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Religion, Gender, and Politics in Kenya: Challenges of Female Leadership in the 21st Century

By

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Abstract

The status and role of women in politics, especially leadership continues to be a challenge in the 21st century. While social norms have improved in terms of gender equality, a lot is yet to be done towards improving women's role in politics. To understand gendered politics in Kenya, it is important to interrogate social structures, cultures, and norms that inform attitudes and behavior towards women. In this article, I examine how multiple complex social variables intersect to influence attitudes and behavior towards women's participation in politics. Drawing from works of sociological and ethical theories, the role of religion as a legitimating agent of gender-related social behavior is highlighted. Findings also draw from a survey of 50 Kenyan respondents to document perceptions on women as leaders, especially in politics. Specific attention is made in understanding Kenya's perception of a woman as a leader of the highest political office- the presidency. I argue that since social behavior is cultivated and shaped through the socialization process religious leaders as authoritative figures in this process have a significant role in empowering society to embrace gender equality in politics.

Key words: Religion, Gender, Politics, Challenges, Kenya

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Introduction

Although Kenyan women can claim to have the highest representation in the Kenyan political history, their participation in politics, especially in leadership positions, continues to fall behind that of men in several ways. This lag is notably manifest in the absence of representation as to the absence of their voices in the 2002 succession and constitutional review debates and in their ineffectiveness as political leaders (Nzomo, 2003: 1, Oriang', 2002: 1). According to a Kenyan political scientist, Maria Nzomo, women's silence in politics is a concern not only with political election representation; it is also an issue of gender inequality (Nzomo, 2003: 1). Commenting on what she considers as the reasons behind women's ineffectiveness of women in leadership, Lucy Oriang', a deputy managing editor with the *Daily Nation Newspaper* argues that the few women politicians have failed to take control of the process of power by doing little to debunk what she calls the "mama mentality" a mindset that influences the attitude that they should continue to think that they should serve men even in political places such as the parliament (Oriang', 2002: 2). This attitude, she argues, does not tally well with leadership expectations since it detracts women from their vision and focuses as political leaders. In her opinion, women need a political strategy that can allow them to effectively participate as leaders in politics for equal representation of both genders in politics. Socialization of genders and developmental concerns make it difficult for women to break the barriers inhibiting their participation and be represented in politics. In this article, I employ intersectionality as an approach of analysis to argue that multiple complex social variables intersect to influence attitudes and behavior towards women's participation in politics.

Drawing from works of sociologists such as Peter Berger (1969, 1990) and Dorothy Smith (1999) who recognize the role of religion as a legitimating agent in social behavior. Findings also draw from a focused group discussion conducted in a religious setting to determine the religious influence on attitudes and political behavior and actions such as voting. I draw from survey research of 50 Kenyan respondents to whom I contacted an in-depth interview and via questionnaire, to document their perception of women as leaders in politics especially in the highest political office- the presidency. In form of the strategy forward, the article draws on feminist hermeneutics of scholars such as Elizabeth Fiorenza's (1998) and the African feminist hermeneutics of feminists such as Mercy Amba Oduyoye to argue that religion as an agent of social deconstruction and transformation can serve as a liberating agent in the life of Kenyan women.

Social behavior draws from structural meanings of any given society. To change behavior therefore, an interrogation of the origins and motivations of such behavior is necessary. It is important to understand how behavior is defined by cultural and religious values that a social structure embraces. While there are numerous social structures that define an individual's behavior, when examining the place of women in Kenyan politics, the influence of religion is a central factor. A renowned African scholar, John S. Mbiti notes this role of religion in an African's behavior when he describes Africans as "notoriously

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religious" (1969: 1). This sentiment that is reiterated by Tshishiku Tshimbangu who describes the African as "incurably a believer" since "religion impregnates the entire texture of individual and commercial life" (1993: 505). Religion in Africa is not just a set of beliefs. It is a way of life, the basis of culture, identity and moral values. In other words, religion defines an African person. Speaking about the influence of religion in an African woman's life, Mercy Amba Oduyoye, an African feminist scholar, describes African women as "culture-bound" and "religious chief clients" (1999). According to Oduyoye, it is difficult to understand African women without reference to their culture or religion. The influence of religion is clearly manifested in an African woman's attitude and social behavior and is clearly apparent in the status of women in politics. It is the assumption in the article that religion is a significant factor in the role of women in politics including the ability to hold leadership positions at the highest level.

Statement of the Problem

A General Overview of the Status of Women

Charity Kaluki Ngilu, born in 1952 in Mbooni, Makueni District of Kitui Kenya is renowned as the first female to seek the presidential candidacy. Even though she is later joined by the late Wangari Maathai and environmentalist, in seeking this highest office in the land, Ngilu is renowned for having been nominated in 1997 by the then Social Democratic Party (SDP) for the presidential bid and later by the National Rainbow Coalition (NARC Party) for the 2013 bid for the same office. Although Ngilu won neither the 1997 nor the 2013 bid, her efforts to seek leadership for this highest office left a mark on the Kenyan political landscape. Her nomination is also seen as a victory for Kenyan women. After her and Maathai, Kenya has seen another woman – Martha Karua- bid for the presidency in the 2013 and 2017 elections. Obviously, these women's efforts for the high office are yet to be realized. According to analysts, their chances of victory were slim due to the African machismo and the myth that women cannot play hardball politics, According to John Githong'o, a political observer and respected columnist for the Weekly East African newspaper, these women's bid is "something that would have been inconceivable just a few years ago...our entire political class has been reluctant to take on women seriously" (Simmons, 1997). Walter Oyugi, a professor of political science at the University of Nairobi described Ngilu as "a different animal". The lady "has a lot of courage." She's been all over the country, and she's made every positive impression" (Simmons, 1997). In 1997, 70 women in Kenya declared their intention to vie for various civic and parliamentary seats. This is however contrary to gender roles expectations of women. Although the argument for women's role in leadership is based on the premise that men and women handle power and authority differently, with men seeking is to command and to control, while women seek it to nurture and to build, the general assumption is that both genders have something significant to offer society.

