

**Perceptions of Feminism and its effect on
voter conscientiousness – A Kenyan
Woman's Perspective.**

By

Dr. Nyokabi Kamau

Senior Lecturer and Head of the Department of Arts and Social Sciences

St. Paul's University, Kenya

Introduction

The civil movement in Kenya spearheaded by women academics, activist, politicians, grassroots women and women from all walks of life has resulted in some notable achievements. The most notable of the achievements of the Kenyan women's movement is the inclusion of the Bill of Rights in the constitution passed in August 2010 and the one third affirmative action in all senior positions been reserved for either gender. The new constitution also provides for a devolved governing structure that will open new opportunities for gender equality not seen in Kenya before.

However, some questions come to one's mind with regard to how Kenyan women and men view feminism or feminist movement as a strategy for spearheading the gender equality agenda. Feminism is still treated with suspicion among most Kenyansⁱ, not just men but even among women who have worked in the women's and gender movement for many yearsⁱⁱ. There are many Kenyan women, who even though their work seems to support what feminists stand for, they still find it difficult to even refer to themselves as feminists. Prof. Wanjiku Kabiraⁱⁱⁱ, in an interview with Dr. Mike Kuria, notes that that this position of most Kenyan women has been due to a misconception of what feminism is and the association of it with the more radical stance that was publicized more than the core of feminism which to her is humanism. The radical feminists of bra throwing may have been seen as foreign and strange for many African women whose according to Dr. Eddah Gachukia – quoted by Prof. Kabira in this interview argued that 'African women did not have bras to throw away, you know they were not wearing any. Even if they wanted to throw them they did not have any'. The point here is that feminism needs to be understood contextually because issues that may be of concern to women in one place and time may be completely different for other women in another place and time.

The electorate on the other hand, has continued to have a negative attitude to the term feminist and they would find it difficult to associate with those who refer to themselves as such – for the same reasons raised above. This may make even women who may describe their stance as feminist not to say so publicly for fear of being seen as men bashers or radical women who stand against family values. This is not unique to Kenya as Mcfadden^{iv} – a Zimbabwean feminist and gender activist has pointed out - that she faced threats and condemnation because of her position. McFadden describes how she was deported from Zimbabwe in the mid 1990's:

The government issued me with a deportation order, in which accusations of my betrayal of the 'Zimbabwean culture' and 'family values' featured prominently. I was identified as a lesbian (and therefore automatically vilified), on the grounds that I wrote about women's rights...and because I defended rights of gays and lesbians...the fact that I am a relatively contended heterosexual was forgotten or ignored...my feminist stance was defined as "dangerous" (p. 53)

McFadden further observes that even those in the women's movement in Zimbabwe remained silent when their government was harassing her. The women's silence could have been due to their own fears of supporting a position seen by their government to be against their culture, even though they may have wanted to support. This has remained the case in Kenya where very few women leading the women's and gender equality movement still find it difficult to refer to themselves as feminists. This follows therefore that if few women leaders hardly use the term, then it is unlikely that the electorate (majority of whom may not even have had a chance to read much or even understand what feminism stands for) would even want to identify with feminism.

This paper will attempt to look at the following guiding questions:

1. Is the gender agenda acknowledged and propelled by the electorate and the candidates of political office?

2. How is feminism understood in the Kenyan context? What are the different strands of feminisms and what do they mean for the Kenyan context? Why do many women and men struggle with defining themselves as feminists? Why is this term misunderstood in Kenya? What about those who define themselves as feminists? –what has informed their standpoint?
3. Does feminism have a place in modern Kenyan debate of gender equality especially with regard to political representation? Does the electorate respond to and demand for gender equity as a basis for choice of political representation? Is the gender debate central to the electorate's conscience?
4. How is feminism expected to influence electioneering and subsequent voter conscientiousness in 2012? Will the affirmative action quotas be achieved based on engendered electioneering (and using the feminism platform)

Is the gender agenda acknowledged and propelled by the electorate and the candidates of political office?

I would argue that the gender agenda seems to be quite attractive especially when it is noted that the focus is not only on women, but on men and women and their relationship with each other. Since 1992, when the multi party democracy was re- introduced in Kenya, the number of women holding political office has been increasing gradually. This has meant that many Kenyans have had an opportunity to understand how women lead and what they stand for. A good example is the 9th Parliament which saw quite a large number of women get into parliament – both through election and nomination by political parties. This was the first Parliament that ever passed laws that could be termed as being women friendly^v. The passing of the sexual offences act, increase of maternity leave and the introduction of a fourteen days paternity leave could not go unnoticed by the Kenyan electorate. Most noticeable was the fact that these laws were brought through efforts of women parliamentarians. Surprisingly, there was a big challenge from the male parliamentarians who were not keen to have the sexual offences bill passed into law. At that time, many Kenyan women and men got a chance to experience the meaning of gender equality and the need especially to have women in positions where they can influence how laws are made.

