basic commodities. In an economy revolving around agriculture, women had only user rights to land passed through the husband's patrilineage; these traditional land tenure systems made few provisions for unmarried, divorced, or widowed women. In most societies all property was inherited through the male line. When women today ask for control of title deeds or access to credit, they are challenging these deep traditions.

These structures also denied women access to decisionmaking processes. Almost all societies now part of Kenya had political systems in which clan elders made decisions concerning the political and legal affairs of the community; these councils of elders were male dominated, and women rarely participated in them.⁷ In some strongly male-dominated societies, such as pastoral communities, women were not even accorded adult status. This gender-based ideology of oppression was institutionalized through a number of mechanisms, including the legal system, educational and religious institutions, and customary beliefs and practice.⁸

The gender-based division of labor also revealed the culturally determined and socially constructed power relationships evident in traditional societies. Despite this stereotyping of gender roles, in reality women performed all productive and reproductive functions in addition to off-farm community activities. They fetched water, cooked, collected firewood, and cared for both animals and family members; they also did most of the manual agricultural work, tilling the land, planting, weeding, harvesting, and processing food. In addition to ensuring that women and girls did most of the work, these norms accorded higher status to the male roles, a situation that continues in the present.

Women's realization that their marginalized position in society resulted in common problems not experienced by men motivated them to initiate ways of sharing and addressing these problems. Forming cooperative work parties was a positive strategy for coping with the work burden. Women also expressed their dissatisfaction through various cultural forms, such as song, poetry, and dance. In a Maasai prayer described by writer and researcher Wanjiku Kabira, a young woman describes her grief at the prospect of an arranged, polygamous marriage:⁹

*My father
Why do you send me to
Ole Kasero*

*Why do you send me
to such an old man
Ole Kasero has eleven wives
You say he can look after me
but he is too old
Father why do you send me to
Ole Kasero*

Such songs are not unusual in traditional Kenyan societies. Women challenged gender-based oppression in institutions such as marriage, polygamy, and political governance, which perpetuated their marginalized position, and found nonconfrontational artistic methods of expressing their challenge.

The Growth of the Women's Movement

During the colonial period the form and substance of women's resistance changed considerably. These changes were catalyzed by colonial policies and labor laws designed to meet the demand of a market-oriented economy, which disrupted traditional social structures and shifted responsibilities. The colonial period saw the strengthening of the women's movement. This was typified by two parallel movements that were formed almost simultaneously, and both drew their roots from the traditional support networks and self-help groups.

The first movement was composed of militant but informal associations of women who mobilized existing women's groups to rebel against those colonial policies that were destroying the local culture and economy and institutionalizing colonial structures and ideology. The colonial government imposed a series of laws and legislation that drew Kenya into the exploitative colonial global market economy. In 1902 an ordinance was enacted that "empowered" traditional village headmen to enforce forced labor policies. Between 1912 and 1922 the Native Authority Ordinance reinforced this policy by legalizing forced labor on European farms with minimal pay. The 1926 Native Ordinance and the hut and poll tax further ensured the availability of labor in European farms by necessitating cash income to meet tax obligations.¹⁰ This resulted in massive male out-migration in search of wage employment.¹¹ Traditional family and social networks were profoundly disrupted.

As a direct consequence of these policies, many women became heads of households,¹² and their labor time greatly expanded as they continued to shoulder all their traditional responsibilities while taking on those of men. Women relied on their traditional work groups to help meet these responsibilities. Furthermore, in areas where cash crops were predominant, women performed all the manual tasks, such as picking coffee and tea, while men dominated the mechanized agricultural work. The Swynnerton Plan of 1955 led to the privatization of land and

the issuing of title deeds to men by the colonial government. The plan sanctioned large tracts of land for cash crop production while sharply reducing land available for subsistence production, a sector dominated by women. This resulted in the erosion of women's customary rights and further limited their access to land.

The situation was exacerbated by the exploitation of natural resources for cash crop production, which resulted in extensive overcultivation, overgrazing, and soil erosion. To rectify this situation, the colonialists forced women to undertake soil conservation measures such as terracing, planting trees, intercropping, and engaging in mixed farming. This compounded women's workloads and left them with limited time to attend to their numerous other responsibilities.