The nurturing component in women's leadership is the reason that some female leaders are recognized based on these characteristics. For instance, in Liberia, the first African woman president, Ellen Sirleaf- Johnson is frequently referred to as 'Mum' and the Nobel Laureate Professor Wangari is always remembered as '*mama miti*'. As Ringera observes, these attributes include the perception that women are open to dialogue, they build bridges and cross lines, they have their touch with the community, fight for inclusion of all and that their concerns for fellow women and families are extraordinary skill needed in politics (Ringera, 2017). Although acknowledging female attributes and contribution is a welcome idea, the challenge remains with an appreciation and approval of this contribution. As is noted, women in Kenya face challenges to political participation including culture/tradition religion, patriarchy, intimidation, violence, access

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to capital or financial resources to campaign, access to political networks, internal barriers with political parties, voter perception of women politicians and women's mindset and corruption, to mention just these.

All over the world, women's history points to a lower status of women in comparison to men. This role is clear in politics. Various forms of marginalization and oppression characterize women's lifestyles. Susan Moller Okin, a political feminist has observed:

Measured in terms of characteristics traditionally valued in citizens such as education, economic independence, and occupational skills, women have remained second class citizens...in leadership positions, and especially political spheres, women are nowhere near the equals of men considering the power that the public sphere commands (1997: 3).

While feminist ideals have influenced us for over a decade now, modes of thought and attitudes about women have not changed much whether this is in westernized countries such as the United States or an African country such as Kenya. Okin is right in observing that the thoughts of medieval philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle and Stuart Mill, continue to dominate "the writings of modern thinkers and ideologies of our institutions" (Okin: 1997: 3). These ideologies continue to be part of the education and values that are imparted to our younger generations. This is not to mention traditional cultural beliefs and values that continue to be imparted to the youth regarding women's perceived status. In my opinion, this is what Charity Ngilu and Hillary Rodham Clinton have in common – both are female politicians seeking roles in what is normally believed to be a man's world.

The situation of women in third world countries is worse off than that of women in western or developed countries because of development-related problems. In Kenya for instance, whereas women form more than half of the population their status in leadership and other development sectors is lower than that of men (Oduol: 1995: 85). Variables that point to the low status of women include illiteracy, education level, employment rates, type of occupation, age at first marriage, economic status, role in decision making, representation in political and administration positions, property ownership rights, laws about women's rights to mention a few. In addition, attitudes towards women and the way the treatment they received in their families and in various social institutions as well, contribute to the status accorded to women. A greater percentage of Kenyan women are unemployed or employed in low-paying jobs not to mention that their work is undervalued. Men hold most senior positions in government. Even though as at 1995, the literacy rate of women stood at 86.3% a situation that should be far more improved today, fewer women attain higher education to be able to compete with men for employment, a situation that makes them continue to fall behind that of men. With men's continued prejudice against women occupying high positions, most women drop out of school due to the pressure of stereotypes.

Despite marginalization due to patriarchal ideas and social structures, Kenya women have formed strategies and forms of resistance over time. The most significant form of resistance happened in the history of the United States of America. This resistance resulted in women's and feminist movement that has since influenced people's lifestyles all over the world. As a result, several countries have instituted laws and amended bills in an effort to promote equality between women and men. As noted earlier, however, the status of women in politics has barely changed worldwide. As more than half of any community's population, women are entitled to equal opportunity, as citizens to exercise their social-cultural and political rights. As consumers and beneficiaries of social policies and resources, women have the right to participate in the production of social policies and resources. Politics concerns itself with the behavior of groups and individuals

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in matters pertaining to their government and community at large. As a political scientist, D.D. Raphael observes, “voting, forming and running political parties, exerting influence on government officials and the formulation of policies” are some of the rights citizens are entitled to (Raphael, 1976: 30). Women have a right, not only to political participation as voters but also as leaders. The argument for increasing women’s in leadership emanates from the perception that women as a leader are likely to contribute to express nurturing compassionate and caring abilities that men often don’t.

Like most African societies, the status of women in Kenyan politics is appalling. Even though women account for 52 percent of Kenya’s adult population and 60 percent of the voting population, the representation of women in politics, especially in leadership positions, is very low (Kamau, 1999: 1). Whereas Kenya’s first political party, Kenya African National Unions (KANU), was been in power since independence (in 1963), the only first country’s female cabinet was appointed in 1995. This appointment resulted from the pressure of women’s groups who demanded that women should have a representative in parliament. The 1997 parliament with 210 seats had only seven women with only one appointed female assistant minister in the then Moi’s cabinet (Nzomo, 2003: 4). Even in the general elections held in the year 2002 where the number of women increased considerably compared to other times in history, the population of women in parliament is far below 10 percent. Because of poor representation, women in Kenya lack a sufficient voice to push the enactments of laws that could enhance respect for women’s human rights and alleviation of economic marginalization and other forms of oppression they face daily. It should not be surprising that out of 350 members of the National Assembly of Kenya, only 65 are women. It should be noted that after the adoption of the new constitution in Kenya in 2010, which granted women equal rights of political representation, great improvements were made in the latest 2017 election. History was made as many female candidates defeated male opponents for top elective posts. Six women were elected to serve as governors and senators – three female governors – Joyce Laboso, Ann Waiguru, and Charity Ngilu and three senators – Susan Kihika, Fatuma Dullo, and Professor Margaret Kamar. It was even more historic to see pastoral and Muslim communities’ elect women for parliamentary seats. Naisula Lesuuda won the Samburu West seat, Sarah Paulata Korere won the Laikipia North seat, Peris Tobiko won the Kajiado East seat and Sophia Noor won the Ijara seat after beating renowned opponents. While this is an indicator that Kenyan women are reexamining sexist values, as Karambu Ringera explains, Kenya remains deeply patriarchal (Ringera, 2017).

