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Three major influences that bolstered women's representation in public offices

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Abstract

Background: The advancement of women active participation in governance has been stymied by structural socioeconomic, and cultural barriers. Other than civil society influence on affirmative action, multipartism, the Kenya constitution 2010, and devolved system of governance have strengthened women's voices or representation in both appointive and elective offices, the extent to which has not been formally determined.

Objective: To determine the extent to which multiparty democracy, the Kenya Constitution 2010, and devolved system of government have strengthened women's representation in appointive and elective offices.

Methods: Qualitative data is obtained through document analysis and desktop reviews. The data is analyzed descriptively and exploratively to isolate data patterns distinguishing various political epochs in Kenya from independence to devolution. Ultimately the results are visualized and interpreted accordingly.

Results: The major influences of women's representation are: independence, political pluralism, and constitutional reforms.

Conclusion: It is becoming increasingly clear that two-thirds gender rule faces more challenges than structural reforms.

Keywords: Women representation, multiparty, democracy, constitution, devolution

Introduction

The trajectory of women's agenda in Kenya has been as protracted as it has been nuanced with social, economic, cultural, and political barriers (Mogeni, 2025) ^[37]. Inherent pre-colonial Kenyan or African society defined place of women in home-keeping (Kalabamu, 2005) ^[29], child-rearing, land-tilling, and traditional culinary services (Matovu, 2016) ^[36]. A good woman was judged by her performance in those matters. From childhood, apprenticeship training of girls anticipated marriage and home keeping (Goody, 1989) ^[25]. As such education remained in the bounds of apprenticeship in matters already defined by largely patriarchal societies (Chuku, 2018) ^[18].

Contextually, participation of women in matters that affect broader community was limited (Ahikire, 2014) ^[2]. All her roles precluded decision-making in governance, warfare, and socioeconomic factors in pre-colonial society. Outside the predefined roles, a woman could be a healer when such powers are passed down to her by divinity, parentage, or patronage (Anyinam, 1997) ^[6]. Until scramble for Africa and colonial era, a woman had to content herself with modest personal or collective ambitions (Geiger, 2002) ^[22].

Arguably, the disruption meted upon African societies by colonialism necessitated participation of all members (Cooper, 1994) ^[19] of such communities to resist invasion. It is in this era that we find women like Mekatili wa Menza (Carrier, 2016) ^[13], Wangu wa Makeri (Wanyoike, 2002) ^[42], among others, joining the resistance to protect communities. It is equally documented in the history of pre-independence Kenya how women supported the struggle by taking up arms or acting as informers to the nationalist armed movements (Bosibori, 2023) ^[11].

The independent, and post-colonial Kenya epochs saw women acquire western education and begin to get involved in decision making (Chege, 2006) ^[16]. However, their contribution and participation were marginal. Women like Grace Monica Onyango, the first ever elected legislator in 1969, and Mama Phoebe Asiyo, among few are considered to be pioneers in formal national political participation of women (Nyakwaka, 2013) ^[38].

As such, independence sowed the first seed of women's agenda not only in Kenya, but also in the entire Africa. Perhaps suffragettes in America (DuBois, 1999) [21] and Europe were equally buoyed by women's movement in Africa. Although there was little representation of women at the time in parliament, it was a departure from the racist's misogynist colonial LEGCO. Between 1974 and 1979 the number of women representations in parliament rose from one to five: Grace Onyango, Julia Ojiambo, Philomena Chelagat Mutai, Eddah Gachukia and Jemima Gecaga (Christian T. et al., 2014) [17].

The numbers remained negligible exacerbated by one-party system of government spearheaded by the founding president Mzee Jomo Kenyatta, limiting democratic space for women participation (Nzomo, Kenya Women in Politics. Public Decision-making, 1997). However, the actual repealing of Section 2A of the old constitution (CRAWN, 2020) ushered in multiparty democracy, thereby expanding democratic space for election and nomination of women to parliament. The numbers began increasing as the number of political parties increased (Caul, 1999) [14].

Eventually, the contribution of Agenda 4 Reforms (Wekesa, 2013) after the famously hotly contested, and equally disputed presidential elections results in 2007 paid homage to women representation. It saw the conclusion of constitution review process, promulgation of the new constitution (Kenya, 2010), and ultimate devolved system of government which established inaugural regimes of 47 county governments of Kenya.

In this paper, we are investigating to what extent did independence, multiparty democracy, and new constitution strengthen women's representation in parliament.

Method

We obtained qualitative data through desktop review and document analysis of publicly existing materials from varied sources covering 1963-2022 period. We classified the materials into three categories: independence and one-party rule; multiparty democracy; and new constitutional dispensation. Independence materials include inaugural constitutions, pre-7th House parliamentary Hansard, books, and government reports. Multiparty democracy materials include Electoral Commission of Kenya (ECK); civil society reports, journal articles, UN Women reports, and Agenda 4 reforms documents. The materials related to new constitution dispensation include promulgated constitution, Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC) reports, journal articles, parliamentary Hansards, civil society reports, among others. First, the documents were collated and scrutinized for accuracy through triangulation of content such that those with conflicting information are subjected to additional search and harmonization. Then, the screened materials were thematically analyzed and interpreted accordingly and conclusions drawn before formulation of recommendations.