Many Kenyan women politicians have actually campaigned on a gender agenda. In a study of women politicians where ten women were profiled, (Kamau, 2010), nine of the women interviewed said that they developed an interest in politics from a gender platform. All these women said that they had either experienced gender inequality and injustice or witnessed the struggles especially that girls and women face in Kenya simply because of their gender. Once they got into parliament, the women in this study explained how they focused most of their energies on issues that affect women and girls and they were very keen to see Kenya having fewer inequalities and injustices.

However, I need to point out that not all aspiring women politicians see gender equality as an issue they should focus their attention to. In the run up to the 2007 general election, I listened to a radio interview with a woman aspiring to become a Member of Parliament. The woman articulated quite well what she would do once she got into parliament. Towards the end of the interview, the aspirant was asked whether she would be different from other women MPs who seem to focus only on gender issues and according to the interviewer, ignore other equally important issues of development. The aspirant said she would surely focus not just on gender issues but on issues that affect men and women in her constituency. The contradiction here from both the radio presenter and the woman parliamentary aspirant was making it look like focusing on development issues that affect men and women is not gender? My interpretation from that one incident was that there is still a problem of lack of an understanding of what gender issues are – they tend to be seen as 'less important – less serious' issues focusing on women only.

If the millennium development goals are a guide as to what the key pillars of development are, then it is clear that without gender equality, there cannot be development. None of the MDGs can and will be

achieved if there is no gender equality and if women lack symbolic power and social capital to participate equally with men.

The position of the woman aspirant mentioned above may also be what the Kenyan electorate may think as shown by a study carried out Lawless and Fox^{vi} where 68 women citizens and 19 women candidates running in the 1997 general elections cautions that 'the suggestion that electing women candidates will generate a women's agenda is precarious in the Kenyan case.' The study points to political and gender socialization as critical impediments to the expectation that women politicians will necessarily articulate a women's agenda once elected – according to the electorate. Accordingly, Murunga^{vii} in his contribution to Kamau's work argues that:

Independent Kenya structured politics in a way that prevented, if not limited, the potential for women leadership. It did not provide space for a gendered understanding of leadership or politics. Politics and the state was dominated by a male ruling political class that was also unapologetically masculinist. While there has been a sprinkling of women, these were either socialized in a male-centric political ethos, were too connected to the ruling class through femocracy to be of significant use to the larger majority of women, or were too few to make a difference. The critical feminist voice needed to inform and transform the existing leadership culture was, therefore, either absent or drowned. (p.14)

Murunga's argument provides a good summary of the historical context in Kenya and the position of the gender agenda.

How is feminism understood in the Kenyan context?

Before looking at how feminism is understood in Kenya let me first provide how I understand it. My understanding is informed by my own personal journey. My journey began as a young girl growing up a small village where it was obvious to me that men had a higher status than women. My father, who was a teacher – was seen as a working person – while my mother – a peasant farmer – was seen as a housewife even though she spent more hours away from the house than in there. Her day started at 5 a.m. and ended at midnight when the rest of us had slept. Yet if my mother was asked if she worked, she would say she did not have a job. This was clearly unfair even to me as a young girl who had not heard anything like feminism. Later as a young woman development worker in an NGO set up to a gender activist to a reluctant feminist and eventually to a fully proclaimed Kenyan feminist without any reservations or fear of being seen as a copy cat of Western ideologies because I came to understand feminism better – as I describe next.

What informed my current position?

As a Kenyan woman, I identify with feminism and call myself a feminist while aware of some controversy that this concept has elicited among African women (Kolawole, 1997). Some African women writers have found the term 'feminism' foreign, while some have embraced it altogether. Kolawole^{viii} for example notes that:

A major problem emerges from throwing one's voice unless the African woman is firmly determined not to allow her voice to be submerged by existing feminist discourse. While some are assertive in identifying with feminism, others are cautious, while others will have nothing to do with feminism as it is presented from the West (1997 p. 7).

Kolawole (ibid.) further notes that African women who accept feminism, whether Black or Western, risk being viewed as parrots:

As opposed to being creative and creating our own discourses...some women see concepts such as African feminism and Black feminism as identical to singing African songs from the belly of the beast (Kolawole, p. 10).