All of this led to intense debate among women, which culminated in open rebellion in the 1930s and 1950s. A few women mobilized existing women's groups in a series of riots. According to the colonial commissioner at that time, "If left unchecked, [they] might have precipitated a landslide in government authority."¹³ Women in Muranga district mobilized their groups to resist soil conservation measures in 1948: "2,500 women from Muranga danced and sang and informed everyone that they would not take part in soil conservation mainly because they felt they had enough to do at home. [When the District Commissioner ordered their arrest,] they were quickly released by a large crowd of their own sex brandishing sticks and shouting Amazon war cries."¹⁴ Igembe women looted an Indian shop whose owner was not giving them a fair price for their produce.¹⁵ In 1947 Kiambu women refused to pick coffee because they felt they were being underpaid.¹⁶

Numerous examples of women's mobilization also occurred during the Mau Mau war of 1952, which was fought to liberate Kenya from colonial domination and reclaim lost lands. Up to 5 percent of the forest fighters were women, and women also supported the war by organizing their work groups to prepare and carry food into the forest, hide firearms, and convey messages. As is discussed later, some women also rose to prominent leadership positions in the liberation struggle. In addition, women in central Kenya broke away from the most influential African political group of the time, the Agikuyu Central Association. Women characterized the group as chauvinistic in its approach toward issues and dominated by men, who assumed all the leadership positions and marginalized women. The women left to form their own group, the Mumbi Central Association, named for the mythical mother of the Agikuyu.

These examples of women's militant activities during the colonial era demonstrate that women were fighting oppression at two levels. They were fighting colonial domination, which denied them control of their lives in all spheres and totally disrupted the mechanisms that organized society. They were also fighting a patriarchal structure that provided all the opportunities to men while marginalizing women. Men engaged in cash crop production and reaped its benefits; they also reduced their workloads by using modern technologies, leaving the more menial

tasks to women. As a result of disruptions in the traditional division of labor, women shouldered all responsibilities, while men worked away from home. The women resented this and fought against it.

Parallel to this more militant movement was the establishment in 1952 of a nationally based women's organization called *Maendeleo Ya Wanawake* (MYWO), which means "Progress for Women" in Swahili. It was formed by a group of white settlers and administrators' wives who sought to advance the status of women according to Western values. They mobilized traditional women's work groups and trained them in child care, hygiene, cooking, home sanitation, handicrafts, and other traditional activities.

The colonial government hoped that the interactions between white and black women within this organization would diffuse the tensions that were culminating in the liberation war. This is clearly evidenced in MYWO's close alliance with the colonial government during the Mau Mau uprising of the 1950s. In return for this support, the government awarded MYWO an annual grant for capital development and equipment, and its members were exempted from forced labor by the colonialists.¹⁷ In fact, for many in Central Province in the 1950s and early 1960s, MYWO was synonymous with the colonial government and its homeguards. This created clear tensions between Mau Mau activists and those women's groups that supported them, on the one hand, and members of MYWO on the other. Ironically, after independence the new government sought to maintain this close association with MYWO. MYWO's close relationship with the ruling party, KANU, has created similar tensions with other women's organizations and activists in the contemporary period.

Scholarly opinion is divided on MYWO's success in promoting the cause of women. Some see MYWO as one of the few organizations that has successfully mobilized women's groups from all over Kenya and coordinated their activities in an effort to improve the status of women. Authors such as Ruth Nasimiyu and Shanyisa Khasiani, for example, quote escalating membership figures to support this assertion.¹⁸ They argue that, while there were only 508 women's groups with a membership of 36,970 in 1954, today there are more than 3,000 registered groups coordinated by MYWO. They further assert that MYWO is the only women's organization that has provided a sense of continuity for the women's movement over the last three decades. It has weathered all sorts of obstacles since the colonial era, yet still retains its vitality.

Opposing views hold that MYWO has been vulnerable to political manipulation by the existing regime. Nzomo, for example, notes that in 1989 the organization was co-opted by the ruling party government.¹⁹ Its elections were grossly interfered with by male KANU politicians who had picked their own candidates for the leading posts. Audrey Wipper also asserts that MYWO's acceptance of the status quo has limited its effectiveness as a membership organization since the leaders spend their time promoting the interests of the ruling party while ignoring the

members' needs.²⁰ As already noted, KANU and the regime have used increasingly repressive measures to consolidate power. One tactic has been to try co-opting and controlling popular organizations, including MYWO. Because of MYWO's popularity and influence among women's groups all over the country, the government has a strong interest in co-opting it to win its members' support.

