

# **Women's Organising for Self Improvement in Colonial and Post Colonial Kenya: A Historical Analysis**

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## **1.0 Introduction**

Research on women's activities and interests was spurred by the feminist movement in the 1960s and has sustained its recognition as a genuine field of investigation. Since early 1970s national and international attention has focused on women. In Africa, research on women grew intermittently in the wake of the global feminist movement and despite numerous setbacks it has grown incredibly. It was particularly boosted after the UN Declaration of Women's Decade in 1975. The declaration of the UN decade for women produced both rhetoric from government officials and feminist leaders about women's significance in all aspects of life and determined efforts to improve women's education, economic situation, social status and political participation. Consequently discussions by and about women began to take centre stage and continues to play an important role in contemporary political debate. This means that what was considered the women question in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century became a central or core issue in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. The potential and actual contribution of women to political, cultural, and socio-economic development of Africa and their special needs and problems in development have been reiterated in the expanding literature on women.<sup>1</sup> There is generally an expanded database on the operation of women in society and group context internationally. Such publications have increased as the production of social knowledge on women proliferates. In Kenya women are currently remaining in several research agenda and efforts of many scholars have made the literature on gender and women to increase enormously. Although it is recognised that women are agents of historical change and objects of policy consideration there is still paucity in what can be considered her story in Africa and Kenya specifically.

Before the 1970s available research on African women's history per se was minimal although information on women in Africa was available in anthropological,

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<sup>1</sup> See Ndeda 2002.

ethnographic and development studies. Since 1970, historical research on African women has steadily expanded, motivated, by the development of the international feminist movement. The first publications in the 1970s dealt with women and economic change and as political activists (Hafkin and Bay). By the mid-1980s there were a number studies that began to appear. Soha Kader's *Egyptian Women in a Changing Society* (1987), Nina Mba's *Nigerian Women Mobilized* (1982), Claire C. Robertson's *Sharing the Same Bowl* (1984), and Margaret Strobel's *Muslim Women in Mombasa* (1979) which still primarily focused on women's public lives. But with studies undertaken by Kristin Mann's *Marrying Well* (1985), Fatima Mernissi's *Beyond the Veil* (1975), and Luise White's *The Comforts of Home* (1990), studies of family and sexuality were also emerging. It was only in the 1990s did a substantial number of monographs on specific topics begin to appear. (Claire Robertson, 1999) Scholars were also analysing reasons for the marginalisation of women's history. Tiyanbe Zeleza has described the enduring marginalization of African women's history, as the information that has been recovered is omitted from textbooks or included in very limited ways. The absence of African women historians is frequently commented on, as there are regrettably few who publish regularly (Tabitha Kanogo, Makanyike Musisi, Kenda Mutongi, and Bolanle Awe are among them). Often work by African scholars is not published, or is only available in African publications, which can be difficult to obtain in Europe and North America. (Kathleen Sheldon,

*Women: History and Historiography* 2012) The task of the historians of women in Africa was additionally overwhelming because of the invisibility of women in the records meaning that despite women's activity and presence in the events of history they were systematically left out of the official records meaning that significant issues on women's corporate or individual lives were "hidden from history." However, today there are numerous historical studies on women but still; so much needs to be done on the history of women.

The emergent women's histories have been approached variously by scholars. Some have used the political narrative to tell the women's story while others use the analytic position by locating this story in a broader social context or to use it to shed light on the unexplored areas of politics. The interest of historians has led to the emergence of all kinds of studies have tackled almost all areas of women's

experiences with some topics assuming more prominence than others. Topics amply dealt with include work, family, politics, the state and ideology. Theories that cut across these topics touch on the issues of class, ethnicity, sexuality and symbolic representation (Imam 16).

In the initial writing of African history women were completely left out (Imam 1988). The second group of historical studies presented women as inferior or subordinate to men, emphasizing the opposition and total subordination of women to men. The third trend conceived women's roles as equal and complementary to those of men so inferiority or superiority did not arise (Lebeuf 1992). The fourth trend presented African women's history as actors in social processes rather than passive recipients of change. Such studies recognized the social structures and mechanisms that constrained women and subordinated them (Imam 1988:30).<sup>2</sup>

Attempts to recapture the history of African women led to emergence of many studies on women in colonial times with a focus on their responses to the establishment of colonial rule and their experiences during the colonial period. Most of these studies have dealt with changes in the gender division of labour and the subsequent transformation of gender relations due to colonial domination. Such studies have challenged major conventional concepts and pointed to the resourcefulness of women and emphasize the colonial reorganization of the economy through its land and labour policies. They also emphasize the consequent development of capitalist relations of production and their differential impact on men and women. There are also studies on prostitution, working class women, and domestic workers, urban women and women in resistance.<sup>3</sup>