The low status of women in politics is attributed to the country’s social and political structure. The Kenyan social structure defines what women are, what they need to do and what they need not do as women. Those who dare to challenge this structural normalization are punished or alienated. Good women are those who confine themselves to the sphere of domestic tasks, homemakers, workers, and artists. Culturally this is perceived as their traditional roles. Public life is generally believed to be a man’s sphere. Because of traditional stereotypes that continue to discourage women from seeking political or any other public positions, women are often falling prey to apathy when it comes to considering the pursuit of public positions. Often statements uttered in the public sphere are intended to remind women that they have no business engaging in public life but should concentrate on their ‘significant’ roles as home managers. Although women in Kenya are eligible to participate in politics, quite often their role is limited to voting. The legal right for women to vote, to be eligible for appointment to policy-making bodies and to occupy public offices exists in most countries including Kenya, but in reality, these rights are not often exercised. Very few women are willing to join politics as leaders because of the apparent apathy of women in politics. This apathy has its roots not only in culture but also in education. Cultural perception of women leaders as “arrogant”, “domineering” and “unwomanly” has resulted in the

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resistance to women leaders since they are viewed as dissidents for challenging traditional perceptions. The few women who have dared compete for political leadership positions have faced obstacles most of which are culturally and religiously justified. As a result, most of them have been unsuccessful, an experience that has demoralized women's political ambition.

For instance, constraints to women's participation in politics, especially in seeking leadership positions were clearly manifest in the 1992 and 1997 general multiparty elections with a little improvement in the year 2002. Structural constraints include predetermined social roles and domestic task burdens, unemployment, illiteracy, ignorance of political rights, lack of confidence to run for elections, resistance to women seeking leadership positions due to stereotypes, lack of economic independence, mass media discriminations, violence targeted at women during campaigns, and women's perception of politics as "dirty games," to use Srujuana's term (1996: 1). In the year 2002, these constraints seem to have a significant effect on women as they culminated into women's silence on issues that matter most for women. While Nzomo attributes women's silence during this important time in women's history to lack of a coordinated political strategy, a fact that I agree with, she acknowledges how structural constraints continue to be a significant factor in women's actions. She observes unevenness in electoral politics where gender is concerned. She summarizes this unevenness thus:

The persisting social resistance and or lukewarm acceptance of women's participation in political leadership; a culture of electoral violence that tends to be harsher towards female than male candidates; the feminization of poverty that renders women more financially constrained to manage a campaign than men; lack of adequate political socialization for leadership that manifests itself in women's exclusion from access to strategic political information and general inability in the art of public oratory and populist campaigning; women's marginality in mainstream political party hierarchy; they are therefore unable to change rules of engagement which are defined and organized around male norms and values (Nzomo, 2003: 4).

Cultural and current educational pedagogy continue to enforce stereotypes about the role of women-only as wives and mothers to be. In traditional societies, history and myths portrayed negatively women who held significant roles in politics. Such women were described as power-hungry, conceited and immoral. Among the Kikuyu, for instance, a story is told of Chief Wangu wa Makeri, who is portrayed as being intoxicated with conceit and craze for power that she danced naked before a crowd that she was removed from power. The Kikuyu also have a myth which explains how at a certain point in history women ruled but were overthrown by men who colluded and impregnated all of them at the same time, as a strategy intended to curtail the power that these women wielded (Change 1988: 78-79). Oduol also discusses how women from Pokot, Kikuyu, Meru and Kamba communities formed councils and police forces, which enhanced justice and other judicial functions, and yet this contribution is totally ignored in the history of Kenya. She further explains how women participated significantly in the Mau Mau independence struggle yet very little is said about their role (Oduol, 1993: 25)

Violence is one of the constraints to women's participation in politics. Violence is targeted against women for their "defiance" of social norms and stereotypes for seeking political positions. By trespassing socially defined boundaries and seeking political leadership positions these women challenge traditional norms. This violence is both physical and psychological and may take the form of assaults, insults, and name-calling. Since a woman who seeks any form of leadership is considered "domineering," or "dissident," name-calling is meant to poison the electorate against voting for such a woman. Name-calling is a very effective tool for discrediting a woman's political

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candidacy, especially in rural communities. A woman seeking leadership is perceived to be anti-structure. In some cases, violence is targeted at female voters to influence their campaign or vote against female candidates. Rape or threats of rape have been reported from families that dared to support female candidates. The economic constraint is another significant factor behind women's nonparticipation in politics. This constraint is manifest in women's lack of financial power which is a necessary tool to succeed in politics. Since education is a resource for economic independence, not many women have well-paying jobs to finance and support successful campaigns. Also, since very few people believe in women as political leaders, not many rich people want to invest in women since they are likely to lose. As a result, most women candidates must finance their own campaigns. Apart from proving themselves to their hesitant sponsoring political parties that they are as good candidates as men are, women are expected to meet most of the costs for their initial parts of their campaigns for which they are to demonstrate their ability and hopefully dissuade the reluctant sponsors to invest in them.