In Kenya, there have also been sentiments that anything to do with feminism is foreign^{ix}. Other African feminists have cited experiences of being condemned and misunderstood (for example Tamale^x, and McFadden quoted earlier in this article) but this has not stopped them from carrying out feminist work even if they may not label themselves as such. One Kenyan woman who has fully embraced the term feminism is Prof. Wanjiku Kabira^{xi}. She argues that African women need to embrace feminism as it provides them with a platform to fight injustices against women, which many African men condone or simply ignore (ibid). I accept feminism as a political stand and position because it provides me with strategies for reading and analysing women's experiences. My readings, interactions and work with women and men who struggle daily for justice in their daily lives have helped me to finesse my understanding of feminism which seems to state that:

- That a category of women, clearly differentiated from men exists
- That women have some common conditions of gendered existence, despite the social and cultural divisions between them
- That women suffer universal injustices^{xii}

What are the different strands of feminisms and what do they mean for the Kenyan context?

Having said that I am comfortable referring to myself as a feminist does not mean that I have even come close to fully understanding the feminist discourse given the breadth and width of the field. There are many strands of feminism for example the liberals, socialists, culturalists, post-modernists, post-colonialists, Black, Christian, African, feminist structural, post- structural etc. Even though I find something relevant to my experiences as a Kenyan woman in almost all these different strands of feminism, I am more drawn to post structural feminist stance. Feminist post structuralism was developed from structuralism. Many of the challenges affecting Kenyan women can be seen to be as a result of underlying structures that still adhere to patriarchy. In post structuralism terms, these structures should be viewed as having underlying multiple meanings but not fixed^{xiii}. I find the argument of Feminist post-structuralism which dispute the notion of a natural social order relevant to the Kenyan situation. Feminist poststructuralists view reality as socially constructed, it is regulated through discourse and all knowledge is socially produced and regulated^{xiv}. This theory moves away from the automatic privileging of the dominant 'colonising' group and other dominant discourses and it moves towards 'multiple voices, multiple perspectives and multiple ways of seeing the world'^{xv}. According to this perspective, women can no longer be viewed only from the negative eyes of patriarchal systems and they should not be treated as 'other' but as part and parcel of the main. This feminist position – explains the situation for Kenyan women especially from a political perspective where the male dominated political structures need to be changed and also the need to see the different issues from as having multiple perspectives depending on who is looking at the situation, the context and the time in question.

However, the feminist theoretical issues with which I identify have some relevance to my African/Kenyan background and I believe have some bearing on the political conscientiousness of the electorates and those who wish to be voted into various political positions – especially women and other groups which have experienced injustices of patriarchy.

My dilemma about the breadth of feminist discourse notwithstanding, it is clear to me that feminism helps to illuminate the significance of gender in society^{xvi}. In politics, it is necessary that it is understood that equality between men and women can be achieved if their differences are appreciated and included in policy and practice. This is a position that need to be clarified to both the politicians and electorate so that they can see feminism not as foreign and contradicting African values, but as a stance that can be useful for men and women and all people who have experienced injustice just because they may be viewed as different.

Those against feminism do not always understand what feminists stand for and many of them simply dismiss the position without taking time to understand that some of the work they do everyday be it in education, health, food security – reaffirms the feminist position. The need for clarity on the bottom line of

what feminists stand for is still as necessary today as it was at the beginning of the movement in America almost a century ago.

Does feminism have a place in modern Kenyan debate of gender equality especially with regard to political representation?

Yes, feminism has a place in modern Kenyan politics where women in particular are struggling to find their rightful place in politics. With the new constitution women now have a constitutional right to take up political offices and challenge the status quo where power has been the male domain. In patriarchal traditions, power is seen as a right to dominate others. This translates to men who hold the power, dominating women who are then seen as powerless. The feminist debate that I have found useful as far as understanding the issue of power is well put by bell hooks^{xvii}. She argues that women need to look at power from a positive perspective. That women should not just pursue power for the sake of it – but power that transforms social-political-economic structures. This kind of power is one where tasks are rotated, there is consensus, and emphasis on internal democracy.

How is feminism expected to influence electioneering and subsequent voter conscientiousness in 2012?

The feminist ideal described in this article should be used to make women conscience (as electorates and candidates) of the need for transformative power that does not dominate and one which challenges the status quo. The sad reality is that when some women rise or get appointed into senior positions, they may also endorse policy decisions that maintain the status quo. This process is sometimes referred to as masculinization of women^{xviii}. Feminist ideals discussed in this article need to be made public and demystified so that Kenyan women can use the new constitution to reject the notion of obtaining power for the sake of dominating the powerless. This needs and should be the agenda of those women who intend to run for political positions in 2012. They need to make the electorate aware of the need to change the existing social structures which even if women are added on, will necessarily end sexist oppression. Male domination and any other kind of domination by a few powerful men and women must be challenged – the new constitution provides us with a good platform to do this.