In Kenya literature abounds on gender relations. Whereas Kenyatta (1938), conceived his work similar to his colonial mentors (e.g. Bronislaw Malinowski and Radcliffe Brown) who did not include African women in most of their scholarship other colonial writers such as Evans Pritchard and A. Southall portrayed the African systems as marginalizing women. This notwithstanding, subsequent writers have utilised non- Marxist and Marxist approaches to portray gender relations differently to

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2 For details on these trends see Ayesha Imam "The Presentation of African Women in Historical Writing," in *Retrieving Women's History: Changing Perspectives of the Role of Women in Politics and Society*. Ed. S. Jay Kleinberg, (Oxford/Paris: Berg/UNESCO, 1988), pp. 30-40.

3 Ibid.

reflect the changing political, social and economic development trends. At the same time gender relations became the subject of underdevelopment and dependency theorists of the late 1960s and early 1970s (Rodney 1972). There are yet other countless writings including: Strobel (1974, 1979), Kitching (1980), Hay and Stichter (1984) and Were (1985). But despite these efforts, critics of historiography in Kenya point that male referents continued to dominate the discourses (Ochwada, 1995a).

Given the inadequacies of nationalist, neo Marxist, as well as the orthodox Marxist approaches, theories that cut across the confines of the earlier broad paradigms of analysis explaining gender relations in Africa and Kenya, in particular. Some of these studies include: Nasimiyu (1984: 1985); Likimani (1985); Kanogo (1987); Nzomo (1987, 1989); Zeleza (1988 a, 1999b); Were (1990, 1991); Ayot (1990); Jalang'o Ndeda (1991) and Khasiani (1992). They provided critiques that engendered appraisal of the production of social and historical knowledge of Africa. These critiques constituted the different gender perspectives to illuminate the historiography of Kenya (see Kleinberg, 1988: Mohantry, et.al.1991: Imam, 1990: Meena, 1992: Ochwada 1995a; Zeleza, 1999).

Moreover, there are studies that have interrogated gender from a post-modernist position that critique the efficacy of meta- narrative portrayal of the gender question. Some of them popularized the use of "differences" and "otherness" in their effort to explain the pretence of homogeneity of women and their plight globally. Feminists have used it to challenge the andocentric approach to gender relations (Parpart, 1993). They assert, for instance, that Third World Women's aspirations and interests vary from those of Western women. Even within the Third World itself gender interests vary.

The end of the cold war saw the expansion of social movement's which sought to safeguard their social and economic interests. These included feminist movements and organizations which sought to correct the imbalance in gender relations. Various works within this mould also appeared in Kenya and they included: Maathai (1992); Nzomo (1993a, 1993b, 1993c, 1993 d, 1996a, 1996b); Kibwana (1995), Sigot et.al. (1995) and Nduta (1996). Such studies were conceived as anti-power movements with an obligation to defend and maintain their autonomy. This development seemed significant in demonstrating the efficacy of the gender paradigm. Perhaps this is why a conscious effort to restore women to history in works such as Wai (1994), Getui

1994), Ndeda (1994), Mururu (1994) and Ayot (1994).<sup>4</sup> Tabitha Kanogo has made significant contributions to Kenyan women's history.

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Although there is an expansion in the publications on women by Kenyan women there are numerous researches on Kenya that have been undertaken in the 21<sup>st</sup> century but which are stashed in university libraries shelves as unpublished masters or doctoral thesis (Mwangi 1994, Musalia2010) and seminar papers and therefore not widely read. Others have been published (Tanui 2010). Thus the words of Zen Tadesse (1992) that "we should also stop to note the conspicuous absence of the writings of African women from most of the published and widely circulated materials" cannot be ignored. Perhaps for Kenya, Zeleza's 1999 statement that "Despite the proliferations of literature on women including women's history women are misrepresented in male stream African history." He further states that feminists ought to make women's history visible by all means.

This paper analyses historically the engagement of women in development through the women's organizations in Kenya since 1945. in the 20<sup>th</sup> century there were various manifestations of women's organisations namely women's clubs, women's self help groups operating under various umbrella bodies, and other non-governmental ones. These have received scholarly attention since 1970s in the form of the study of women organising into self help groups particularly as the academic establishment increasingly responded to the impact of the international women's movement. As Nasimiyu (1987) says the nature and functions of women's organising in groups have been analysed in a variety of rural and urban contexts in Kenya with a number of different interpretations of the subject. Organisations among women are, therefore, no longer exclusively conceived as part of a private world that is dissociated from political life and public purpose (March and Taqqu 11). These organizations have sought to give voice to women and are part of Kenyan women's history that need to be corporately dealt with by Kenyan Historians.