Another difficulty that women as political candidates face in contesting for a parliamentary or presidential position is the uncertainty of acceptance in the areas they plan to represent. Culture has always depicted women as alien not only in their own homes but also in their marital homes. Unmarried women are believed to be in transition to their "new" homes, yet, those who are married are often considered as "visitors" who can leave at any time. In other words, women are not considered to belong, and therefore they are not perceived as true parliament representatives of the constituencies they reside in. This seemingly simplistic assumption is a crucial obstacle that women must face in the months they declare political ambition, especially as a leader. Another challenge is the mass media, which is also very important as a tool in political campaigns. Just like other social institutions, the mass media is ridden with patriarchal attitudes and other biases. During the 1992 and 1997 campaigns, minimal coverage was given to women contestants. Although women have not featured much in the mass media due to financial, the community's attitude toward leaders plays a significant role in their discrimination.

Other challenges to women in politics draw from the history of colonialism. Colonialism compounds women's current political status since colonial governments are based on the western and traditional patriarchal social structure that emphasizes the division of labor based on gender roles. Because western ideas embedded in the colonial mindset categorized gender roles based on public and private spheres, they introduced or reinforced traditional Kenyan norms. In the traditional cultures of the Kenyan people, the public sphere is male while women's roles are perceived to belong to the private sphere. In Kenyan's minds, for instance, there is no distinction between a colonialist and a Christian, because missionary Christianity arrived, it not only legitimated patriarchy but it also embraced colonial governments. By advocating women's submission to men and distinct gender roles, colonialism and Christianity contributed significantly towards the negative perception of women in politics and leadership roles. Industrialization and urbanization continue to enforce these spheres with the flow of men to the urban areas while women remained in rural areas to manage domestic chores. Speaking to this situation, Oduol argues:

Cultural constraints prevent women from actively participating in politics. In a patriarchal society where everyone is socialized into superior/inferior roles, both males and females internalize these cultural norms. Males (cross-culturally) learn to be aggressive, outward-oriented leaders and competitive while females learn to be passive, dependent, internal oriented and submissive. The impact of traditional upbringing on women make them timid about assuming positions of leadership and makes them as reluctant as the men to vote for other women into responsible

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positions (1993: 33)

Faced with all challenges, few women who manage to rise through the ranks are often watched and every move they make is monitored. As Mukhisa Kituyi observes, “their individual mistakes are used as excuses to rubbish the abilities of their sisters” (Kituyi, 2001: 2). These sentiments were expressed during the survey carried out on 50 respondents. While a fair amount of my informants agreed that women should be given an opportunity to run for a leadership position, many, men and women continue to express their reservation regarding women’s leadership skills. According to David, a male informant, “Women are cognitively capable just like men. They can disseminate information just like men... Even if any specific woman was to fail in her responsibility, this should not be used to generalize about all women’s ability- as is often the case. This is because some men have also failed before and their experience has not been generalized where men are concerned.” (David Interview July 25, 2001). According to Margaret, women should participate in politics and should run for elected leadership positions if they are capable.

In the survey, I posed questions regarding women’s participation in politics and asked their views of the two women presidential candidates both in Kenya and in the United States. Although the general response seemed to favor women’s participation in politics, 70 percent of the women interviewed favored the role of women in politics, their response seemed to change when I questioned about women’s ability to hold leadership positions in politics. To Margaret, women should be elected to leadership roles because they are “capable of handling the position” they are vying for responsibly. Margaret explains how she is against the idea of women voting for women for the sole reason of being a woman. Asked what she thought about the Kenyan first woman Presidential candidate, Charity Ngilu, she had this to say. “No Ngilu cannot make it. Male chauvinism is still very strong in Kenya. She will meet too many obstacles from men who think women cannot rule.” “However,” it is important that Ngilu makes the noise that she is making. That noise is very important in educating men that women are capable of. It is this noise that will one day sink into their mind and only then will things change for the better for women.” She added.

Rose Mwenda, another informant, argued that women’s participation in politics is a right, however, she adds, Kenya is not ready for a woman president. While Rose thinks that most women will support and vote for a women candidate, she is unsure whether men will give her full support. This, she argues, is a major obstacle. It is difficult to change men’s attitudes, but soon or later, they will, she adds. According to David, the only obstacle to women’s participation in politics in Kenya lies in men’s ignorance and patriarchal tendencies that emanate from the internalization of a sexist culture. Like some of my other informants, David felt that it will take time to transform these cultural attitudes. Along with other respondents, he felt strongly that with the social change that is occurring in our societies, women will soon venture into politics in great numbers. This is because, as most get educated, their capabilities are being noticed and recognized and the younger generation will soon appreciate efforts women can make in all areas of society, including leadership roles in politics.

Whereas several women’s organizations such as Education Center for Women in Democracy (ECWD) have attempted to empower women contestants and voters in constituencies where women candidates contested, their efforts have often encouraged cultural obstacles that draw from existing stereotypes about women. Although during the 2002 elections, there were attempts by the Engendering the Political Process Program (EPPP) banner to empower women, women’s silence during the electoral process on issues that matter for women was an indicator of something gone a miss (Nzomo, 2003 1). Because of women’s absence, several bills initiated in parliaments such as the Equality Bill and the domestic bill failed to pass due to the male-dominated parliament. Organizations such as the International Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA) have received

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resistance from women themselves. For instance, in 2002, an outspoken parliamentary woman Beth Mugo was surprised that the main opposition against the new gender equality bill she tabled in parliament came from the Muslim women. More than 200 Muslim women marched with placards in the streets of Nairobi, the Kenyan capital, to protest the bill she tabled claiming that the bill had a western agenda which also violated religious values (Aching, 2003). While structural constraints continue to inhibit women's endeavors to become leaders, the role of religion in legitimating these cultural values, is significant.

