

## **The Voiceless in the Society and Decision Making**

By

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this article was to investigate how women's economic participation is empowering; that is, the extent to which it leads to women having more power, choice, voice, agency, space and influence over decision making. The focus is on Tugen women, found mainly in Baringo County of Kenya and elsewhere. The contention of this article is that women's economic participation relates to their livelihoods activities. This includes their access to and ownership of financial and productive assets that enable them to engage in productive activities. Men and women alike have the right to participate in decisions that define their lives. This right is the foundation of the ideal of equal participation in decision-making among women and men. The right states that since women know their situation best, they should participate equally with men to have their perspectives effectively incorporated at all levels of decision-making, from the private to the public spheres of their lives from local to the global. This article addresses women's participation in social, political and economic activities. In particular, factors that hinder women from participating in social, political and economic activities in Tugen are discussed. Analysis shows that factors such as education, African and new patriarchal traditions, lack of land ownership status, colonialism and Gender-blind policy with different levels of magnitude contribute differently to their poor participation. Internal and external criticism of data analysis was used. Results indicate that in pre-colonial Tugen society women were actively involved in every aspect of the societal life that is social, economic and political. The economic aspect was closely fused with the political and the social spheres. This fused version of the economy would end with the integration of the Tugen society and the colonial state thus locking women out of the participation of the economy.

**Keywords:** Kenya, Baringo, women participation; socio-political; economic; activities; Tugen

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### **Introduction**

The Economic participation of the Tugen women was transformed in the colonial period. The current thinking on development issues indicates that there is a gender imbalance in access to and control over resources in most African communities (Snyder, 2000). In communities like the Keiyo of Kenya, women were priestesses who carried out same rituals as men (Changkwony, 1999). The Tugen household in the pre-colonial period for instance was the primary unit of production and reproduction (Ochieng, 1975). The British colonial penetration produced the most profound changes in their lives and disrupted the traditional system of acculturation reflected by the changing family structure and patterns of behavior. Despite the central role of women in the country's economy and their population size, women have had little access to key decision-making positions. The affected groups are those who live in rural areas where they have formed the backbone of the Small - Scale economic sector. Their largely unrecorded role in agriculture explains the survival of many traditional subsistence communities, in that women are producers of food crops. Women therefore, have contributed significantly to Kenya's Gross Domestic Product, and generation of employment. Consequently, there is need to investigate the factors that militate against the participation of women in the Kenyan economy.

### **Overview of Women in Indigenous Communities and Colonial Kenya**

The role of women in the socio-economic development of African societies both in the pre-colonial and the colonial period is an important area in Africa's historiography (Hay, 1994). A number of studies have been carried out to examine the political, social, cultural and economic positions of women in Africa (Kanogo, 2000). A number of these studies demonstrate the fact that women's roles in pre-colonial Africa varied extensively across Africa's multiple ethnic communities (Hay, 1991). Some were chiefs who wielded a lot of power than their male counterparts like the Wangu wa Makeri of the Kikuyu and Man'gana of Kadem among the Luo (Nyakwea, 1994). Unfortunately, this pioneer spirit has not been translated into an increase of economic participation of Kenyan women (Kamau, 2010). Kenya's Vision 2030, the new Country's development blue print aiming at making Kenya a newly industrialized Country by the year 2030, points out that sustainable development cannot be achieved without the participation of both men and women in decision making (ROK, 2007).

### **The place of African Women in the Pre-colonial Period**

Beginning with the pre-colonial period, most scholars agree African women were engaged in both their domestic and public spheres of their societies (Robertson & Klein, (1984), Harkin & Bay, (1996) and Galloway, (1974). O'Barr (1995) while writing on African women in politics asserts that it is not easy to differentiate economics and religious power from political power systems, there is the assumption that the action is with the males and that women are peripheral to the political events. She points out that this view was less true in Africa, where women were economic, social and political actors in their own right. Most pre-colonial

African societies had strong concepts of “Male” and “Female”, and in many societies people believed that all work were gendered (Okeke, 2000).

