

# Going beyond Numbers: the Need for a Paradigm Shift in Understanding Women's Political Participation in Kenya

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## Abstract

*Women continue to lag behind in many countries in the South in terms of political representation and efforts to understand this have mainly focused on the form of democracy such as numerical aspects of women's participation in the political process. Numerical aspects of women's representation though undoubtedly important in understanding women's political participation does not seem to adequately address women's lack of participation in politics. It is in view of this that I argue that there is need for a paradigm shift to give more attention to the substance of democracy i.e. the discursive aspect in the study of women's political participation in Kenya. Drawing on findings from research on the representation of women's issues in Kenya carried out in Makueni District, the argument in paper is that since language plays a critical role in the construction of reality, a study of language is critical to understanding women's political participation. The study draws on an eclectic model that cuts across language, gender and politics. The findings of the study indicate that at the level of representation, women, politicians and other community leaders use deficit discourses to talk about women's issues. They all draw on the prevailing discourses about women. This language reflects and reproduces the exclusion of women in the political process because it is hard for women to believe that they have a contribution to make when they are interpellated by these deficit discourses; it might explain the relatively low voices of women in the democratization process in Kenya. A dual focus on the form and substance of democracy illuminates the importance of participation in democracy as a means to social justice.*

**Key words:** Women's agency, Deficit discourses, Participation, Democracy, Social justice.

## Introduction

Sub-Saharan Africa, like other Southern regions, continues to experience political changes of monumental proportion. Monumental not only due to the drastic restructuring of social and economic and political spaces, but also due to the introduction of new forms of politics as well as political actors. One remarkable category of actors in society is women as agents of social change. Since the late 1980s, Africa has witnessed a great deal of activity in the political arena, involving popular campaigns for reform, the convening of national assemblies, and transitions from single party and military rule to the introduction of multi-party politics, the emergence of local Non-Governmental Organizations, the licensing of private newspapers and broadcasting stations, the conduct of elections for many countries under international observers and the assertion of the right of free speech and assembly ... and an increase in the voices of women and the youth (Olukoshi, 1998: 455). In other words, there is a concerted effort at foregrounding women's action that derives from the women's experiences to explain their situation in the democratization process. In this paper, the term agency is used with reference to Fairclough (2003: 22) who defines it as the capacity of people to act freely, pointing out the limitations of agency by pointing out that, social agents are neither "free" agents, they are socially constrained, neither are their actions totally socially determined.

Citizens have legitimate expectations that one of the dividends that should flow from democratic governance is the facilitation of access to a broad range of social services. In Sub-Saharan African, the state as a political sovereignty has largely failed to meet the obligation of provision of these services to its citizens. As a result, new forms of popular participation have emerged as in the Kenyan context where women have turned to self-help groups (Thomas, 1988; Ndambuki, 2010a) in the form of community based organizations popularly known as *merry-go-rounds*. Participation is increasingly seen not only as the transferring of public responsibilities to civic groups but also about increasing citizen control over the state and of improving the capacity of ordinary citizens to understand and decide on the issues affecting them in their daily lives. The argument that ‘there is need to go beyond numbers’ is timely as motivated by the fact that despite increase in terms of numbers, for example in Burkina Faso, Togo, and Kenya, women’s political participation still remains peripheral.

The relation between meaning in the world and its representation is mediated through language. The focus here is on discourse as a form of social action as used by Wodak (2001). The way we select available options in language constructs one version of reality and not another. In other words, language works to constitute reality (Bourdieu, 1991; van Leeuwen & Wodak, 1999). The term representation is used in the present study in two senses. The first sense is ‘political representation’; how women are represented in the political system in terms of numbers. This is what Gouws (2004) in her writings, calls ‘descriptive’. The second sense is ‘discursive representation’, which is concerned with how women are portrayed or constructed and how they construct themselves. The relation between meaning in the world and its representation is mediated through language. The focus here is on discourse as a form of social action as used by Wodak (2001). The focus of this paper is on the language used by politicians because they are opinion shapers and what they say is critical to how women’s political participation is to be conceptualised. In this sense of representation, the focus is the selection of content and form; for example, lexicalization, metaphors, euphemism, transitivity, mood, prioritization, sequencing of texts, and how through linguistic selection, women’s issues are constructed. The aim of this paper is to determine how a study of language used to talk about women’s issues helps us to understand the constraints and possibilities for change for women with regard to agency and change. Further, the paper attempts to explore the extent to which use of deficit discourses to talk about women’s issues by politicians and community leaders could explain women’s low participation in politics.

### **Background of the Study**

The analysis of Kenyan political discourse has been extensive particularly from a ‘political science’ perspective (Olaleye, 2003). Most of this discourse is seen against a background of the widely accepted rationale for the NARC<sup>5</sup> coalition based on the public’s (voters’) desire to see changes in Kenya’s political environment in the 2002 elections. Despite the acknowledgement by Fairclough (1989) that language is power, little focus in Kenyan political

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<sup>5</sup> NARC refers to National Rainbow Coalition, the historic political coalition of the opposition parties in Kenya that dislodged KANU (Kenya African National Union) from power in the 2002 general elections. KANU had been in power for forty years, i.e. since Kenya got independence in 1963.

discourse is given to the ‘text and talk’ of the women themselves and politicians as a possible source of understanding women’s issues in the political process. Further, in spite of this acknowledgement, participants in a conference on *The Participation of Women in Kenyan Society* held in Nairobi in 1975 unanimously observed that women tend to construct themselves negatively. However, little has been done to explore the implications of this with regard to women’s possibilities for agency and change.