Religious Influence

To understand the role played by religion in women's non-participation in politics, it is important that one should interrogate the relationship between social and human behavior. Sociologists such as Emile Durkheim (1982) and Peter Berger (1969) have argued that social is constructed and that religion is a significant agent of social construction. The goal of most societies, as a dialectical phenomenon, is to ensure that social construction is in line with social order. Religion as a constructing agent infuses reality with meanings (Berger, 1969: 27-35). The power of religion, argues Berger, lies not only in its legitimating ability but also in the fact that it draws from a beyond, an extraordinary sphere that is often incomprehensible, by human beings and therefore is rarely challenged. In other words, the role of religion as a constructing agent is intertwined with the goals of other social phenomena in the constructing process. This intersecting role of religion is can only be understood within power relations in that society. Dorothy Smith describes them as "ruling relations" while Karl Marx's calls it the status quo. According to Smith, "ruling relations" are a complex of objectified social relations that coordinate human activities. These relations include culture, systems of communication, knowledge, information, regulation and various forms of control organized in such a way to maintain the status quo (1999: 50, 77-78). Like other social phenomena, religious goals support the existing status quo.

The legitimating role of religion is manifest in many societies. In Kenya, the role of religion in women's in politics is clearly manifest in its covert or overt influence. Religion is a fundamental form of control among Kenyans because apart from describing the religious status of the Kenyan people, it is a significant influence on their social behavior. In legitimating social behavior, religion takes the responsibility of justifying social actions as in the case of Muslim women coming together to reject a bill that they believe to go against their values. For them not to see how the bill was intended to improve women's situations, is not only mind-boggling to human rights activists, it is also a significant indicator of how significant religion is in the decision making of women in Kenya. Given this understanding, women's attitudes and actions towards politics must be understood in relation to their value systems. As Mercy Amba Oduyoye rightly argues, to understand African women we must always recognize the fact that they are "culture bound" and "religious chief clients" (1999: 79, 109).

Since Kenya is a very religious country, with women as most religious persons, the impact of religious teachings on their lifestyles is unquestionable. Indigenous religions of Kenya also known as traditional religion are, rooted in patriarchal cultures that have excluded women from holding certain roles on the grounds of gender. While it is worthwhile to acknowledge that some women participated to some degree in the decision-making processes in several Kenyan communities, their numbers are not only insignificant, but their contributions have not been acknowledged positively in Kenyan history. In cases where some of the women are acknowledged they are described as extraordinary for supposedly excelling where "normal" women do not. Commenting on women's role in politics, Oduol observes how traditional religion has inhibited women's participation in leadership roles (1993: 24). Christianity and Islam are strongly rooted in

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and influenced by patriarchal cultures of their communities of origin. They also draw from Western dichotomies that define perceptions of the woman based on gender. For instance, Christian teachings found in Biblical texts such as Corinthians 11: 31, Corinthians 14: 34-35, Ephesians 5: 23 and 1Timothy 2: 11-15, are understood to be an endorsement of the “true” status of Christian women.

Attempts by women to become political leaders have always been met by religious slogans. Kituyi, a member of parliament of Kimilili acknowledges this fact when he observes that:

I recently attended an inter-parliamentary conference where, after an eloquent presentation by the speaker of South Africa’s parliament (a woman), one of my colleagues gleefully read the tired line from the bible (the book of Isaiah) about God making men leaders over women. Strangely, he thought he was funny. He was just being Kenyan (Kituyi, 2001: 1).

As a significant factor in the socialization process, religious ideas that define women are internalized as normal by both men and women. Religious teachings about the submission of women to men implies women’s silence even in the public, a fact that is evident in women’s low participation in politics especially leadership positions.

Due to the difficulty in distinguishing religion from culture among Kenyans, every action is perceived to have a religious implication. Traditional stories enforce social stereotypes about women’s place and roles. Among the Kikuyu for instance, a story is told about how women were overthrown by men at a certain point in history based on their femininity, an illustration of how religion promotes cultural stereotypes about women. These stereotypes impact women’s economic status and the general treatment that women get even in the mass media. Since education and economic independence are sources for attaining high status in society, social stereotypes that discourage educated women contribute directly or indirectly to the high rate of unemployment and illiteracy that characterize many women in Kenya. Such stereotypes are significant social instruments designed to intimidate women who trespass socially defined gender boundaries, and therefore a major hindrance to women’s participation in politics. The role of religion in inhibiting women’s non-participation in politics must, therefore, be interrogated to explore efforts to transform attitudes of Kenyans, both men, and women, towards women as leaders in politics.