Most African economies were based on agriculture and iron technology, although pastoralism dominated in certain areas of the continent and small pockets of hunting and gathering people remained in other areas. Rotating slash and burn cultivation on communally owned land was the norm. Women and junior males usually contributed a portion of the fruits of their labour to senior male lineage heads or political authorities, who allocated use right to particular plots of land, which might be reallocated rather than inherited at a person’s death. Women performed much of the agricultural labor, as they still do. Their great labor value made them most valued as slaves; in pre-colonial Africa a majority of the slaves were woman, who usually fetched higher prices than men (Robertson & Klein, 1984). Harkin & Bay (1996) on the other hand postulate that from the fifteenth century on, Europeans traded along the coast of West Africa. They established relationships with the most influential women who would accept them in order to obtain commercial privileges. Galloway (1974) gives more reliable evidence that women with outstanding qualities and with wealth acquired through trade ruled West African villages in traditional times.

Gordon and Gordon (1996) observed that economically African women in most African societies during the pre-colonial period were influential economic actors in informal ways if not through formal economic roles. They continue to observe that with the advent of colonialism in Africa men gained economic advantage as customary sources of female power were ignored or undermined. Europeans imposed their own prejudices about the proper authority of men over women by dealing only with male leaders. Moreover, men were provided new commercial opportunities in cash crop agriculture, and began to assert their customary rights to land and the labor of their wives in order to accumulate income for themselves. This work is important as it provides insights to the present study, on the subordination of women in Kenya generally and Baringo County in particular.

In expanding of similar view Arena (1991) and Karuk (2010) examined the aspect of culture in enhancing gender imbalances in African societies. Arena (1991) defines culture as the sum total of a people’s way of life. Both scholars observe that conceptually, language, gender and the law converge in culture and that by the time they are adults, children of each society have internalized or acquired specific values regarding the gender issues they have experienced. They add that it is in culture where specific values and ideas about male and female roles are found, what the society expects from each, codes of behavior in various circumstances and the associations and the connotations that go with each genus. Karuk (2010) adds that in most Kenyan communities, the place of women is not clearly demarcated in the public as they are perceived as appendages of men and hence unfit for leadership positions. The gender differences prevalent in most Kenyan societies are not as a result of one’s sex but a creation of Kenyan cultures that are primarily patriarchal. Once a child was born, patriarchal aspects of the society were inculcated in his or her mind through socialization. These works are important to the present study as they address the role of culture in the marginalization of women in Kenya generally and specifically in Baringo County.

In dealing with issues of subordination and marginalization of women, several scholars have also identified patriarchy as a major hindrance against women’s economic participation. Wally (1990), Okemah (2002) and Ruth (1998) all assert that in many patriarchal African communities, women are not supposed to challenge men economically. Wally (1990) defines patriarchy as a system of social structures and practices, in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women. Okemah (2002) describing characteristics of a

patriarchal society observes that in these societies, women were regarded as second-hand citizens, used and handled like personal property of men, exploited, oppressed and degraded. These scholars conclude that in such a case where societies are patriarchal, it is this patriarchy that determines entirely the character of all members of the society, the values and priorities, the place and image of women within it and the relations between the sexes. In this literature, women are portrayed as weak.

### **Impact of Colonial Economy on Women**

Redding (2006) postulates that, although the colonial and post-colonial states did not always place the roles of women high on their list of changes they would have liked to make, often the changes to women's roles that resulted were substantial, particularly as the social and economic foundations of women's pre-colonial and early colonial roles eroded. Chanock, (1982) contends that gender identity had been in the pre-colonial period simply one of the many factors that determined social status for an individual. The innovation of the colonial period, with the twined forces of European gender ideology tended to view women as legal minors and social dependants upon their male relatives and Christian mission teachings, which deemed domesticity to be women's highest, most moral role, was the tendency to bring gender to the fore as a determinant of status (Thomas, 2000; Stoler, 1989).

Claire Robertson, (1986) holds the view that a number of aspects of African history and social organizations are centered to an understanding of women and class. First of all, she argues that changing relationships with the western world have dramatically shaped the past, and continue to influence the present. Colonial rule imposed European economic and political systems on a continent combining enormous geographical and cultural diversity with significant underlying similarities in many aspects of society, including the position of women. For instance, most of women's work than men's is not accounted for because of the nature of their work. Outside the formal labor market in subsistence production, informal employment, domestic or reproductive work and voluntary or community work. Muteshi, (2006) argues about women's unpaid work, that most women's productive activities in subsistence agriculture, family enterprise and in the home remain invisible in labor statistics. Similarly, Van Allen, (1974) describes what weakened women's position in Igbo land as the impact of colonialism which she terms as 'invisibility' of women, that is behaving as people supposedly did in "civilized" Victorian England.