## **2.0 Colonialism and African Women 1940-1950**

In Africa, the main disruptive effect on women's roles was the colonization

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<sup>4</sup> This was a group of women who met regularly in Nairobi between 1994 and 1995 before the Beijing conference and produced some of these documents before the African women's preparatory forum in Dakar. Although the group later changed its agenda the publications exist.

process. The three influential colonial spheres (church/mission, governance and trade) each had their own disruptive influence on traditional power and gender roles. Continuous support of patriarchy and individualism created new economic opportunities but also seriously disrupted the existing gender relations. This resulted in a new division of labour and a further separation of men and women within the community. The colonial structures and capitalist economic principles were institutionalized in religious, economic, legal, bureaucratic and educational structures. Gradually, this led to a new social order in which most African women had very little rights. As a result the economic and legal position of women was changed drastically. Right from its inception, the colonial state concentrated on men. Males were used for direct or indirect forms of colonial rule while women were actually suppressed particularly by missionary organisations (Reiter 1975). Colonialism did not therefore improve the condition of African women as it is often claimed. It was by itself patriarchal and therefore discriminative.

In the British colonies, for example, officially all positions in the civil service were reserved to men "in any of His Majesty's possessions overseas or in any foreign country." It was only the 1919 Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act, which ruled that women were to be allowed to assume any civil profession or vocation. By the time women were officially admitted to overseas civil service in 1946, the Empire was coming to an end and the number of women serving in very junior posts was small. The colonial empire, in fact, helped to boost the hegemony of men. Extreme domestication was imposed on women whose main responsibility was to look after the household. The official attitude towards women in the urban areas was unfavourable and quite often abusive. African households were equally influenced.

However towards the end of the Second World War the Colonial Government began to show some concern about African life which was considered unsatisfactory. By 1942 the Legislative Council resolved to pressurize the government to initiate programmes for native production and welfare policy (Ndeda 237). The policy on social welfare was laid down in 1945 and subcommittees created to implement the welfare activities (CD9/38, Sept. 1948 KNA). The Social Welfare Department was created and District Welfare Officers appointed (henceforth DWO) with duties were clearly defined in Government Notice No. 359 of February 21, 1950.

Apart from concern with social and economic wellbeing of the African, the African woman's question also became a concern to the colonial government. The African women's welfare had to be redressed urgently due to pressure from the international community and the European women in Kenya in the post war period (Ndeda 238). The pressure groups noted that an appreciable improvement in the lives of men could only be achieved if the standard of African women was raised. Olga Watkins bemoaned the colonial negligence of the situation of the African women and appealed to the state to release African women from male enslavement (Ndeda 238). She reiterated that the cost paid for neglecting women was immense because as the old adage had it every society depends on their women for progress. In response to this on March 22nd 1946, training for African social welfare workers was initiated at the Jeanes School. Later in the year, community centres were established in local markets to offer spinning, weaving and literacy classes (Ndeda 239).

By 1948, welfare activities were operational in several Districts of Kenya funded through government grants. Each Centre had certain social amenities and was periodically visited by the mobile cinema (Ndeda 239). Centres for training of female trainers of spinning and weaving were established in Kisumu, Kericho and Nairobi by government, Red Cross and East African Women's League (hence EAWL). Women were trained in spinning and weaving for about twelve months before they established their own industries (Ndeda 239). However it was still expected that the women operate within the framework of their subordinate position which marked the subsequent failure of these efforts. The courses taught may have been comprehensive but they were inconsequential because of irregularity in attendance, failure of the African woman to position herself appropriately within the organisations (DC KSM/1/2/154, 1948, KNA) and the Male attitudes towards women. Moreover the programmes were implemented without the assessment of the labour burden of women, their immediate needs and the availability of markets to sell their wares. However, even though most women were not reached by such developments the groundwork for later African women's movements was laid.

### **3.0 Women in organisation (clubs) in colonial Kenya, 1950-1963**

European women understood the plight of the African rural women who were

confined by many children, daily farm chores, and meagre cash resources and isolated from associating with larger groups of women with similar interests. Part of the motivation to organise the groups was the realisation that African women were lagging behind African men in development. Eleanor Grant, prominent in the East African Women's League, pointed out this discrepancy in 1952 (E.A. Women's League, 1952).