This paper is based on the premise that equal participation of women and men in decision making is needed to strengthen democracy, particularly in the spirit of gender equity. A democratic political culture offers opportunities for gender issues to be a shared concern for all Kenyans. According to Sessional Paper No. 6 of 2006 on Gender Equality and Development, although women account for more than half of the total population and comprise a large voting population, they are still dismally under-represented in decision-making institutions such as Parliament, Central Government and Local Authorities, Trade Unions, Co-Operative Societies, Professional Bodies and grassroot-based institutions such as Land Boards. The trend in Kenyan political discourse has over the last two decades been characterized by the rhetoric of gender equality and fairness towards both genders especially in making opportunities available for leadership roles. Yet scholars (Khasiani, 2000; Ghai, 2002a; Ndambuki, 2010, 2009, 2006) continue to note that women have been marginalised in the political process.

The Kenyan political discourse has been concerned with the empowerment of women in parliamentary elections and seemingly not with as much vigour at the civic level. According to the then Electoral Commission of Kenya (ECK, 2002), a total of 1035 parliamentary aspirants contested 210 seats in the National Assembly; 64 of these were women and yet only 9 (less than 5%) were elected. This is in comparison to 50 (5.7%) women contestants out of 882 parliamentary candidates in the 1997 General Elections and 19 (2.2%) out of 854 candidates in 1992. The data indicate that 10 (4.8%) of the 210 elected Members of Parliament in 2002 were women as compared to 4 (1.9%) of 210 in 1997. In an attempt to raise the number of women in the National Assembly, political parties nominated additional women which translated into 66.7 percent of nominated members of Parliament in 2002 as compared to 41.7 percent in 1997.

Forty-one political parties fielded 7009 candidates. Out of these, 381 women were nominated for the 2128 electoral seats. Makueni District is one of the twelve districts that form the Eastern Province. In terms of administrative units, the district covers five constituencies, 17 divisions, 65 locations and 190 sub-locations (ECK, 2002). There was only one female parliamentary aspirant in the entire Makueni District, but she was not elected. There was also none at all elected from Makueni Constituency, which is the largest of the five constituencies and also the administrative unit in which the study area Mbitini Location is situated. The analysis of the 2002 civic election results shows that eight women contested for councillor positions and out of these, four were from Makueni Constituency although only one was elected. These figures depict the low representation of women in politics.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The discursive representation of women’s issues in the political process has not received much attention in Kenya. From the literature reviewed so far, women are seen to be disadvantaged in

the political process though no overt relation is made in the literature between the ‘text and talk’ of politicians on the one hand and the women’s construction of their issues, their agency and their level of involvement in the political process on the other hand. Text is here used to refer to language use as ‘spoken interaction’. Texts are the products of linguistic actions (Wodak, 2001: 66) and talk produces texts. Consequently, discourse is instantiated in text. The key concern on studies on human agency is to contribute to the transformation of people’s conditions of life. A study on what role language plays in the representation of women’s agency is useful because if we understand how women’s issues are represented, we will be in a better position to contribute to transformation in their conditions of life.

In pursuit of a Pan-African approach based on social justice, this paper seeks to fill a gap in knowledge as to what role language could play in accounting for women’s low participation in politics particularly using a multidisciplinary approach which cuts across the areas of language, gender and politics. This study forms part of the wider social science project where for a long time, language has been ignored yet a critical examination of the ‘text and talk’ of women and politicians might reveal important ways in which women and their issues are represented in the political process. These could in turn explain the low participation of women in Kenyan politics when compared to countries such as South Africa, Rwanda and Uganda. This paper therefore aims to address the questions: How does a study of the language used to talk about women’s issues help us understand the constraints and possibilities for women with regard to agency and change? In what ways does the use of deficit discourses contribute to women’s low participation in politics?

### **Methodology and Research Design**

The research uses a case study approach. In Lemke’s view (1998), case studies are also well suited for discourse analysis methods due to the fact that discourse analysis produces its greatest insights when rich contextual information can be factored into the analysis of each text or episode. Following the principle of triangulation which involves approaching the same question from different data sources (Gillham, 2000: 13), the research employed methodological triangulation which involved combining various sources of evidence; notably political speeches, interviews with politicians and other community leaders, and focus groups with women. The study was carried out in Mbitini Division, a rural division in Makueni District (now Makueni County) in the eastern part of Kenya. The case of one division aims to show the issues concerning women in this rural division. These issues are specific to this section of the population, but are certainly similar to issues facing rural women in Kenya and possibly other rural districts in Africa. The data for the entire research consists of eleven tape- recorded focus group discussions (qualitative group interviews) of between 40-60 minutes each, ten interviews with politicians and other community leaders and four political speeches. Ten participants from each of the ten women’s groups out of a total of 66 women’s groups in the division at the time of the research were purposively collected. The first stage in data analysis was data transcription followed by translation from Kikamba (the language spoken in the area) into the English language.

### **Theoretical Model: Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)**

This paper employs a multidisciplinary framework that cuts across language, gender and politics drawing from Critical Discourse Analysis, Gender studies and Liberal Democracy to

understand women's political participation. A brief outline of the guiding principles is hereby provided.

The data is analyzed within a Critical Discourse Analytic framework, an approach that advocates increased awareness in the use of language to promote the welfare of marginalized groups. Key scholars who have contributed immensely to debates in CDA include (Fairclough, 1989), Van Dijk (1997, 2001) and Wodak (2001). In Fairclough's approach to CDA, individuals are seen as agents capable of constructing their own agency in their daily interaction. The framework presents power as embedded in social relations. CDA is able to show that the semiotic representation of social actors and agency is based on linguistic choices. Fairclough's model of CDA involves a description of both the social processes and structures that give rise to the production of a text. He conceptualizes these relations using a three dimensional view of discourse that includes analysis of text (spoken or written), discourse practices (process of text production and interpretation) and an analysis of the socio-cultural conditions that affect the production and interpretation of texts. CDA takes a particular interest in power. According to Wodak, (2001: 2):

As an approach, CDA is defined as fundamentally concerned with analyzing opaque as well as transparent structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power and control manifested in language. As a result it aims to investigate critically social inequality as expressed, signalled, constituted and legitimized by language or discourse.