The Women's Movement in a Postcolonial Context

In addition to the efforts of Maendeleo Ya Wanawake, a number of other women's organizing and advocacy initiatives have emerged in the postcolonial era. These efforts can be classified into three broad categories: the women's group movement, which is concentrated in rural areas; formalized women's organizations largely based in urban centers; and the efforts of individual women. The following sections highlight the objectives and activities of these categories of women's initiatives and assess the extent to which they have succeeded in improving the overall status of Kenyan women.

The Women's Group Movement

The women's group movement refers to the informal voluntary women's groups that have proliferated all over the countryside and, to a lesser extent, in the urban centers. These groups are typically formed to engage in business enterprises, community projects, and revolving loan programs. The popularity of these groups is so marked that the 1988 *Women's Bureau Annual Report* put the total number of groups at twenty-seven thousand, with more than 1 million members.²¹ Just as traditional self-help groups based their efforts on welfare-oriented and economic activities and utilized social, friendship, and kinship networks to draw their members, the women's group movement in the postcolonial era uses similar mechanisms as the basis for group formation. Membership is usually small (between five and twenty), with the majority coming from the same community and having little or no education. This reflects Kenya's low female literacy rates; of the 80 percent of women who live in rural areas, 62 percent are illiterate.²² Leadership within the groups generally depends on popularity, although in some groups women with more education and higher socioeconomic status tend to dominate leadership positions. They bring skills and exposure that facilitate managing their group's programs. For this reason, a few groups also have male members. Many of the groups are linked with national or international women's organizations, which act as channels for technical and financial assistance to the groups from donors or the government.



Women's self-help groups increasingly work to provide members with skills and income, sometimes in nontraditional areas. Under contract with the African Housing Fund, members of the Kayole Women's Self-Help group in Nairobi produce building materials, such as cinder block, and work in construction.

The groups' activities are wide ranging and often defy generalization. Mazingira Institute describes the myriad activities in the following way: "A group whose main goal is to own a business may also create an emergency welfare fund (through regular contributions) to help needy members, destitute children or homeless mothers in the community. Groups also incorporate educational activities in their meetings, welcome visits from health workers and agricultural advisors."²³

Nevertheless, broad categorization is possible. Welfare groups generally concentrate on providing moral and material support to members during times of need, such as weddings, births, and funerals. Self-help groups organize to actively address community needs, such as constructing water cisterns, schools, bridges, dispensaries, and roads. Income-generating groups seem to have made the greatest strides toward the self-empowerment of women, particularly in the rural areas. Since traditionally women did not own resources or handle income, income earned and projects owned by women either individually or collectively to some extent help reduce their dependence. Illustrative examples of this include initiatives taken by women in Central Province to provide permanent roofing for their houses;²⁴ these efforts were so successful and prominent that the groups came to be known as *mabati* (iron roofing) women groups. Mazingira Institute also provides examples of women's groups that have transformed mutual welfare activities into revolving loan societies, investor groups, highly structured labor collectives, and so on.²⁵ Even more revolutionary, women's groups have bought land, business premises, and other properties. This signifies that women are moving away from merely coping with their traditional status to challenging and redressing it. The sense of empowerment derived from ownership of property is described by Rahab Wabici, a woman from Central Province, in referring to the land her group bought: "I am a free woman. I bought this piece of land through my group. I can lie on it, work on it, keep goats or cows. What more do I want? My husband cannot sell it. It is mine."²⁶

However, while the women's group movement continues to make major strides in addressing issues of concern to women, it also faces major obstacles. The patriarchal administrative machinery blocks many of the women's attempts to challenge existing structures—land is not subdivided, title deeds are not released, and legal cases sometimes remain in court for decades. A formidable obstacle also emanates from the state and KANU, which realize that as a majority of voters are women, they have the potential to greatly influence the political direction of the country. Furthermore, if united, the women's group movement poses a major threat to male superiority and dominance in Kenyan society. To dilute this threat, the state has often manipulated and shaped the direction of the movement to suit its purposes. It does this by using divisive politics based on class, rural-urban, ethnic, and educational differences among women. Politicians often coopt women's

groups by appointing their own wives, relatives, or other partisan women as leaders, thereby ensuring votes during election periods.