Thematic Analysis Results

Impact of Independence on Women's Representation

Participation of women in Kenya's parliament insignificantly began with independence marking the 1st parliament (Sang, 2021) [40]. However, the change was slow and stymied by men only attitudes, regardless of their participation in the struggle for nationalism (Anumo, 2019) [5]. Nonetheless, unlike LEGCO, there were African women in Parliament from 1969 following the election of Grace Onyango to represent Kisumu town, who later became first female deputy speaker. Her victory was a beacon of hope

for future women representation in Parliament (Awuor, 2022) [8]. Many sociocultural and political influences erected barriers to ascendance of women to political positions (Kiamba, 2009) [33]. Also, the general public was largely patriarchal and less amenable to female leadership (Inglehart, 2004) [26]. Moreover, the structural barriers in this context included but not limited to cultural beliefs, values, customs and norms (Touseef, 2023) [41]. Worse still, political violence, intimidation, and costs of electoral campaigns inhibited meaningful participation of women in politics (Krook, 2017) [34]. Independence introduced universal suffrage opening space for participation but the society was far from liberal to elect women (Adams, 2014) [1]. In that way, independence marginally advanced the presence of women politics and a lot more was required to bolster their positions.

Multiparty and Women Representation

The protracted struggle for multiparty democracy benefited from women's participation and eventually improved their political representation as many parties expanded democratic space, where women were either elected or nominated (Brechenmacher, 2020) [12]. The activities of women like Wangari Mathai and Phoebe Asiyo inspired many women with associated ambitions and first multiparty elections in 1992 brought six elected women to the 7th parliament (Kamau, 2011) [30]. Multi-party politics enabled formation of many political parties, advertently bolstering women representation in Parliament (Ajwang, 2025) [3]. Inclusion of women in political parties of contestants became an emerging trend which popularized them (Kenyatta, 2023) [32]. At the same time civil society, useful in the struggle for multiparty democracy, was equally key in reforms for gender equity in representation (Ishkanian, 2007) [27]. It is found that advent of multiparty democracy increased women representation more than independence.

Constitution and Women Representation

A transformative turn in women's political representation and public office appointments was an antecedent of promulgation of the 2010 constitution (Bhatia, 2025) [10]. Previously, the 1969 constitution allowed women of Kenya to vote and contest without statutory requirements to redeem gender disparity (Bevelhymer, 2021) [9]. Retrospectively, the 2007 disputed presidential elections and attendant violence birthed the National Accord's Agenda Four reforms whose overarching output is the promulgated constitution providing for meaningful gender inclusion as provided for in Article 27(8) The Article states that not more than two-thirds of members of elective or appointive bodies should be of the same gender (Ambani, 2015) [4]. In addition, Article 97(1)(b) provides that the National Assembly shall include forty-seven women representatives, each elected by the registered voters of the counties (Ghai, 2021) [23]. Progressively, these articles increased the number of women in Parliament in 2013, 2017 and 2022 to 16, 23, and 29 elected; and 23, 24, and 24 nominated, respectively (Assembly, 2023) [7]. These sum up to 139 women legislators in three electoral periods (Gichuki, 2024) [24]. Despite affirmative action women representation in Parliament remains below the constitutional threshold (Kaimenyi, 2013) [28]. In the present (13th) parliament there are 267 and 82 males and female representatives, accounting for 76.5% and 23.5%, respectively. As such, gap of representation between both genders is 185, translating to 23.5%, that is, not more than 117, leaving a deficit of 35 women (Lihiru, 2019) [35].

From this analysis, it is clear that the implementation of the new Constitution of Kenya significantly increased women representation and appointments in public offices and provides required legal instruments, and accountability mechanism to track progress.

Discussion

Reviewed documents reveal three major influences of evolving progress of women representation in legislature: independence from colonialism; multiparty democracy; and constitutional reforms. These epochs are calibrated as 1963, 1992; and 2013 representing 1st, 7th, and 11th Houses of Parliament. Although, struggle for political pluralism started earlier, its fruitful influence was realized in 1992 general elections. Likewise, struggle for constitutional reforms started earlier culminating in 2010 promulgation but the fruits arrived with the inaugural regimes of 47 county governments.

The trajectory of women representation in Kenya has been incremental gains achieved after protracted struggles for structural reforms. From 5 to 139 women legislators stretched over half a century, in post-colonial Kenya, demonstrates that the challenges were more than colonialism and political pluralism. They speak more to structural and inherent sociocultural influences. If it were not, the two epochs (independence and multiparty democracy) could have redeemed women's situation.

To demonstrate the nuanced struggle of women to be multifold, we put forward this argument: even after the implementation of much-praised progressive constitution in three regimes, two-thirds gender rule threshold still suffers a deficit of at least 35 more women legislators (Charity W Njimu S. O., 2025) ^[15]. So, underlying the struggle for independence, political pluralism, and constitutional reforms is the undercurrent of women's exclusion. From the implementation of promulgated constitution, two-thirds gender rule has faced fierce resistance in passing as an Act of Parliament, always experiencing quorum challenges. Interestingly, this unique challenge was not experienced by Acts pertaining to persons with disability, and youth. The likelihood of attainment of two-thirds gender rule is estimated (Charity W Njimu S. O., 2025) ^[15] to be after 2047 elections, if everything remains constant.

Conclusion

It is becoming increasingly clear that two-thirds gender rule faces more challenges than structural reforms but a tinge of inherited sociocultural misogyny.

Recommendations

1. Gender mainstreaming could be reframed in a win-win context without presenting loss to fragile masculinity rearing its head in prejudice.
2. Gender relations in August house must be weaned of incessant confrontational approach which has proved counterproductive.
3. Gender analysis framework could be revised to incorporate (1) and (2) above.

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