### **Women's Political Participation in Context: Historiography of Women's Political Marginalization**

Preliminary review of literature shows a strong relation between democratic rights and fulfilment of economic needs or simply the fulfilment of people's needs (Sen, 1999; World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). It also emerges that much has been done at the democracy end of the democracy-social justice nexus. This paper therefore attempts to contribute to debates surrounding the creation of a balance between these two notions particularly to show that discursive representation could explain the low participation of women in Kenya in addition to numerical aspects of participation.

A brief history of women's political marginalisation provides a basis for understanding why women's political participation remains at the periphery. In the pre-colonial age, the woman not only played an active role in production and controlling of the surplus but also played a more positive role than it is assumed today because division of labour was different. The men held power over the real wealth of society; land and livestock. In the colonial image, functionally in a system operating around capital and labour, the woman became a commodity like everything else; an asset for cheap labour. The economic marginalization of women can therefore be traced to the colonial period by the end of which women controlled fewer and fewer economic resources with which to play their social roles. Economic changes in colonial times undermined women's status and reduced their political role such that these patrilineal tendencies persist today to the detriment of women (Amadiume, 1987, 2000; Kanogo, 2005).

With the publication of *Passbook Number F.47927: Women and Mau Mau in Kenya*, Likimani (1985) foregrounds the voices of Kenyan African women as actors with agency in the *Mau Mau* rebellion. Unlike many publications that ignored the role of women in the struggle for

independence, this book stands out by providing an illuminating account of women's agentic role in the colonial period. The *Mau Mau* refers to events beginning in the colonial period in Kenya, late 1940s and ending with independence in 1963 in Kenya. It was a revolt by African peasants against economic, political and cultural conditions in which they lived (O'barr, 1985: 1).

Further, women's negligible participation in politics in Kenya must be seen against the background of state formation in Africa which gave prominence to economic development over democratic principles (Nasong'o & Ayot, 2007; Olukoshi, 1998). According to Haugerud (1995), instead of institutionalizing democratic processes in the Kenyan context, both the colonial and post-colonial states emphasized that politics was dangerous and that political activity had to be curbed to preserve civil order, stressing the fact that economic development must come before politics.

Language is one of the most important ways through which people construct reality, but it has been ignored as a possible source of understanding women's participation in the political process. The argument in this paper is that the study of language can contribute to the understanding of women's participation in economic development, social action and the political process. Due to influence from science, women's voices were not seen as a legitimate way of reporting research in the social sciences. However, increasingly there is remarkable change due to fluidity and diversity in post-modernist social science approaches.

Okombo (2001) underscores the greatest weakness of Kenyan political discourse; it ignores the crucial role that language *per se* plays in bringing about human development in the process of democratization. He argues that despite advocacy for education and poverty alleviation as Africa's most urgent problems, the linguistic resources as the 'means' to achieving these goals are not harnessed. In terms of political representation, there is a general consensus that women have been marginalized in the democratization process in Kenya (Grignon, 1999; Khasiani, 2000; Nasong'o and Ayot, 2007; Thongori, 2002). It is in view of this concern that the Constitution of Kenya Review Commission (2001) advocated for increased civic education in order to inform and empower citizens to enable them make informed choices on the issues that affect them in their daily lives; be they social, economic or political. Civic education improves the ability of people in vulnerable groups to make informed choices. It has become an important part of democratization because it improves people's knowledge and skills enabling them to participate in public life. It has been documented that people who have little or no civic knowledge especially in the areas of voter education, gender awareness and adult education are not able to easily and usefully take part in the process of democracy and democratization (Akivaga et al., 2001; Tesfaye, 2002).

Women are portrayed as having problems in entering politics of being elected despite the increasing number of educated and talented women in various domains of society (Ghai, 2002: 82 ff). Factors leading to this situation have not been fully understood. Fresh approaches have been proposed to deal with this gap in knowledge. Gouws' research (2004) on women's representation in the South African Electoral System in the 2004 election observes that there is a shift from a concern with numbers (descriptive representation) to participatory representation (democracy) where quantitative data must be matched with qualitative data. This shift involves

voicing women's interests, experiences and perspectives. Since the 2004 elections, South Africa has had 131 women in parliament; the eleventh highest in the world. Women formed quite a significant constituency, with 1,982,867 more women than men having a vote. Gouws' observation that 'women need more than the vote, they need a voice in government' (2004: 64) confirms that there cannot be talk about women without their involvement. This is echoed by both Tamale (1999) and Ahikire (2005) in their studies on women's political representation and participation in Uganda.

Tamale's study in Uganda (1999) indicates that Affirmative Action<sup>6</sup> has enhanced the participation of women in the electoral process since the late 1980s. Her research shows how women's participation in Ugandan politics has unfolded and the implications of women's parliamentary participation as a result of affirmative action handed down by the state rather than grassroots movements. Ahikire (2005) observes that at a general level, Uganda is one of the countries in Africa and indeed in the world with substantial numbers of women in public political positions and therefore Uganda as a success story is unquestionable especially given that this has to do with the magnitude of change in the last two decades. She traces the remarkable increase of women in political positions from 1989 with the women constituting 17 percent in the national parliament and progressing to 19 percent in 1996 and 24.4 percent in 2001 (2005: 97). For her part, the 'why' of these figures rests on electoral engineering 'from above'? But the question we should be asking is as follows; does the increase in numbers for the women in these countries lead to transformation in their conditions of life?