Another threat to the women's group effort is the influence of donor agencies in shaping its structures, objectives, and activities. Donors work with women's groups through national coordinating organizations such as MYWO, the National Council of Women of Kenya (NCWK), and the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA). Because many of the donor agencies still adhere to a women-in-development (WID) approach, they focus largely on welfare-oriented projects. WID posits that women, as a disadvantaged category, need to be integrated into development projects. Carefully designed strategies and projects have been implemented in attempts to improve women's status, but without challenging fundamental gender relations. Typically, women engage in small projects in areas such as beehive keeping, poultry, goats, and kitchen gardens; often the benefits are minimal compared to the input. Other projects are based on outside ideas and technologies such as water pumps or grinding mills. When these break down, members tend to disassociate themselves from the project since the program idea was not internally generated. However, not all projects undertaken by women's groups are donor sponsored, nor do all those that are sponsored by donors fail. Nevertheless, groups that are affected negatively by donor influence find it difficult to achieve a sense of independence or empowerment.

Formalized Women's Organizations and Associations

Apart from the women's group movement at the grassroots level, there are many formalized women's organizations and associations that have raised strong voices in the women's movement. These organizations are nongovernmental, and most are formally registered under the statutes governing organizations in Kenya. Most of them are affiliated with international women's organizations whose objectives they largely adhere to. A few of them, such as the Kenya Finance Trust (KFT), the YWCA, and the NCWK, are umbrella organizations for grassroots women's groups.

The efforts of these organizations complement those of the small rural groups just discussed. They see women as agents of social change who should have their voices heard, and the activities and programs of these organizations are oriented toward empowering women at different levels. For many, empowerment implies the capacity of women to increase their self-reliance and internal strength through group effort and mobilization. Some also vocally challenge existing social structures and institutions and advocate for the elimination of discriminatory practices against women at all levels.

These organizations use a variety of approaches. For example, while the YWCA primarily conducts welfare programs, it also worked aggressively for women's po-



The National Council of Women of Kenya (NCWK) was founded in 1964 and is widely known for its successful Greenbelt Movement to combat desertification. Women carrying seedlings march in Nairobi in 1981.

litical empowerment during the democratization period of 1992, when it organized voter education for women throughout the country. The KFT focuses on economic empowerment of women by providing loans and business skills. This does not, however, prevent it from engaging in welfare activities such as child care, family nutrition, and hygiene.

Perhaps the organization that best exemplifies these diverse activities is the NCWK. The NCWK was initiated as an affiliate of the International Council of Women in 1964 to coordinate women's organizations and groups in Kenya. While many of its programs, such as dressmaking, crafts, and home economics, reinforce women's traditional roles, it also works actively for women's empowerment. For example, during the multiparty era in the early 1990s, the NCWK launched the National Committee on the Status of Women to educate women on democracy and their political rights as Kenyan citizens. The organization also sponsors scholarships and training institutions for girls and women and initiated the well-known Greenbelt Movement to combat desertification in Kenya. It was instrumental in the First and Second Women's Conventions that took place in 1992 and 1993 and brought women together to strategize and demonstrate their solidarity in the struggle against gender-based oppression.



Women's organizations increasingly form partnerships to address pressing issues. Girl Guide leaders participate in a training session on gender violence conducted by the Kenya Anti-Rape Organization.

Several other organizations have been at the forefront of the women's movement and bear mention. The Kenya chapter of the International Federation of Women Lawyers has advocated for legal protection for children and women, especially widows; conducted outreach programs to educate grassroots women on their legal rights; provided legal counsel; and challenged laws that discriminate against women. The League of Women Voters undertook a voter education program during the democratization process of 1992, published a booklet on women and democracy, and advocates for women's rights in all spheres. The Antirape Organization conducts educational and policy programs against violence against women and provides support to women who have been physically assaulted by men.

Of special interest is the contribution of research organizations and writers to the liberation of Kenyan women. A major example of this is the Kenya chapter of the Association of African Women in Research and Development (AAWORD). AAWORD engages in action-oriented research on women's issues for policy implementation. Its publications, which include *Democratic Change in Africa*, *The Women's Movement in Kenya*, and *Women in Politics*, provide information to influence policy on a range of issues affecting women. AAWORD also conducts seminars in areas such as research methods, women and democratization, and vi-



NCWK takes an active role in the political education of women. Here women campaign during a parliamentary election.

olence against women. Its impact is largely felt in educated and professional circles.