This caused the white elite females to initiate several philanthropic services. The period 1945-1959, a flux of charitable activities was initiated by the governor's wife and other administrators' wives to improve the lot of African women. These elite women had nothing conceptually revolutionary in their agenda but merely spearheaded the general trend towards domestic science. The general impression from the available evidence, particularly the newspaper articles, underscores the paternalistic attitude of these women in providing these typically Western services for African women. Their upper class Western bias was obvious, the poor African woman had to become clean and learn feminine tasks that could help improve her life and as Tinker (1984) says there was no evidence of the efforts made by European Women to teach African women skills related to their real work. Consequently, not only did the Europeans retard the African women's strong traditional farming roles but also brought in Western concepts of what women and especially low class women were supposed to do.

These initial efforts were later replaced by Women's clubs, part of a colony-wide organization started under the auspices of the colonial government's Department of Community Development and Rehabilitation to promote the advancement and transformation of African women in 1951. Nancy Shepherd, the Assistant Commissioner for Community Development, formalised these groups. The Jeanes School was handed over to the Commissioner for Community Development for this purpose in 1950. After a series of meetings between the white ladies interested in African welfare and African Women training at the Jeanes School, the Women's Institutes were formalised in September 1951 (E.A. Standard September 10, 1957) under the name Maendeleo Ya Wanawake. The clubs were a facsimile of Women's Institutes in England (CD 5/205, 1951, KNA) and were to be avenues for departmental officers to explain their individual policies. They were not vehicular to the rising nationalist effort in which women participated. They were elitist and not

well equipped to generate widespread and effective gender politics.

The strategy used by the colonial government was that whenever a sufficiently large number of women in any single area were interested, a club was formed and the activities supervised and guided by the staff under the direction of the Commissioner for Community Development and Rehabilitation. The objective of the organization was to promote better living conditions, awaken the women to the need of good health and hygienic habits, teach and encourage them to fully utilise the food and materials which they had close at hand and to guide them in fulfilling their roles. To do this, they selected some women and gave them home craft training in Nairobi, Kericho, Kisumu, Nakuru and Machakos and it was expected that they could disseminate this knowledge widely at the end of their training (Monthly Report CD CN, May 1954, KNA). In 1952, the first women conference was held at the Jeanes School and the maendeleo Headquarter committees were formed and annual conferences planned (e.g. Associated country women of the world).

At the local level for a club to be instituted the DC, the African District Council (ADC) members and the chief convened a meeting of women for a specified day when, the team explained its agenda. The women then picked leaders to run their affairs while the ADC advanced funds to purchase the materials to be bought by women and pay the salaries of the African female instructresses (Ndeda 243).

In September 1950 the Jeanes School opened its door to the first African women trainees in domestic subjects. Those trained were expected to create groups in their own homes and villages and to replicate what they had learnt. The school was the responsibility of the Department of Community Development which was to ensure that the objectives were met. The department regularly visited the Districts to hasten the formation of women's/ clubs and institutes (Ndeda 242). It was expected that the groups would aid in the improvement of women's knowledge of domestic science, subsistence farming, people's eating habits by encouraging better use of land, rotation of crops, the growing and cooking of nutritious foods, to improve and diversify livestock and methods of dealing with waste (Ndeda 244).

The initial response to the movement seemed favourable marked by the numbers attending the courses. The advantage of these groups was that they fostered the spirit of self-help, self-reliance and held a lot of hope for sound development. Such

an organization also simplified the task of government officers who wished to contact the women. The possibility of mutual understanding developing between European and African women was cherished and advanced as the cause for government support of such organisations. Given that the core need of the day was to raise the standard of living of the women, it was essential to ensure that the clubs achieved this (Ndeda 244 - 45).

In most areas the period between 1952 and 1963 was marked with numerous contradictions and ironies. In areas like Central Kenya the Emergency was underway making it hard for the women to operate freely without suspicion and interference. In other areas, there were numerous fluctuations, with expansion in some years and lack of enthusiasm in others.

For a while the women's movements expanded, become popular and beneficial. Women of all groups eagerly participated in the activities and undertook the programmes with ease and enjoyment. They realized the interesting possibilities of the clubs in their communities. However, contradictions and ironies were also noted in that despite the remarkable progress in the clubs and formation of new clubs, some clubs closed down due to poor leadership, mismanagement of funds and decrease in attendance, and lack of support from men, chiefs and headmen and the failure of instructresses to perform their duties (Ndeda 246).