### **Challenges to Women's Political Participation in Kenya**

Nasong'o and Ayot (2007) attribute the almost negligible participation of women in the Kenyan political process to the social division of labour, the rigid domestication of public and private spheres, the social construction of the political realm as a man's domain, and the general perception of politics as a dirty game. Their analysis shows that political activism of the Kenyan women's movement in the 1990s yielded a marked improvement in women's representation in Parliament. Noting that though women's representation in parliament in Kenya is less than half the continental average, the prospects of even higher numbers are positive given the gender activism and the increased awareness for women's issues. To enhance equity on women's political representation, they propose that the cultural, economic and political constraints to their participation be addressed. They capture the urgent need to focus on the women's agenda in the context of democratization thus:

The advocacy groups in the gender movement need to seek to bridge the divide between rural and urban women, educated professionals and uneducated professional ones, and to overcome their own divisions along ethnic, religious and class lines in order to advance their collective interests within the complex multilayered and dialectical process of democratization in the country (Nasong'o & Ayot, 2007: 192).

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<sup>6</sup> A possible solution to the small number of women in politics has been proposed to be a constitutional and legal system that is more supportive of women for example some Uganda's Affirmative Action has been used to reserve a number of parliamentary seats for women. At least 39 seats in the Ugandan parliament are reserved for women.

While it is potentially misleading to maintain a paternalistic view as most political discourse has done particularly in the representation of women as social actors in polarization of categories such as rural vs. urban, poor vs. rich, educated vs. uneducated, etc, it is imperative to recognise women's action in relation to women's multiple identities and begin to see how women are agentive in these multiple roles.

It has also been argued that among other factors, sexism in language use in the representation of women's issues is probably tied to the poor representation of women in politics (Nasong'o and Ayot, 2007). A case in point is the 1997 elections that are particularly relevant for the women's movement in Kenya; this was the year that Charity Ngilu became the first Kenyan woman to contest the presidential election. Grignon (2001) identifies two key factors as responsible for Ngilu's dismal performance nationally and the Kamba's failure to vote as a bloc for Charity in the 1997 elections. The first is that Ngilu was the least well off of the five presidential candidates and yet money is crucial to electioneering. Secondly, in a male dominated country where close to 75 percent of the population is still rural, the usual prejudice against women's leadership greatly hampered her presidential bid (2001: 345). These two factors worked at breaking what Grignon (2001) calls the 'Ngilu wave' in that Charity Ngilu had a great challenge to face; the most important being the age-old attitude among the men who in Grignon's words 'could not imagine being led by a woman'. He captures this challenge thus:

As in many Latin European or Latin American countries, a great majority of the electorate might enjoy the idea of a woman president, but when the time comes for casting the ballot, the weight of the individual's political socialization which associates power with men's attributes does not play in favour of women candidates. Kenya is not unique in this respect (Grignon, 2001: 345)

The above quote represents the kind of challenge women in general face especially in the Kamba community. Derogatory language was observed in Ngilu's campaign. For example, she was nicknamed 'wiper' because of her popularity and ability to get votes; a label that was normally transformed to 'viper'<sup>7</sup> by opponents.

Based on extensive research in India, and taking note of the debate between political liberty and democratic rights on the one hand, and the fulfilment of basic economic needs on the other hand, Sen (1999) advocates for the prominence of political rights including freedom of expression and discussion. He argues that these are not only pivotal in inducing social responses to economic needs, they are also central to the conceptualization of economic needs themselves (1999: 153-154). In his fresh approach to development, Sen underscores the transformation that has accompanied women's agency in social change with regard to the two-fold features used to increase women's agency: those related to *well being* (and which have received significantly more attention) and the *rights* that were aimed at the free agency of women. For Sen, agency issues are beginning to receive some attention in contrast to the earlier exclusive concentration on *well-being* aspects.

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<sup>7</sup> The nickname 'viper' is a derogatory term that was used to portray Ngilu as a venomous 'monster' and an inappropriate choice for a presidential candidate.

The objectives have gradually evolved and broadened from this 'welfarist' focus to incorporate and emphasize the active role of women's *agency* (italic's is author's emphasis). No longer the passive agents of welfare-enhancing help, women are increasingly seen by men as well as women as agents of change: the dynamic promoters of social transformations that can alter the lives of *both* men and women. Sen foregrounds the idea that the changing focus of women's movements is thus a critical addition to previous concerns and is not a rejection of those concerns. In his view, the relative deprivations in the well-being of women were and are certainly present in the worlds in which we live, and are certainly important for social justice, including justice for women (1999: 190).

### **The Politics of Gender and Participation in Kenya's Political Arena**

This section starts with the deconstruction of the notion of 'gender' as it is often misconceived as being synonymous with women. Many researchers have shown that indeed that which we think of as 'womanly' or 'manly' behaviour is not dictated by biology but rather is 'socially constructed'. Such social constructions of gender are not neutral; they are implicated in the institutionalized power relations of societies. In known contemporary societies, power relations are often asymmetrical such that women's interests are systematically subordinated to men's (Giddens, 1993). In Wodak's view, many empirical studies have neglected the context of language behaviour and have often analyzed gender by merely looking at the speaker's biological sex (1997: 1). This paper draws intellectual strength from Wodak's proposal for a context-sensitive approach which looks at gender as a social construct as this would lead to more fruitful results, i.e. a look at gender in connection with the socio-cultural and ethnic background of the interlocutors, and in connection with their age, their level of education, their socio-economic status, and the specific power-dynamics of the discourses they inhabit.

Naturalization of characteristics and attributes was generally avoided through the differentiation of the terms 'gender' and 'sex'. Sexual differentiation may be a biological fact but the principle underlying the concept gender is that, the traits assigned to a sex by a culture are cultural constructions that are socially determined and therefore alterable. Giddens (2001: 107) defines 'sex' as the 'biological or anatomical differences between men and women', whereas gender 'concerns the psychological, social and cultural differences between males and females.' For Lazar (2007), gender functions as an interpretive category that enables participants in a community to make sense of their particular social practices, a social relation that enters into and partially constitutes all other social relations and activities. In her view, a feminist political critique of gendered social practices and relations is ultimately aimed at effecting social transformation.