Towards Empowering Women

As a legitimating agent religion is not only transformative, it can also liberate in its influence. Religion can bring about positive or negative changes depending on the values that are most emphasized. The power of religion to impact positive change lie in three significant factors, namely: universal values, symbolic capital and social capital (Bourdieu, 1972: 227-43, 1990:112-21, 1992:119). As validly argued by Bourdieu, all religions uphold universal values that promote social justice such as respect of the human worth and the need to love of our neighbors as thyself. These values that form the golden rule that is found in all religions lie at the core of social justice. Symbolic capital is the authority and legitimacy that religious figures are granted as vessels of the divine. This authority can serve as tools of transformation in society because leaders’ words are considered sacrosanct and hence powerful. If properly utilized this potential can transform our societies for the better. Social capital is a feature of social organizations that religious institutions also possess. For this reason, religious are resourceful in terms of fostering civic engagements and encouragement of the emergence of social trust among its members and society at large through networks and social trusts. As a sociologist Robert Putnam argues, networks broaden the participant’s sense of self, developing the “I” into the “We.” (Putnam, 2003: 107). This harnessing of religions commands power can help to transform people’s attitudes towards things, including

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challenging social injustices.

Society as a dynamic entity has evolved during the ages from the so-called primitive communities to modern societies. With this evolution comes a change in perspective. For instance, while moral values such as freedom and human rights are embraced and applauded in modern society, patriarchal norms and stereotypes once embraced are frowned upon and discouraged. Social structures that promote the oppression of some members of our societies in the name of culture or religion such as socialism romanticism are challenged. The World Council of Churches is on record for challenging values in our traditional societies that enable sexist behavior and it has called on Kenyan men and women acknowledge injustices in their cultural ways of life (WCC, 1975: 82). Efforts to confront social injustices in the world intensified with the rise of liberation theology. It is because of these efforts that the term liberation became an attractive concept in the modern world. The objective of liberation is to eliminate all forms of oppression in our societies while recovering cultural identity, intellectual freedom and liberty of conscience at the same time. The goal was the establishment of social in the world within distinct cultural lifestyles.

Out of liberation theology emerged the feminist theology movement whose concern was to challenge social injustices that were directed towards women because of their gender. To promote women's participation in politics, it was argued, both men and women should be empowered towards attitude change and to respect women's role in politics. A feminist theologian Rebecca Chopp describes the mission of feminist theology as that of corrective to society and Christianity because it arose as a criticism to social and Christian sexist ideas and structures that oppress, marginalize and discriminate against women. Sexist culture is critiqued since it promotes male dominance that is eventually projected upon God to sanction the oppression of women (1987: 149ff). This argument is reiterated by Fiorenza, who validly argues that religion has always supported patriarchy because religious scriptures are rooted in androcentric cultural contexts and texts that have always conveyed a message about God as biased. This message portrays God as sexist (1998: 29). Fiorenza believes that the only way to access the true message as communicated by God is to utilize a feminist critical hermeneutics of suspicion as employed by feminist theologians. This method enables the reader to challenge androcentric realities by rereading and discerning the underlying message of equality between men and women and to reclaim the scriptural history as women as well. This enables one to further reclaim the contemporary community of women struggling for liberation as its locus of revelation (Fiorenza, 1989: 29). According to Chopp, and Fiorenza therefore, the main objective of feminist theology is the transformation of the society to deliver women from sexist oppression and bring about affluence to them as humans (1989: 149ff). As a reflection on the relationship between humanity and God, feminist theology hopes to establish the true nature of that relationship. The reasons behind male dominance and female subjugation as portrayed in the Bible draws from Hebrew culture, classical philosophy and medieval theology– a background that has immensely influenced the Christian religion.

The role of religion in changing attitudes towards women can be fostered through the empowerment of women's agency to promote self-definition and realization. Drawing from values of social justice embedded in all religious leaders can locate social justice in the scriptural teachings and argue for the original message that God communicated to humanity through various religious leaders such as Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad. Drawing from the values of human worth teachings central to the teachings about the creation of human's beings in the image of God helps to distinguish universal values from androcentric cultural stereotypes that marginalize women. Explaining how the true message of God is concealed in the sexist culture is an attempt to distinguish culture from universal religious values. This is the "sieving" process that awakens the conscience of women to transcend oppressive cultural norms and embrace their potentials while

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awakening men to the reality of gender equality before God. Discernment of this message is possible through the process of deconstruction of the scripture and alienation of corrupted androcentric versions from the neutral message of God. The deconstruction process should be supplemented by the rereading of scriptures to elucidate erased incidences that acknowledge women's contribution to society (Fiorenza, 1998: 29).

Religion can also empower women by drawing from religious models to empower and foster attitude transformation. For instance, identifying successful women leaders in history and in scriptures as models for emulation can be very motivating and sources of empowerment to potential women leaders. Establishing a direct link between God and fellow women illustrates to women that God is as happy with them as leaders just as he is with men. The erasure of women in biblical history should be explained by attributing it to cultural considerations of the time or simply to the fact that some women's stories were not told, a job feminist like Elizabeth Grouthius do well (Grouthius, 1997: 190). As indicated earlier, religious texts are fundamental when it comes to the transformation of attitude and general social behavior. Other than the creation of male and female as equals before God documented in the Genesis story (Genesis 1: 26), the positive relationship of Jesus with women, as well as the successes of women who served with Paul in leadership positions should be highlighted as motivating moments for women who want to go into any leadership roles. A feminist theologian Elizabeth Johnson has suggested the need to deconstruct the sexist language used about God and the need to reconstruct all references that acknowledge experiences of all; both men and women. For instance, a reference to God as "She Who Is" should mean a lot to women's roles and relationships in society because this name challenges every "structure and attitude that assigns superiority to rule men based on their supposed greater 'godlikeness'" (Johnson, 1992: 243). In other words, if we stop speaking of God exclusively, especially in terms of the dominating male, the patriarchal structure that is held in position by this assumption is removed.