In 1956, it was officially requested that the chiefs, elders and the rest of the administration take interest in the Maendeleo clubs. By 1960 the national leadership of *Maendeleo Ya Wanawake* was intermittently being handed over to African women due to the decolonization process. Although by this time *Maendeleo Ya Wanawake* organisation was a quasi government movement steps were taken during the year to make it independent (Social Services Annual Report 1960:3).it is in the process of Africanisation that Phoebe Asiyu became the first African to chair *Maendeleo Ya Wanawake*. The effects of this organisation varied considerably. By 1961 most women had lost contact with the organisation. Maendeleo's principle at this stage was to offer voluntary service to the people and Leaders were merely given honoraria. No wonder most of those trained in the home craft centre: simply disappeared into oblivion or joined other employment sectors that would give cash returns.

According to colonial reports, the women's self-help groups were well-received and owned by the women right from their inception (Askwith, 1956). However did they actually improve women's condition or did they serve a double edged purpose? This whole idea of women's clubs (later self help groups) stemmed directly from the mistaken belief that women were underemployed. A relevant approach was necessary to identify which activities rural women were already involved in and to raise productivity of labour so as to increase existing earnings or help transform a subsistence activity into an income generating one. When attempts were made to introduce improved techniques or technologies aimed at increasing productivity, the result was that the men took over the traditional women's industry. The fact that women were excluded had nothing to do with the technology itself, but rather with the assumptions and conditions under which it was introduced. The rule seemed to be that when a new technology which brought upgraded skills and higher returns was introduced the men took over (Carr 25).

The government's assumptions of dependence effectively discriminated against women by interfering with their access to economic resources, and involvement in education. The long standing patterns of male dominance were not addressed by the state. In addition to general economic and political problems faced by Kenyan peasants, women were further subordinated by the existing division of labour within the household and patterns and assumptions of dependence by women. It is their particular relationship to men in respect of problems of development or underdevelopment which determined the relatively disadvantaged position which government policies towards women claimed to seek to rectify. Such policies needed to demonstrate that they were providing or encouraging transformation of the subordinate relationship of women to men as a necessary condition of improving women's position in society.

One discerns from the foregoing picture the need to re-analyse existing data on the colonial period from a gendered perspective. The increase in the number of clubs particularly in the 1950s may not have been a reflection of a simultaneous rise in the level of development. The impact of this movement was also limited because reached a small number of women. The whole programme left out the bulk of the women. The enthusiasm that marked women's participation in the groups captured in the colonial records was never sustained. Moreover clubs serviced extensive

areas to be effective. Over ten years later there was no marked change in labour burden, poverty levels and patriarchal controls (Nyerere 10). It is an indicator that elitist spokeswomen with no democratic mandate from the Kenyan women embraced a state feminist agenda which did not challenge the patriarchal character of the colonial state.

The colonial state did not adequately address the women question and the women leaders seemed to be handmaidens of colonial patriarchs whose goal was to prevent women from getting out of control. The colonial government wanted to halt the perceived trend of social disintegration and restore the organic unit of the community so such groups seemed to be one of the concrete programmes towards this but with numerous weaknesses. Perhaps a more aggressive movement would have been necessary if the government was genuinely interested in improving the lot of African women, and had recognised the female potentialities as vital for development (E.A. Standard, 30 November, 1950). This movement was not an African initiative and therefore difficult for the women to own. The movement was not cohesive and women's level of commitment left a lot to be desired. It was worse hit after 1959 when it became quasi independent. (Enrenfels 133).

#### **4.0 Women's organising 1963 – 2000**

Although women and women's organisations were highly involved in the struggle for independence, their efforts were not rewarded and so did not translate into more rights for women. At independence there was apparently no need for separate women's agenda, since the ideal state was to bring freedom and improvement for all gender.

During these earlier years women issues did not form part of the agenda of the nationalist government. Self-help which was regarded as a special way of improving people's lives materially, socially and psychologically was the core business of the state. It was viewed as the basis for democracy, in the sense that people had the freedom to decide and undertake projects which were of immediate need. This view did not comprehend the state as a site of contestation. Populist politics were employed to handle women question treating it opportunistically and exploitatively.

Self-help was an acceptable social cultural attribute in the early periods. A mutual social responsibility was accepted by members of the community who came out to

one another's aid or community aid when the need arose. This had weakened over the years. After the Emergency, it was no longer confined to housing and farming alone. There were other village projects that v required this. At independence in 1963 Jomo Kenyatta called it "Harambee".