According to the National Policy on Gender and Development (2000: 2) gender relations in Kenya have been moulded by a combination of factors that draw from the influence of various traditions, customs and cultural practices. In addition, levels of education and awareness, economic development and emerging patterns of social organization besides legislation also affect gender relations. The socio-cultural attitudes held by men and women, the socialization processes and women's perception of their own status, roles and rights are of particular significance in determining the status of women. Women's agency is linked to the question of power which is realized in two spheres; in macro-level civic politics and in everyday micro-level interaction through social practices. In Kenya, both of these are shaped by patriarchal

discourses. The politics of gender intersect with civic politics such that representation in the political sense and representation in the semiotic sense intertwine. Representation in language and discourse is fundamental to the articulation of policies and actions for the public good. Gendered social relations contribute to the prevailing conditions for the production and reception of texts. The argument is that the possibilities that exist for women's semiotic representation of themselves by politicians and other community leaders affect their political representation. The study on which this paper largely draws looks at discursive production to see if it can account for women's lack of participation in the political process.

This study takes into account women's political participation as a core area of focus against a background of multiple approaches. The most widespread approach has been the Women in Development approach (WID) and the more recent approaches jointly referred to as the critical approaches. The WID approach is based on the assumption that women were not making a full economic contribution to development and thus issues that underlie this approach of integrating women into development are ultimately economic in nature. The emphasis on income-generating activities of women's groups by donors and international bodies is evidence of this goal. The critical approaches on the other hand especially the Gender and Development (GAD) approach maintain that in any developmental analysis, there is a need to focus on the dynamic relationship between women and men.

### **Democracy versus Liberal Democracy**

Contesting views exist as to the form and substance of democracy and whether democracy is a western concept. Olukoshi (1998) warns students of Africa not to assume that the only applicable yardstick against which the African democratic project can be measured is what is loosely referred to as 'Western democracy' (p, 457). In an article on *The State and Democracy in Africa*, Ngonzola-Ntalaja (1997) explores the question of whether the quest for democracy is an externally driven initiative or a genuine demand for the African people and summarizes his opinion as follows:

There is no question of Africanizing democracy; the key demand of the moment is rather to democratize Africa. In other words, we cannot import or Africanize democracy because the latter is something that is universal. Democracy is not an exclusive property of western societies, democratic norms are universal but the institutions which inform democracy and the concrete forms of its political practice may vary in time and space (i.e. through historical epochs and from country to country (Ngonzola-Ntalaja (1997: 10).

In other words, democratic transitions do not follow a uni-linear path, the routes are varied based on history and values. Ngonzola-Ntalaja (1997) explores three basic foundations of democracy as a universal concept. Firstly, democracy is a moral imperative, a basic human need and therefore a political demand for all freedom loving human beings. It is basically a permanent aspiration of human beings for freedom, for a better social and political order, one that is more human and more or less egalitarian. All human beings feel the need to improve their material conditions of life as well as to feel freer. Secondly, democracy is a continuous process of promoting equal access to fundamental human rights and civil liberties for all. For him, these rights include: the fundamental rights of the human person to life and security; the freedom of religion, assembly, expression, press, association, etc.; the economic, social and

cultural rights – the idea here being that democracy is meaningless when the basic needs of the population are not satisfied); and the rights of peoples, including the inalienable right to self-determination. In sum, democracy is concerned with the quality of life. Thirdly, and lastly, is that democracy is a political practice or form of rule, a specific manner of organizing and exercising power in accordance with certain universal norms and principles.

The most frequently mentioned principles of democratic governance by Ngonzola-Ntalaja (1997) include: firstly, the idea that legitimate power or authority emanates from the people; secondly, the concept of the rule of law according to which the parameters of state power and the sphere of governmental authority are well defined and limited so as to allow for other societal actors; thirdly, the principle that rulers are chosen by and are accountable to the people. The element of choice implying that democracy is government by the consent of the governed. In other words, the rulers are accountable to the people for their acts; fourthly, the right of the citizen to participate in the management of public affairs through free, transparent and democratic elections, through decentralised governmental structures and through Non-Governmental organizations (NGOs); fifthly and finally, the right of the people to change a government that no longer serves their interests or the right to revolution, which is often captured in former US president's definition as 'government of the people by the people for the people' (Ngonzola-Ntalaja 1997: 14).

Ngonzola-Ntalaja and Lee (1997) argue that the current struggle for democracy in Africa resulted mainly from the legitimacy of the post-colonial state, which has failed to meet the people's aspirations for freedom and material well-being. To correct this situation, new vibrant and political movements arose to end authoritarianism and to restructure the state for purposes of building democracy and achieving social progress. Unfortunately, the contradictory and uneven process of transformation has adversely affected the social and economic fabric thus acerbating political tensions and conflicts. A case in point is the recent political crisis in Kenya following the 2007 December General Elections which has adversely affected women's agency as majority of the Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in camps are women and children.

The key challenge to the process of democratic consolidation as Olukoshi succinctly puts it, 'centres on the need to anchor representation (through electoral pluralism, and universal adult suffrage), the rule of law and the freedom of speech and association to popular participation and control in decision making at all levels' (1999: 458). In other words, democracy and free election must lead to visible improvement in people's lives in order for the elected government to be perceived as being legitimate (Quinlan & Wallis, 2003; Abrahamsson & Nilsson, 1995).

Scholars are in agreement that democracy must lead to visible changes in the well-being of the citizens; what Sen (1999: 155) calls fuller '*practice of democracy*'. In other words, what matters most is how freedoms are exercised. For instance, low voting numbers among women despite women being majority in most Kenyan rural constituencies cannot be ignored.