Parpart (1988) holds the view that, colonial administrators had two aims with regard to African women. One was to "liberate" them from the hard physical labour that most women performed in the fields in the production of food and cash crops. The second aim was to "domesticate" women. This was intended to keep women and children in the rural areas as men went to the urban centers for wage labour. The criminalization of female migration had the effect of diminishing women's economic roles as it hindered them from taking up some of the more highly paid forms of wage labour (Gaitskel, 1990; Hansen, 1992). It also barred their access to education and other forms of social services that might potentially have allowed them some social mobility or independence (White, 1988).

Morrow (1986) on the other hand asserts that, colonial ideologies of social control generally expressed through mission-sponsored education aimed at creating African women in the mould of Victorian wives and mothers. Writing on the South African situation Gaitskell (1986) notes, elite girls' boarding schools which were intended to shape a generation of married Christian African mothers. These girls were to become wives to the new African elite of teachers, ministers of the gospel and evangelists. Similarly, Larson (1991) notes, that when women's education was finally considered for indigenous

communities, it was used as a vehicle for domesticity. Thus, the limited number trained, were to be good housewives and mothers primarily, for the emergent male clerks and church officials. This brought about the notion of the African woman as a dependant housekeeper, wife and mother confined to the home and economically dependent on the husband as the breadwinner. This view ignored the central value of African women in the public and economic spheres of society.

Similarly, in dealing with the issue of lack of education to girls and women, several scholars have identified lack of education as a major force militating against women's economic participation. Kenworthy (1997), Maina (2012), Onsongo (2005) and Kanogo (2005) all posit that in many African communities, men were given greater educational opportunities than the female counterparts. Kenworthy (1999) contends that education instills interest in economic matters and educated women would be more adept to pursue it. He explains that, over many years educational opportunities have been muted in, preference for education for the boys. Maina (2002) emphasizes that education is both a tool for entrenching gender inequalities and a tool for eradicating the inequalities. Onsongo (2005) observes that education introduced by the colonialists was discriminatory to women therefore; majority of the women remained illiterate. Kanogo (2005) notes that the syllabus that girls were exposed to during the colonial period was designed to cultivate their domestic skills for their roles as wives and mothers. And as such, women were not expected to combine marriage and careers. Moreover, these contradictions have continued to affect women's careers and indeed how work places and politics are structured. These works are important to the present study as they interrogate the effects of the colonial policies and practices.

## **Results of Research**

The research found out that some of the factors that affected women participation in the Kenyan economy were: Colonialism, patriarchy, socio-cultural, socio – economic, mass media and lack of education.

### **Socio-economic factors**

Under the customary law, Tugen women were not expected nor allowed to own land. It belonged to men of her clan and those of the land into which she was married to. Land was allocated to the household once a man got married. Each household was charged with all the activities required for the sustenance and needs of its members, including production, deployment and use of labour and the determination of economic objectives (Kettel 1980).

The idea of woman owning or controlling property independently of her husband is vehemently rejected (Chesire, 0.1, 2015). Once a girl is married, everything which belonged to her before marriage has got to be under her husband's control. A man was quoted by an informant saying the following "Always everything is mine, even that *wimbi* she plants. What do you think a woman is when she is here? She is a servant of mine. She is mine, and all that she does is mine" (Pala, 1975).

The dangers of feminine control of property are expressed thus: "If a woman earns more money than her husband, she can easily boast. Whenever a quarrel arises, she can say that she is the master of the economy in the family. That way she will seek to be the head of the family eventually leading to divorce (Chepkilot, 0.1, 2015).

The Tugen are not opposed to the idea of a woman working for wages, as long as it is clearly understood that the woman's husband, and not herself, is the one who controls the income. A joint bank account is always recommended, which is frequently alternately referred to as "the husband's account". It is always made clear that while a husband is free to



draw from such an account without consultation with the wife, she can only withdraw with the permission of her husband (Kobilo, 0.1, 2015).