The political consciousness that needs to be embraced as we draw close to 2012 is that every woman has power that she can exercise to advance feminist struggle. Feminist ideology can clarify for women their power especially as voters and show them ways these powers can be used to resist oppression and exploitation. Recognition of women's power is a step that the feminist struggle can use to take women towards liberation and indeed towards taking their newly earned constitutional right and take up positions not just in the reserved quotas but also compete with men.

In conclusion, Kenyan women need to work for the reorganization of the feminist movement by appreciating that we have all complied with the existing oppressive system. The movement should not be seen as another oppressive system open only for elite college educated women^{xix}. Feminism should be relevant to all women. Many have abandoned the movement because they feel that it's a movement which has no space for married women, yet there are many women who have very positive and caring relationships with men. Such women have not felt comfortable within the feminist discourse. It may mean that all of us must change, not just those we call oppressors – we need a revolutionary approach to the discourse, to address the existing oppression is to progress, to change, to transform our current realities. I am in agreement with Oduol and Kabira^{xx} when they suggest that if Kenyan women are to achieve their quest for equality and equity, 'they must continue to fight the negative challenges posed by state, tribal, class, ideological and cultural mechanisms that perpetuate their marginalised positions'. It is against this background that I am convinced most of what western feminism stands for can be applied to the Kenyan context especially with regard to women taking their rightful places in the political governance of the country.

-
- ⁱ Kamau. (2009) *AIDS, Sexuality, and Gender Experiences of women in Kenyan Universities*. Eldoret. Zapf Chancery Research Consultants and Publishers. Kamau discusses the Issue of feminism at length and the reluctance to embrace this term even among women academics not just in Kenya but in the rest of the continent - even those working on gender equality
- ⁱⁱ Kuria, M. (Ed.). (2003). *Talking Gender: Conversations with Kenyan Women Writers*. Nairobi: PJ.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Kuria, M. (2003) *Talking Gender: Conversations with Kenyan Women Writers*. Nairobi: PJ. p. 25 – 26 – in a conversation with Prof Wanjiku Kabira
- ^{iv} McFadden, P. (2003). Sexual Pleasure as Feminist Choice. *Feminist Africa: Changing Cultures*(2), 50 - 60.
- ^v Kamau, N. (2010) *Women and Political Leadership in Kenya: Ten case studies*. Nairobi. Heinrich Ball Foundation
- ^{vi} Lawless, J. and R. Fox (2001), 'Women Candidates in Kenya', *Women and Politics* 20(4): 49-76.
- ^{vii} Murunga, G. (2010) in Kamau, N. (2010) *Women and Political Leadership in Kenya: Ten case studies*. (p 9-14).
- ^{viii} Kolawole, M. M. E. (1997). *Womanism and African Consciousness*. Trento: Africa World Press Inc
- ^{ix} Kuria, M. (2003)
- ^x Tamale, S. (2005). Eroticism, Sensuality and "Women's Secrets" Among the Baganda: A Critical Analysis. *Feminist Africa* (5), 5-36.
- ^{xi} Kuria, M. (2003) *Talking Gender: Conversations with Kenyan Women Writers*. Nairobi: PJ.
- ^{xii} Ramazanoglu, C., & Holland, J. (2002). *Feminist Methodology*. London: Sage Publications.
- ^{xiii} Hughes, C. (2002). *Key concepts in feminist theory and research*. London, Sage publications.
- ^{xiv} Warner, S. (2001). "Disrupting identity through visible therapy: A feminist post-structuralist approach to working with women who have experienced child abuse." *Feminist review* No. 68: 115-139
- ^{xv} Davies, B. (1997). "Constructing and deconstructing masculinities through critical literacy." *Gender and education* 9(1): 9-30.
- ^{xvi} Chatzifotiou, S. (2000). Conducting Qualitative Research on Wife Abuse: Dealing with the Issue of Anxiety. *Sociological Research Online*, 5(2), 9.4 paragraphs.
- ^{xvii} hooks, b. (2000). *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (second ed.). London: Pluto Press.
- ^{xviii} See Kamau, 2010 p.44
- ^{xix} Hooks, b (2000)
- ^{xx} Oduol, W. and W. M. Kabira (2000). The mother of warriors and her daughters: the women's movement in Kenya. *Global Feminisms since 1945*. B. G. Smith. London, Routledge: 101-118. p. 117