In 1964 The National Plan for Community Development was launched to support and accelerate development, prevent social ills, promote the general welfare of the community and strengthen family life and improve the care of children and women. Similarly a National Community Development Policy was released that emphasized self-help stipulating the involvement of all people in determining their desired kind of change. With these new developments afoot what was the position and role of women's groups and women's organisations which was the only face of African women organising after Independence? After independence, the government did not emphasise the development potential of women's groups so the existing ones declined. The participation of women seemed undetermined. They were not mentioned in Sessional Paper no. 10 of 1965. The First Development Plan had no specific mention of women thus it neglected or completely underrated women's role in nation building.

At independence in 1963, some women's organisations such as Maendeleo ya Wanawake already had a wide outreach in rural Kenya, while organisations like the East African Women's League and the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) Anglican Mothers Union; Girl Guides, and Dorcas Society were working in urban areas. Such organisations had many women's groups operating under them. In 1965, the president inaugurated the National Council of Women of Kenya (NCWK), which became the umbrella of women's organizations to which individual national women's organisations could affiliate for coordination and cooperation and indication of the significant role women had played in the development of African communities.

In the years that followed, leadership of major organisations like Maendeleo and NCWK became ethnicized and the struggle for organisational positions along ethnic lines was common. Interestingly, while the government moved away from a two-party to a one-party state, the women's movement retained its regional diversity. It was able to do this because women adhered more to the principles of selecting leaders by rotational time-bound methods and did not often tamper with formal

regulation (Country Report for CFA).

In the immediate post-independence period, women's organizations seemed focused on religious, welfare and domestic concerns. Local handicrafts, savings, farming, income generating, religious and cultural clubs dominated their landscape. Their discourse was primarily one of 'developmentalism' (Ngugi). Women's organizations adopted Women in Development approach, generally divorced from political concerns. They also focused on research into discriminatory practices and laws and on raising consciousness - also referred to as 'gender sensitization' or 'conscientization' (Geisler 546). But in general they were reluctant to engage in advocacy and push for changes in laws, if it put them at odds with the government authorities. For example, Maendeleo Ya Wanawake (MYW), which had the largest membership in Kenya, was confined to improving childcare, domestic care, handicrafts, agricultural techniques, literacy and engaging in sports (Wipper 100). The conservative stance of this organization, which persists to this day, is reflected in the thinking of its president at the time, Jane Kiano, who claimed in 1972 that 'women in this country do not need a liberation movement because all doors are open to us' (Sahle 178).

The problems such as financial challenges, lack of strategic plan, government interference and state neglect did not deter Maendeleo Ya Wanawake from operation (*Sauti Ya Mabibi*). Its significance could not be ignored and Maendeleo Ya Wanawake itself was not just the provider of domestic skills it was also a forum for discussions of local problems. Clearly under such circumstances it was not possible to separate the role of women from development and that is why officers of the Department of Community Development later the Department of Social Services worked closely with Maendeleo Ya Wanawake.

Despite recognition of the significance of the women's movement in Kenya by 1967 the movement was struggling because of lack of trained personnel and other factors. Gender insensitivity was a marked feature of early post independent Kenyan policies. It was assumed that both gender benefited equally from development despite the failure capture women in the development plans. According to the government Kenyan women were not discriminated against. But this was not necessarily the case because apart from Special Rural Development Project effort in 1970/71 there were no other programmes for women prior to 1975. Moreover apart

from the women's non-governmental organisation (Maendeleo Ya Wanawake) and National Council of Women of Kenya no other national machinery for women existed. It was only after the declaration of the Women's Decade that the government began to demonstrate an active interest in the existing women organisations and in addition created the Women's Bureau (Nzomo).

The Third National Development Plan was important for women because for the first time women were referred to directly. The 1974/ 78 Development Plan set a new trend in Kenya's development planning with a bias towards women's integration in development and this was re-emphasised by subsequent plans. From 1970s, the government and political leaders began to actively support women. National government policy also supported the continued formation of women groups. This policy derived from a growing international interest in women's issues drawing from the UN impetus behind the international year of women, (1975) and a worldwide strengthening of women's organisations. Interest focussed on the differential impact of various modernisation processes on women, the ways women could be more fully involved in the development process and their roles in economic and social change (Thomas 173). In addition opportunities for funding women's programmes became available through increased interest of international aid organisations. The Ministry of Housing and Social Services (now Ministry of Culture and Social Services) responded to these opportunities and pressures by reassessing and restructuring its efforts to organise and assist rural women.

The World Plan of Action adopted at the first Mexico World Conference called for the establishment of national machinery to accelerating the achievement of equal opportunity for women. By a Cabinet Memorandum 78(b) of 1975, the Women's Bureau was formed to create awareness of women's potential in national development and enlighten women concerning obstacles faced in realising this. The Bureau became the effective focus for policies towards women and a major means of acquiring international funds for aid specifically directed at women. Such funds were welcomed by the government and were relatively easy to come by due to them. This was indeed a factor that contributed to the failure of most of the groups.