Following Ake (2000), Nasong'o and Murunga (2007) argue that liberal democracy emerges as the closest approximation of conceptualising democracy. Ake himself makes this distinction clear by pointing out that liberal democracy is markedly different from democracy even though it has significant affinities to it; for example, in the notion of government by the consent of the

governed, formal political equality, inalienable human rights including the right to political participation, accountability of power to the governed and rule of law. However, instead of the collectivity, liberal democracy focuses on the individual whose claims are placed above those of the group. It replaces government by the people with government by the consent of the people. Instead of sovereignty of the people, it offers the sovereignty of war (Ake, 2000: 9-10). The paradox in all this is that liberal democracy presupposes individualism but there is little individualism in the communal societies of rural Africa; it assumes the abstract universalism of legal subjects, but that applies mainly in the urban areas.

According to Ake (1996, cited in Nasong'o and Murunga, 2007), for this liberal democracy to be suitable for Africa, in addition to people having real decision-making power over and above the formal consent of electoral choice it has to meet three conditions. First, it has to be a social democracy that places emphasis on concrete political, social and economic rights; second, it has to be a social democracy that invests heavily in the improvement of people's health, education, and capacity so that they can participate effectively; this puts as much emphasis on collective rights as it does on individual rights; third and lastly, it has to be one of incorporation, which is an inclusive politics that engenders inclusive participation and equitable access to state resources and ensures special representation in legislatures of mass organizations especially the youth, the labour movement and women's groups which are usually marginalised but without whose active participation, there is unlikely to be democracy or development (Ake 1996: 132 cited in Nasong'o and Murunga, 2007: 6).

### **Bridging the Divide between Democracy and Social Justice**

Sen (1999) provides a broad view of development that involves expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy. Looking at the informational bases of some standard theories of social justice, in particular; utilitarianism, libertarianism, and Rawlsian theories of justice as major approaches to political philosophy, Sen proposes an alternative approach to evaluation that focuses directly on freedom, seen in the form of individual capabilities to do things that a person has reason to value. Borrowing from these three approaches, Sen identifies a general approach that concentrates on the capabilities of people to do things - and the freedom to lead lives - that they have reason to value (1999: 85). Besides taking note of the importance of freedom, the approach pays particular attention to the utilitarianism's interest in well-being, libertarianism's interest in liberty of choice and the freedom to act, and Rawlsian theory's focus on individual liberty and on the resources needed for substantive freedoms. He argues that in analyzing social justice, there is a strong case for judging individual advantage in terms of the capabilities that a person has, that is the substantive freedoms he or she enjoys to live the kind of life he or she has reason to value. The state and the society have extensive roles in strengthening and safeguarding human capabilities.

Sen's conception of development requires the removal of major sources of lack of freedom; poverty as well as tyranny, poor economic opportunities as well as systematic social deprivation, neglect of public facilities as well as intolerance or over activity of repressive states (Sen, 1999: 1). He argues that this process of development is much of an agent-oriented view, since with adequate social amenities, individuals can effectively shape their own destiny and help each other as opposed to being seen primarily as passive recipients of the benefits of development programmes. For him, this provides a strong reason for recognizing the positive

role of free and sustainable agency. Maathai (2004: xvi) echoes a similar view in relation to the Green Belt Movement, a tree planting project in Kenya, that was instrumental in her recognition as the Nobel Peace Prize Award in 2002. In her words, the project ‘has over the past 30 years shown that sustainable development linked with democratic values promotes human rights, social justice and equity, including balance of power between women and men’. In her view, the 2004 Nobel Peace Prize demonstrates that although the work of grassroots groups, especially women’s groups does not always make headline news, it does make a difference (2004: xvi’).

### **Representation of Women’s Issues by Women**

Many themes emerged in response to the key research question, ‘what are your needs as women in this division? The most commonly mentioned needs were support, education, development, basic needs, a leader and political interference. ‘Political interference’ is used to show how in the use of metaphor, women represent their issues. Political interference might be seen as an external threat which often has to do with power, culture, ideology and distribution of resources. Women’s fear of political interference in running their affairs in the women’s groups was cited by the majority of the groups. One respondent described it thus:

#### **Text 1:**

*Resp: nitwithaa na wia nundu ta mwaka wa miongo nyaanya na itano nitwai na kikundi kingi kyai na vinya na tooka talikwa ni anasiasa. Tooka teewa tikwatanenee ikundi nee mingo itano nai ili tuuwe itinga na mutongoi ai kuu tamuvata tamwia mbesa ii nisyiui ulika na alea na eethia ndekwendeew’a ni nuu na atwia ‘nundu nimutongoi’ ikaani, ‘natamunenga mbesa, syo isu situ syalika mana syathela vyu. Onomunthi tutaaimiwa ona vati mumemba waiimiwa nitinga yiu.*

Resp: We are fearful because like in 1985 we had a very strong women’s group and we were interfered with by the politicians, we had many strong groups. We were asked to unite, I think 52 groups to buy a tractor and the leader was here, we warned her that that money was just going to be ‘eaten’ misused. And she refused and did not like that and she said, ‘I am the leader’. So we gave our money and it was misused. No member benefited on the use of that tractor on their farm.