Writers of fiction and poetry have continued the tradition of using cultural expression to articulate women's perspectives, concerns, and aspirations. In *Our Secret Lives*, by Wanjiku Kabira and Akinyi Nzioki,²⁷ women express their individual suffering. They reveal how the sanctioned status of women and girls continues to destroy the body, mind, and soul of women. In *They Have Destroyed the Temple*, women condemn their own alienation and the destruction of the temple within them and express the desire for full autonomy and a full life.²⁸ While these writers target both the public and academia, a major emphasis is on providing material to schools to reverse the socialization process in educational texts that portrays women as subordinate. While these writers have taken important and often courageous steps, given Kenya's strong patriarchal orientation, major changes in the perception of women require sweeping policy changes.

While formalized organizations work for women's rights, they face a number of problems. Just as the state developed mechanisms to weaken women's groups at the grassroots level, it also manipulates these formal organizations and employs divisive strategies that hamper unity. While the ruling party rewards and financially supports organizations such as MYWO that promote its interests, it harasses and heavily censures those organizations that challenge its oppressive patriarchal

structure. For example, under the strong leadership of Professor Wangari Maathai, the NCWK was censored by KANU and the government for publicly challenging government policies that undermined women's progress and the promotion of human rights.

A major omission by the formalized organizations is that, while they concentrate on power relations in the public sphere, their members compromise their rights at the personal level. For many women, practicing at the personal level and within the home what they advocate in public is impossible. Many women stay in unhappy marriages because divorce is culturally unacceptable. Many cannot make personal decisions on whether to stay single or whether to have children because they are going against societal expectations. Many activist women also continue to perform multiple roles at home and at work without expecting assistance from men because they risk being ostracized.

Without empowering themselves, women who advocate for female liberation cannot act as effective role models. It is therefore quite unfortunate that this vital element of women's liberation efforts has been largely ignored by existing organizations. Few groups have programs that deal with strengthening the personal lives of individual women through hotlines, counseling services, or centers for women who are victims of domestic and other forms of violence. Until these issues are effectively addressed, the impact of the women's movement will be limited in the real lives of Kenyan women.

Efforts of Individual Women

The importance of individual women's efforts toward individual and group liberation cannot be underestimated. While there is a paucity of literature on women's heroic actions during the precolonial era, colonial history abounds with examples of women who sacrificed their lives to fight for the cause of liberation and attain personal empowerment.

Scores of women joined men in the forests to fight colonial domination during the Mau Mau war of 1952. Of these women, a few rose to very senior ranks within the military. Likimani describes the case of Field Marshall Muthoni, a woman who attained this high military rank in a male-dominated army because of her courage and individual discipline.²⁹ She later defied all traditional constraints when she divorced her husband after the war by returning the dowry paid for her; he had told her that she needed to remember that she was just a woman.³⁰ At a time when divorce was a rare phenomenon and cultural inhibitions were at their height, this action was considered an extreme act of courage by female activists and total rebellion by the rest of society.

Wanjiru Nyamarata acted as a judge in the Mau Mau courts in Nakuru town in the center of Mau Mau activities. She passed sentences and was intensively involved in administering oaths and recruiting new guerrillas. As a result of these

activities, she earned the name *Nyina-wa-Anake* (Mother of Senior Warriors).³¹ This is particularly significant because during this period it was unheard of for women in any of the Kenyan ethnic communities to participate in judicial matters, let alone act as judges. The courageous feats of these individual women reversed societal perceptions of women from dependent and submissive to politically active, at least as long as the Mau Mau war lasted. Academic Tabitha Kanogo supports this assertion in noting that during this period “leadership ceased to be a male preserve and there was no difference between male and female leaders.”³²

In the postindependence period heroic women have persisted. Two cases that have had wide repercussions in Kenyan society are the famous 1987 Wambui Otieno case, where a woman fought to reverse patriarchal laws that prohibited her from burying her husband, and the case of Professor Wangari Maathai previously mentioned.

S. M. Otieno, a legal practitioner from the western Luo tribe based in Nairobi, died in 1986. His wife, Wambui Otieno, a Kikuyu, and his relatives and clan members could not agree on a place of burial. She filed a suit in the high court claiming the right to bury her husband on their farm near Nairobi. Otieno’s relatives claimed that no respected member of the Luo tribe could be buried away from his rural ancestral lands. This case generated heated debate and forced examination of a range of policies relevant to women. What are the rights of Kenyan women in relation to burial of their nearest kin and inheritance of property both in constitutional law and traditional customs? What is the relevance of constitutional law in a society in transition from a traditional to a modern economy? What are the tensions and conflicts resulting from ethnic intermarriages?