In the Bible for instance, the New Testament scriptures that beseech women not to speak in church, teach or have authority over men such as 1 Corinthians 14: 34-35, 1 Timothy 2: 11-15 should be explained in cultural contexts of the communities at the time of writing and contrasted with scriptures such as Genesis 1: 27, Peter 3: 7 and Galatians 3: 26-28 that tell about male and female being one in Christ as equal heirs of God created in the image of God.. Galatians (3: 26-28) tells us that before Christ there is "neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, man nor woman." In the Old Testament, highlights of texts such as Exodus 15: 20, Micah 6: 4, Judges 4-5, 2 Kings.22: 14-20, 2 Chronicles 34: 11-33, (Nehemiah 6: 14), (Isaiah 8: 13 and Anna (Luke2: 36) would be appropriate in illustrating how women such as Miriam, Deborah, Huldah, Noadiah, Isaiah's wife and Anna spoke authoritatively on spiritual matters. The fact that God allowed women like Deborah to minister negates the argument that God disapproves of women's leadership in public spheres as implied by androcentric texts in the Bible. The confidence of God in women as religious leaders is further manifest in the fact that God's first move at the resurrection of Jesus Christ was to commission the women who came to the empty tomb with the ministry of proclaiming the Good News to other believers (Matthew 28: 1-10, Mark 16: 1-7, Luke 24: 1-10, John 20: 11-18). The pertinent question therefore is, why would God do this if God did not permit women to preach or speak with authority over men? The outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost and the gift of prophecy that became available to both men and women is another indicator of God's position on women as leaders (Acts 2: 17-18). The four daughters of Phillip had the gift of prophecy (Acts 21: 8-9). 1 Corinthians 11: 4-5 tells about both men and women who prayed and prophesied publicly in church meetings. Pricilla and Aquila were involved in teaching and pastoral ministry as fellow workers with Paul and as leaders of a church in their home where they offered doctrinal instructions to Apollos, a teacher and leader in the church (Romans 16: 3-5, 1Corinthians 16: 19). Phoebe was a minister or deacon of the church at Cenhrea (Romans 16: 1-2, Titus (2: 3) as the female elders and

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teachers are also referred to in 1 Timothy 5:2.

In Islam, also major religion in Kenya, liberating message for women is embedded in Prophet Muhammad considerable efforts to liberate women from social injustices that prevailed in a pre-Islamic Arabian culture that included infanticide, polygamous marriages, divorced and female circumcision, to mention just these (Abu-Sahlieh, 2001: 25). Often the actions of the prophet Muhammad are not interrogated in the contexts within which he was acted as this detracts from his social justice mission. For instance, those who often condemn Islam for encouraging polygamy to forget the nuance in the fundamental teaching of the prophet which allowed men to marry more than one wife only and only if they promised to love and treat them equally. Because of Islam, women were able to own, buy, sell and inherit property. They had to consent to marriage and could obtain a divorce. Islam obliged men to support women financially and treat them kindly. In fact, Islam has an entire chapter (*sura*)- “Woman” which centers on the treatment of women (Abu-Sahlieh, 2001: 25). Like Christianity, Islam has role models that can be resources for empowering women. For instance, the role played by women in Islam is a source of motivation.

The story of Hagar is a significant illustration of how women ought to struggle for their own survival by seeking to overcome obstacles that confront them just as Hagar confronted her struggles as a slave woman. God was with Hagar even when all odds were against her. Her faith in God enabled her to sail through difficulties she faced amid a culture that despised slave women as her determination made her a hero. In addition to Hagar, stories of women like Khadija, Fatima, Aisha, Zubaydah, and Rabiah are significant illustrations of women’s contribution to the success of men as in the case of prophet Muhammad. For instance, Khadija contributed immensely to the development of Islam even though she does not receive significant recognition as men do. Even though she was a widow at the time Muhammad met her, she was a woman of substance during her time. She was a successful merchant and wealthy women. Muhammad worked for her for two years before he married her. He received a lot of wealth from her, the wealth that freed him from the need to work so hard for a living. It was during this time of comfort that Muhammad started contemplating about the religious state of his people and finally receiving revelation from God (Carmody, 1989: 188-9). When Muhammad was in doubt about these revelations, it was Khadija who encouraged him to pursue them.

Other wives to Muhammad are also role models for Muslim women. They are not only revered as mothers of believers, but some also contributed immensely to the welfare of Islam as leaders. Aisha the second wife to Muhammad is venerated as a mother of Muslims. She also contributed immensely as a leader at the Mosque in Arabia and went to war in defense of Islam. Other women Zubaydah, the queen of Harun al Rashid, a leader of the Abbasid Dynasty that was centered in Baghdad and Rabiah a famous mystical poet. According to Carmody, Zubaydah “gave Islam a model of how piety could flourish amid difficult surroundings” (Carmody, 197). She was known for her strength and calm amid turmoil and warfare which included the assassination of her princely son. By not seeking vengeance, she helped Baghdad avoid disastrous strife (197). Rabiah’s simplicity and stress of ardent love of God developed a theme that became immensely important in the Sufi mysticism. She generated many legends (Carmody, 1989: 198).