From the text above, the women construct themselves as collectively fearful signalled by use of the pronoun ‘-twi-’ ‘we’, in the expression ‘*nitwithaa na w’ia*’ ‘we are fearful’. The women are fearful because in 1985, a politician asked 52 women groups in Mbitini division to unite and buy a tractor but they did not benefit from its use. In the women’s view, this constituted political interference because the money they had contributed was misappropriated and the tractor did not benefit the women. The metaphor of ‘*mbesa syaiwa*’ literally meaning ‘money being eaten’ is a common metaphor in Kenyan political discourse and it often refers to money being ‘misused’ or not being used for the intended purpose. Coppock et al. (2006: 19) cite ‘political interference’ but hardly provide an explanation of what the women meant by this or what they meant by the use of the term. The ‘eating’ of the women’s money in buying a tractor by the politician might be taken to indicate the political ideological set up in Kenya which gets affirmed by male dominating social-cultural structures in the way the tendency to interfere with women’s affairs is made explicit in the text above. More often than not, politicians in

Kenya are men and this in a way gives them power to manipulate women when it comes to dealing with women's groups whose membership is essentially female. Grignon's (2001: 317) study confirmed this when he clearly shows how Paul Ngei, one of Kenya's freedom fighters as well as one of the Kamba independence leaders, had created *Mbai Sya Eitu* (the women's clan) in Machakos District in the 1960s. This was an army of women's groups organized on clan lines which he protected against male clan organizations and which gave him years of staunch support till 1971 when it was banned. Such women's groups created by politicians are part of their political strategy as Grignon (2001) points out; women who form 70 percent of the rural electorate are the regular target of food and money distributions in Ukambani as they provide a guaranteed source of support.

One of the key issues that the women consistently mentioned was the need for a leader (the reasoning being that women leaders would understand their needs because of belonging to the same gender). In the respondents' views, such a leader is a person who can 'do things for us', 'show us direction', give us support' (money) 'show us the light', to mention but some of the responses. On the whole, a critical examination of the data indicates that participants characterize themselves in a 'discourse of suffering'. The following responses from participants in selected focus group discussions provide evidence for this point;

**Text 2:**

*Nituthinaa ova tutena mundu wautwonia mbee. Na nengi andu makaleaa kwonua mbee komesa kumbuka.*

We suffer here with no one to show us ahead. And if people are not shown ahead, can they really emerge?

**Text 3:**

*Resp: Aya, sukulu kwitu, syana situ sukulu ... kwakya ve syana imwe withiaa syina thina wa mavuk , kwona nguua, ingi syiendaa na nguua syeekiwe ilaka syeekiwe ilaka, usu nithinomwi nund wasisya yu musyai uu ndena vinya wa kuua nguua na mbingi ku misyini ikomaa nthi ukethia uthi ukethia mundu atandaasa kuu na tukona kethia nitwona mundu atuvinia business ta kikundi okya muthemba...*

Like in our school ...in the morning some children do not have books. They do not have clothes; they walk in tattered clothes, that is a problem because when you look at the parents they do not have the ability to buy clothes and many in the homes sleep on the floor. If only we could find someone who can open a business of a particular kind for us as a women's group

**Text 4**

*Lakini utitha ta yuketha kyha kuu nitwithiwa na kiw'u kuu aka kuu nimathinaa muno uketha nimathukuma na vitii. Yu thina ula ungi aka makuu methaa naw'o nikwithia tita monaa atongoi na kumelekelya ila maile kufaidika*

But if only women had water, women here suffer a lot, if only they could work with more effort. The other problem the women have here is that it is as if they do not have leaders to show them how to benefit.

The issue of leadership among the women must be seen within the context of problems being faced by the national organization *Maendeleo Ya Wanawake* - MYOW (Women in Development) the national women's organization. This suggests that the women construct themselves within deficit discourses and therefore the notion of a leader is an individuated discourse. Women on the one hand want to give agency to a leader and yet agency resides in the collective. Political power on the other hand resides in the individual; that is, political power is with the individual politicians. The entire society is built on the collective and no person is a person without others. For example if we look at Nelson Mandela's political strategy during the apartheid struggle in South Africa, it involved putting a face to the African National Congress. Unlike Mandela, these women are not politicians and wanting to give agency to a leader does not work for them. Discourses are ways of being, women grow in these deficit discourses and this appears to be the prevailing dominant discourse about women; a Kenya discourse and no wonder they inhabit and reproduce these discourses. This deficit discourse constructs the women as helpless, and suffering and this comes straight from their mouths that they look for a saviour, a leader, and a mentor.

In the first text, by using of the plural object -infix '-tu-' (we), the women construct themselves as a 'suffering community' that needs a leader to show them the way. Morrison and Love (1996: 59) underscore the role of the pronoun 'we' used to define 'who we are'. They contend this is especially pronounced in periods of upheaval (as in the problematic times of the women's national organization in the last decade in Kenya) or national resurgence during which there is usually an attempt to redefine or reassert a particular identity construction. Despite a culture of community, in which women's groups are deliberately constructed to give members the support of the collective, women construct themselves in a discourse which focuses on the centrality of an individual leader. This is further repeated in text 2 where the speaker wishes for a leader who could start a business for them and again in text 4 where the need for a leader is made explicit. In other words, they do not see the power that exists when they work together collectively. The women do not understand that community action underpins their sustainability and not individual power. Their agency is based on the mutual support that women give one another, not on the power of an individual leader.

The women represent themselves in an impersonal way. They refer to themselves as 'people' and use the third person plural pronoun suffix '-ma-' 'they' which gives women a generic reference. According to Fairclough (2003: 150), generic reference is often associated with the universal and hence by use of the generic pronoun 'they'; the women construct a particular 'we-community' which exhibits the suffering of rural women in general in the local and global community. What is foregrounded in the three texts is their suffering, not their actions that sustain their families. This negative self-representation goes against the rules of social justice and belittles their political participation.

## **Representation of Women's Issues by Politicians and Other Community Leaders**

This section looks at the construction of women's issues by politicians and other community leaders in political speeches and interviews. Political power resides in the individual; that is, the politicians as leaders. Unlike the women in women's groups, politicians on the other hand have a vision of power and not sustainability. In view of this, it therefore becomes crucial to look at how politicians represent women's issues since it might provide alternative insights towards understanding the participation or non-participation of women in politics.

Leadership emerged as a key theme whereby the leaders raise an important concern regarding women's leadership in politics. Majority of the leaders agree that women are inherently good leaders but not in politics. On the whole, the politicians appear to perpetuate the use of deficit discourses just like the women themselves to construct women's agency. Text 5 provides an example.