After four months of what the *Washington Post* described as “the most sensational legal struggle in Kenya’s history,” Wambui Otieno lost her case.³³ The judge declared that according to Luo custom, which is considered customary law, the deceased would be handed over to his brother, who would bury him in his rural home village. This case was illustrative of a society torn between adherence to familiar traditional norms and values and the need to adopt and respond to new values. More important, the case epitomized patriarchal gender-based oppression. The details revealed that in Luo customary law women were not only denied the right to bury their husbands and other close kin but were also not considered their husbands’ closest kin. After a man’s death, his brother would be considered the next of kin and would look after the estate until the eldest son married; the wife would then be inherited by the husband’s relatives. These customs also applied in many other Kenyan tribal communities.

The case also clearly revealed the openly discriminatory nature of Kenyan constitutional law. The court of appeal admitted that the constitution permits discriminatory laws on matters of personal law. The court did not even refer to the section of the constitution that specifically deals with the protection of fundamental rights and freedoms of the individual. In his concluding statement, the

judge categorically stated that “the plaintiff had no right to bury her husband under Luo customary law. She does not become the head of the family upon the death of her husband.”³⁴ Such blatant statements have led to a number of changes, such as the formation of a high-level commission dominated by women, to look into and change discriminatory laws and regulations.

Wangari Maathai has committed her life to the struggle against gender-based oppression and violation of human rights. A Ph.D., scientist, and internationally renowned environmentalist, Maathai headed the NCWK in the 1980s and initiated the Greenbelt Movement to mobilize women for environmental conservation efforts. During her participation in public life, she has spearheaded the women’s movement by taking a position on national issues adversely affecting women’s rights. In 1986 the NCWK challenged the validity of the queuing method, where votes are counted by persons publicly standing in line, rather than secret balloting. When Wambui Otieno was fighting for the right to bury her husband, only the NCWK under Maathai actively lobbied for the introduction of burial laws that protect the rights of women. She broadened the agenda of the women’s movement by challenging the government on the environment and human rights. The most celebrated incident was her battle to stop the government from erecting a skyscraper in the middle of the largest recreational park in Nairobi.³⁵ She was threatened, harassed, and thrown out of the offices she had occupied for over a decade. In March 1992 mothers of political prisoners being detained without trial went on strike; Maathai was the only elite woman who actively joined and fasted with the mothers. When these women were attacked and brutally beaten by the police, she was among the victims, beaten unconscious and admitted to the intensive care unit in Nairobi Hospital.³⁶ When she was endorsed as the presidential candidate by women delegates in June 1992, she turned the offer down, maintaining that she could best serve women in her capacity as an environmental conservationist and not as a politician.

Conclusion

In the introduction to this chapter, we emphasized that, while conventional notions of social movements do not fully explain the women’s movement in Kenya, the movement does exist and is vibrant with activity. However, these efforts are often uncoordinated and fragmented, with individual women’s groups developing specific strategies to suit local situations. We also noted that the movement has its roots in traditional forms of resistance to gender-based oppression. We argued that this resistance was expressed by developing strategies for coping with the burdens imposed by unequal gender division of labor and expressing silent resistance in artistic forms.

These less confrontational forms of resistance evolved in the colonial era to a more militant stand against colonialism and gender-based oppression, as embodied in protests and women joining in the guerrilla independence struggle. In the postcolonial context the movement has become more diversified. Women fight against male dominance as individuals and as members of groups. They strategize and formulate coping mechanisms ranging from welfare-oriented approaches to initiatives that aim at transforming the status of women in all areas of society. They are not satisfied with perpetuating the stereotyped roles of wife and mother that have been mapped out for them by society. They want equal pay for equal work, their own title deeds and other property, a share in reproductive work, and the freedom to shape not only their destiny but also the whole nation.

However, to attain their objectives, they must continue to fight the negative challenges posed by state, tribal, class, ideological, and cultural mechanisms that perpetuate their marginalized position. This requires more effective strategizing, the more vigorous pursuit of existent goals, and the ability to withstand opposition and harassment from a male-dominated society.

NOTES

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