In traditional heritage, for instance, the story of nationalist leaders such as Field Marshall Mary Muthoni Nyanjiri who led the Mau Mau warriors during political movement in Kenya and Me Katilili who led her people in the resistance to colonial rule in the Giriama community of Kenya are empowering (Oriang’, 2002: 1). Other women include Moraa Ngiti and Mary Nyanjiri. They must be emphasized in retelling the Kenyan history as a way of recognizing women’s capability as well as to motivate potential women leaders. Recounting stories of all courageous women who took risks carrying food into the forests to their warriors, hid firearms and messages in their skirts from villages to detention camps is one way of applauding and recognizing their

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contributions (Oduol, 24). Women such as Sarai Jomo lobbied and backed up the freedom movement (Oriang', 2002: 3). Even women that have contributed in politics after independence such as Margaret Kenyatta who was an active member of the Peoples Congress Party, Jael Mbogo who joined the Luo United Movement need to be acknowledged in history as important motivating examples for women to participate in leadership and politics. Deconstruction and rereading of scriptures can, therefore, be a powerful resource of transforming attitudes towards women in politics and leadership positions in general. Applying the hermeneutics of suspicion, to Kenyan culture by way of deconstructing meanings that empower women's experience is an additional way of utilizing Kenyan models as sources of empowerment. These three traditional perspectives – indigenous, Christianity and Islam, should enrich Kenyan women's positive attitude towards politics.

To understand and transform the situation of women in politics, it is important that gender issues are embraced as societal concerns and not just as women's concerns (Kituyi, 2001: 2). Embracing gender issues as societal concerns will make both men and women accountable and responsible in the process of empowering them on these issues. It is important that social prejudices and stereotypes that continue to nurture a sense of inferiority and defeatism among women should be challenged by all. As theologians and activists, religious leaders should seek to dismantle structures that discriminate against women by advocating a God that supports women in all forms of leadership including politics. Such a God expresses the wish that all human beings; female, male, slaves, free, white and black should live in a society that is respectful of every individual's unique experience by expressing the willingness to listen and to grant everyone equal opportunity to realize their potentials and responsibilities as citizens. It is a responsibility of religious agents such as pastors and imams to take it as their challenge to preach and teach their congregations and adherents sermons that speak to social injustices and hence promote empowerment of the marginalized such as women. Utilizing social networks in their congregations to promote civic education can be a significant task that religious institutions can contribute to the process of empowering the society on the need to give women a chance to prove themselves as leaders.

Having said this, however, upon understanding the place of religion in society, it is the challenge of Kenyan women to empower themselves to confront obstacles they face in their quest for leadership roles in any sphere including politics. It is the responsibility of Kenyan women to rethink their spirituality and meditate upon it to discern and distinguish the true message of God from cultural laggings that are branded religious. It is high time that Kenyan women evaluated the role of religion in their lifestyle to distinguish mere social mechanism that is intended to control and constrain their participation in development from God's will and purpose for their well being. The need for women to re-examine their status in society and confront challenges that demean their humanity need not be overemphasized.

Conclusion

In this article, I have explored cultural constraints to women's participation in politics in Kenya highlighting how the existing social and political structures contribute immensely to the low rate of women's participation in politics. I have noted that this experience is not unique to Kenyan women. I describe the experience of Hillary Clinton Rodham's experience in the just-ended election of the United States to illustrate this fact. I argue that while there are similarities in the experience, there are unique experiences of Kenyan women. I have noted further that religion as an agent of social legitimation has a significant influence on the role of women in politics, especially leadership roles. It promotes the patriarchal "ruling relations" that are sexist.

I have argued that while it can be sexist, it can also be a tool of social transformation by influencing a change in attitudes towards women's role in politics and as leaders. As an agent of

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social transformation, religion has the potential of promoting the empowerment of women. I have argued for the need to promote deconstruction and reconstruction of a scriptural message to help in discerning universal values of egalitarianism that speak to inclusivity, women's participation and in leadership in politics.

Drawing from scriptural illustration, I have demonstrated how the deconstruction of an empowering message can motivate women's participation in politics. Using the hermeneutics of suspicion approach to scriptural interpretation, teachings of religious leaders and their cultural contexts can be reread and deconstructed to discern liberating and empowering messages for Kenyan women seeking political careers in leadership. Overall, I have emphasized the fact that women as half of a nation's population and the largest religious group in any society do not only have a right for political representation but are bound to be influenced by their cultural values in their decision-making process. Having said this, however, I emphasize the responsibility that women possess in confronting cultural setbacks that demean them by voicing them as a step towards changing or eliminating them. Women should be bold enough to challenge oppressive cultures and religions that compromise their human rights. Overall, the participation of women in politics must be promoted at all levels because, as Chopp validly argues 'the personal is political' and therefore a woman as personal cannot afford not to be political. As Ringera validly observes, the culture of inclusivity at the leadership and decision-making process in Kenya is crucial and that it can only be entrenched in Kenya when women are taken as equal partners in leadership (2017)

Recommendations

Based on the following argument, the following recommendations suffice in order to empower women to participate in politics and especially to motivate them to seek the highest office in the land. First, there is a need to reconstruct gender roles and to cultivate in both genders – that both girls and boys, men and women have the ability and talents to serve in all positions of their choice. This reconstruction process of gender role needs to start at childhood as children and your men and women are encouraged to embrace passions their desire. Henceforth, tools of social construction such as books, media and other tools of virtue cultivation need to be revised to rid them of based patriarchal messages that undermine gender equality in politics. As has been argued the role of religion in promoting gender inequality is significant. While it has sometimes undermined gender inequality due to its patriarchal values, religion values of affirmation and liberation can also inform gender equality. Religious leaders need to draw from affirming teachings in religions embraced by Africans to empower gender equality and political participation for women. Since financial support is a significant factor in the success of women as candidate of political office, the government should consider empowering women financially to help boost their candidate given the odds that female politicians struggle with. ultimately, efforts to empower gender equality must target all in the community as women have demonstrated in many ways that they have the talent and skill to serve as leaders, including occupying the highest office in the land.

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