### **Text 5: Leader 1:**

*Resp: yeah, mostly women are not very good in politics. They are not very good. Uangalie kama mama Ndetei, (like when you look at mother Ndetei), I would like to give you that example. Alikuwa akawa mbunge (she became an MP) and we had a lot of backing for that lady. Na siasa yake ilikuwa nzuri sana.(and politics was very good). Lakini you can be played. Politics can be played on you.*

*Inter: you mean on women?*

*Resp: Politics are played on women, unaona (you see)... Lakini (but) women, you see the other time there was this funny story about women. Unaona ooka (you see she came) her the other day there was this funny story about Ngilu, na ni siasa anafanyiwa, siasa. (And it is politics being played on her).*

*Resp: yeah, mostly women are not very good in politics. They are not very good. Like when you look at mother Ndetei, I would like to give you that example. She became an MP and we had a lot of backing for that lady and her politics was very good). Lakini you can be played. Politics can be played on you.*

*Inter: You mean on women?*

*Resp: Politics are played on women, you see... but women, you see the other time there was this funny story about women. you see she came her the other day there was this funny story about Ngilu, and it is politics being played on her.*

The speaker in the above text code switches from English to Kiswahili. The two examples 'Mama Ndetei' and 'Ngilu' cited in the text refer to two Kenyan women parliamentarians who were allegedly involved in sex scandals. The respondent chooses to omit the scandals by referring to them as the 'funny' story. Sexualisation of scandals involving women is common in politics and often seeks to discredit female politicians and generally portraying them as unfit for public office. In this text, the use of the plural form of the third person pronoun 'they' constructs women in generic terms as collectively 'not good in politics'. The claim that '*women are not very good in politics*' represents the feeling of most male politicians and leaders in general, that women are deficient in politics as a male dominated domain. The text constructs women as 'done-tos' as seen in the expression 'politics are played on them'. The use of 'them' shows women as 'non-agents' in politics. In other words, they are objects on

which action is taken. Similarly, the speaker constructs women as ‘done-tos’ in the use of the pronoun ‘her’ in object position. To illustrate this, we look at more examples of how the leaders talk about leadership;

**Text 6: Leader 2:**

*No group ya aka.Maendeleo Ya Wanawake (MYWO) yaanangiwe ni atongoi, the national leaders. Kwoou, yiina mutongoi, yiina future, kana itingwa future.*

*The women’s organization Maendeleo Ya Wanawake was spoilt by leaders, the national leaders... so it does not have a leader, in other words, it does not have a future.*

**Text 7: Leader 9:**

*vata munene niniwonaa muno ukethia angi nimekwenda kuungama ivila matongoesye aka angi, matwike makanzala*

A major need for women is to contest for political seats, so that many want to get seats in order to lead other women and, like maybe become councillors,

Unlike leader 1 in text 5, looking at the way leaders 2 and 9 talk about the need for women leadership is clear evidence of increased numbers of women, which is an indication of progress for women in the democratization process. There is however no clear link as to whether this will actually translate to transformation in the condition of women’s lives. Over the years, Kenya has had increased numbers but one cannot say for sure that this has led to change in the conditions of their life. Unlike the women who represent themselves as deficit, the leaders make a case for female leadership arguing that if more women are to represent women, it would lead to a better life for all. This gains support from Nasong’o and Ayot (2007) who contend that women’s presence in key policy-making institutions in critical numbers enhances and strengthens the political agenda on social issues such as healthcare, education and environmental protection. This is further articulated by (Sen, 1999) in regard to the Kerala<sup>1</sup> experience of India where women’s increased participation in the political process is seen as important for a more balanced wholesome and equitable socio-economic development.

Ndambuki and Janks (2010) use pronouns and modality as linguistic features in an attempt to understand women’s construction of agency. In their view, while women, politicians and other community leaders construct women’s agency within deficit discourses, these discourses do not match women’s enacted practices or what political and community leaders say they expect of women. The contradiction inherent in the study is that everyone constructs women as lacking in agency, yet these women act as agentive subjects. The findings of the study indicate that the politicians on the one hand represent themselves as all-knowing; they are the ones who know and have the answers for the women. They are also dismissive of people’s ability to think things out for themselves. As a result, they represent women as powerless, illiterate and ignorant about their own issues. This denies women agency and yet recognition and voice are values that women need in order to confidently articulate and represent their concerns. All these leaders are drawing from the discourses about women that circulate in Kenya. They continue to reinforce the use of deficit discourses in the representation of women’s issues and in this way contribute to the minimal political participation of women.

## Conclusion

This paper has examined and shown that a study of language used to talk about women's issues helps to depict and understand the constraints and possibilities for change for women with regard to agency and change. The study reveals that women, politicians and other leaders in the community continue to perpetuate the use of deficit discourses in the construction of women's issues. Women are represented against a backdrop of discourses of patriarchy, rurality and poverty that construct them as poor, ignorant and illiterate; constructions which seem to perpetuate unequal power relations between them and the politicians and other community leaders. These findings point to the need for a deeper understanding of what women consider to be their concerns in the context of the changing gender relations and the expansion of the scholarship on gender politics in the African Diaspora and Kenya in particular. Sustenance of the politics of voice is one way of going beyond numbers to enhance the incorporation of women in the political process. This gives recognition to women's political participation; creating a discourse of transformation where women are seen as agents since in reality, women do a lot of things for their communities. Additionally, the politics of voice help to bridge the gap in the democracy and social justice nexus as relates to women's political participation.

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<sup>i</sup> Kerala is a state within India with a population of about 30 million people. It has the least infant mortality rates and highest life expectancy rates. It is the state on which the famous 'Kerala model of development' or 'Kerala's Development Experience' is based and which has captured the attention of development analysis due to the unique pattern of social and economic changes that have been taking place in Kerala as a result of initiatives both governmental and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) based on public action (Parayil G. (2000: viii).

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