From 1975-1976 the government financed the Bureau. In the meantime government grants to women's groups continued to drop significantly. The number of groups and their membership also increased during the period (Nzomo 138). Was

this increase indicative of increased awareness of women's crucial role in development? Despite the existence of the Bureau, support of the Kenyan government was primarily verbal. The ministry sponsored seminars to train female leaders and provided guidelines for group registration and for financial accountability. They also used these groups for political and personal purposes. In sum, the government was a key factor in the formation of women groups but often it did not provide them with resources.

Despite the use of all these other means, the Women's Bureau remained the Government's official means of reaching women. The significant feature of the Women's Bureau is that it served to legitimize certain kinds of special treatment for women. The effects of feminism, as well as the government's approach to basic needs made it acceptable to single out women as an especially disadvantaged group. In this view, women had been left out or left behind in the development process and therefore required special programmes initiated and controlled or coordinated by government agencies. This was also the emphasis by the colonial government after 1945. Given women's the disadvantaged position, all the activities introduced were seen as remedial. Women groups were viewed as chief means of improving the position of rural women in Kenya.

In 1977, Kenya was one of the first member states of the International Labour Organisation(ILO) to take up a "basic needs" approach to development with poverty alleviation as the main theme in the Fourth Development Plan and women acquired definite but inadequately specified, importance as a target group of the Development policies. The plan gave specific ways to create income-generating opportunities. Already the ILO Report on "Employment Incomes and Equality" had indicated the emergent trend of women as heads of rural households a problem requiring specific action. The plan therefore was an indication of the government's commitment to reduce male/female differentials in earnings and to ensure diversification of women's participation in the modern sector. It also advocated for the redefinition of the roles of men and women though but did not specify how this was to be done (Feldman 67; Govt. of Kenya Development Plan 1979-1983; 1989: iii).

This positive attitude towards women groups/organisations by the government created a favourable setting in which they could function. The government support derived from the relevance of women groups to development objectives, women-

related international interests and from increased donor aid for women activities and the obvious public contribution which a number of women's organisations had made. The government could unreservedly endorse this endeavour because they constituted a safe commitment as women were not yet competing in the public arena.

The 1980 world conference of the UN Decade for women admitted that the economic and social situation of rural women had not improved sufficiently in the first half of the decade. A tiny part of the rural population had benefited (through technological advance; access to better education, land services and inputs) but most rural people remained poor and cut off from these opportunities. Hence despite a marked increase in the number of self help groups, there was no marked impact and the majority of women were rarely aware of their existence and their value.

In 1985, the women's movement got a major impulse from the fact that the UN Women's Conference was held in Nairobi. Kenyan women participated effectively in all stages of preparation for the conference and the experience was rewarding. The coordinator of the NGO forum was Dr. Eddah Gachukia. The adoption of the Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies provided an expanded framework for the women of Kenya to organize and lobby the government for more resources and stronger national machinery for women. However, for a variety of reasons Kenyan women were not able to capitalize on the gains of the Nairobi conference. The women's movement was got polarized within itself and the largest popular women's platform, Maendeleo ya Wanawake, was taken over and hastily grafted to the then ruling party KANU (*Kenya Country Report for CFA Programme, 7*).

However, before this conference there was a lot of activity; recruitment of women into organisations was intensified, seminars of all sorts were held from the grassroots to the national level, and feasibility studies were also done. There was excitement among the groups involved. This was the period during which the largest popular women's platform, Maendeleo ya Wanawake, was taken over and hastily grafted to the then ruling party KANU. (Brouwers with Pala) But were the majority of Kenyan women even aware of the decade? Was the end of the Decade Conference an exciting episode for the majority of Kenyan women or did it just pass through the cloud of time like other unimportant events. Nzomo clearly states that many Kenyan women were indeed unaware of the entire decade devoted to them (See Nzomo

1993 for elaboration on the impact of the Decade).