In the modern setting, traditional definitions of all sorts are breaking down, not the least, definitions of women's traditional economic rights. Modernization has reduced women's traditional economic and property rights in some ways. However, modernization has also worked to increase women's property rights as well, for instance, the legal possibility of women inheriting land (Chepkonga, 0.1, 2015)

### **Socio-cultural Factors affecting Tugen women in the participation of the economy**

The distribution of workload was such that it left women with hardly any time for leisure and time for other considerations relating to leadership. (Ayoo, 1994) Some aspects of the socio-cultural systems of the Tugen gave the womenfolk some limited opportunities of leadership, as diviners, priests, prophets and medicine women. Leadership opportunities in these areas were opened to those people who posed special supernatural powers, both men and women who had such powers therefore, found acceptance as leaders in the society. Their roles were strengthened by their ability to solve those problems whose causes were beyond the comprehension of the ordinary people. (Chepkon'ga, O.I, 2015).

Despite patriarchal tendencies among the Tugen authority structures allowed men and women to exercise authority over their own sex and activities. Women who were past child-bearing age ensured that social order prevailed in the society. Those senior women had roles to play in the rituals, they were responsible for the education of children, circumcision of girls, settling of disputes and negotiating between two fighting parties. In general, the assignment of separate tasks to men and women stressed the complementary nature of responsibilities, superiority of one sex over the other was not implied on the division of labour and where inequalities arose, these was almost always compensation in some area (Gordon, 1996).

### **Colonialism**

Wage labor in colonial Kenya, was a colonial creation. The colonial government introduced labor policies which aimed at facilitating a supply of cheap African labor for government projects and for European settlers (Osamba, 1994).

As a result of this individual land ownership, women were denied access to land, something that was new and foreign (Gordon and Gordon, 1996). Therefore, women were left behind. For instance, the 1954 Swynnerton Land Reform Plan bracketed land into artificial boundaries and stipulated that any claims of ownership could only be legitimated by title deeds (Bulow, 1992).

The privatization and consolidation of landholdings disadvantaged women and this set the stage for their loss of rights to land after independence (Davidson, 1988). Such policies have continued in the post-independence period and they pose a major threat today.

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### **Education**

Education and professional training of women is important in order to built skills, confidence, and knowledge that women require for active involvement in the economy of the society. In dealing with the issue of lack of education to girls and women, several scholars have identified lack of education as a major force militating against women's economic participation. Kenworthy (1997), Maina (2012), Onsongo (2005) and Kanogo (2005) all posit that in many African communities, men were given greater educational opportunities than the female counterparts.

### **Mass Media**

Bodega (1995) and Ogusanya (2002) posit that the mass media has great influence in formulation of public opinion. They further add that the capacity to create, spread and perpetuate stereotypes as well as to alter them is undeniable.

They continue to note that the image the African media has given women is rather stereotyped. They note that stories of successive initiatives launched by women hardly get a line in national newspapers. They, therefore, conclude that African women need to involve the media in every project and that on their part the mass media must improve the coverage, which they give to events that concern women and their organizations. Although these works do not focus on a specific country, they provide some relevant insights into the factors relegating women to participate lowly economically in Kenya generally and Baringo County specifically.

### **Conclusion**

Therefore, since the participation of women in decision making is paramount to the development of a nation, a woman faced with patriarchy, colonial impacts, lack of education, effects of mass media, socio-economic and socio-cultural challenges will not progress economically hence cannot do much in the development of a nation. Yet, women's creative solutions, contributions and concerns for development can help change the quality of life in the society.

### **Recommendations**

Considering the findings of the study, governments and Non-governmental organizations need to step up their efforts to eliminate the socio-cultural practices that disadvantage women in order to achieve gender parity in the economy. These may include; the government taking corrective measures and affirmative action to redress the gaps and obstacles that hinder women's equal and full participation in leadership and decision-making focusing attention to the need to overcome social norms, prejudices and practices that negatively portray women in all spheres.

The government on the other hand should ensure that vigorous sensitization measures should be undertaken for girls and women, and boys and men on the whys and how of the goal of gender equality so that every girl and woman will understand and appreciate gender equality, internalize these rights and claim their rights and every boy and man will also understand these rights.



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