By 1990 the multi party movement had started in earnest. Within six months, sixteen (16) political lobby groups were formed and of these, nearly five were women specific. For example women's political lobby was organised to protest the attack on young women by the Saint Kizito boys (Kenya Anti-rape Organisation) Maendeleo Ya Wanawake was reenergized and began to disassociate itself from its previous association with the then ruling party KANU. It was clear that unlike from 1985 when the state had a positive attitude towards women groups and used *Maendeleo Ya Wanawake* as a tool to mobilise women into groups from 1993 this position changed when Maendeleo Ya Wanawake reverted to its non-governmental organization position. The League of Women Voters emerged and championed the voting rights of women. During this time FEMNET organized several gender sensitization workshops, focus on methodologies and media advocacy. Over 2000 Kenyans were trained on issues of gender equality (Brouwers with Pala). Women at various levels were made aware of use of frameworks such as Harvard gender analysis framework, Gender planning in the third world countries (By Caroline Moser), Gender equality and empowerment framework (By Sarah Longwe), People orientated planning (UNHCR), Social Economic of Gender Analysis (SEGA), Gender Analysis Matrix (GAM), Social relations approach and Capacities and Vulnerabilities Analysis framework.

Out of the 1995 world conference in Beijing emerged a plan, the Beijing Platform of Action, which laid out areas that needed improvement if the position of women was to be improved. The areas include reducing poverty among women, stopping violence, providing access to education and health care and reducing economic and political inequality. The notable emphasis of the conference was the employment of affirmative action and gender mainstreaming in all sectors to enhance women's involvement at all levels. With some notable exceptions, progress in these areas has been slow. In Kenya the women's groups/organisations increased in numbers and with new strategies several of them became beneficial to the women. The impact of Beijing Conference in 1995 has been immense and felt up to today. Ten years after Beijing during the Beijing+10 in 2005 it was noted that the Beijing platform could no longer be viewed as a set of simple goals and aspirations, but needed to be used as tools to push for the adoption of gender-sensitive policies (Mutume). For Kenyan

women, the Beijing platform of Action and the various international protocols the government has signed have yet to translate into positive changes in their daily lives. Thus they remain at the bottom of the social hierarchy, with poor access to land, credit, health and education. While some of the agreements that African governments have ratified enshrine property and inheritance rights, in most countries women are denied those very rights.

Hence the 1985 and 1995 UN Women's conferences in Nairobi and Beijing respectively, gave added impetus to women's mobilization. Moreover, shifting donor strategies gave greater emphasis to non-governmental organizations in the 1990s, and women's organizations were among the main beneficiaries of the new funding orientations. The expansion of the use of the cell phone, e-mail and the Internet in the late 1990s, although primarily among the urban organizations, enhanced networking exponentially. These new conditions, coupled with a significant increase in secondary and university educated women since independence, set the stage for new forms of women's mobilization (Brouwers with Pala). This story for another day.

The period between 1990 and 2010 has seen the emergence of a very strong movement that focused on major transformation of their lives through mobilising for constitutional change and political participation and against violence. The struggle for improved position and condition of women continue to date with numerous emergent longstanding organisations attempting to sort out all spheres of women's operations for instance only a few days ago the UN declared female genital mutilation a crime against human rights.

## **5.0 Conclusion**

Women's organizing in Kenya has been going on for decades, since long before the country's independence from colonial rule. The oldest women's organization, the *Maendeleo ya Wanawake Organization* (MYWO) was started in 1952. Although it was started by a group of white settler women, the organization has the widest grassroots penetration in the country, with over three million members at present. For a long time, MYWO's main focus was economic. It aimed to build women's capacity to generate income and manage their households as a means of alleviating poverty.<sup>5</sup>

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5 Kiragu, Jane 'Is there a Women's Movement?' in Muteshi, Jacinta (2006) Mapping Best Practices: Promoting Gender

This approach, whether or not influenced by MYWO remains pervasive and is reflected in the numerous small scale women's savings and credit groups and investment clubs or, as they are commonly called, 'merry-go-rounds.' These groups pool members' contributions to provide credit to their own members or make investments. The potential for using these groups as catalysts for women's rights activism has not been fully explored.

The *Third UN Conference on Women* was held in Nairobi in 1985. This marked the beginning of rights centred activism. A number of women's organizations were born, right after the conference including the *Federation of Women Lawyers, Kenya* (FIDA) which gained prominence for its women's rights advocacy. Today, there are numerous women's rights NGOs, many of which have aspects of the welfare approach.

In the light of this it has also been argued that in order to increase women's participation and integration, it was a tactical error to implement programmes only for women because "separate cannot be equal". Women's specific projects may marginalise the target group and could lead to dead end (or poor remuneration) occupations which are not part of an overall development effort (Weekes - Vagliani, 1985:10). These are definitely polarised positions. The role of women projects was to enhance their access to resources but most often this access diminished as a result of the project. Most projects isolate women from mainstreaming development projects and activities and treat them as consumption items (Weekes-Vagliani, 38).

Buvinic and Nieves (1984: 6 and 24) further pointed that, the efforts to implementing women's projects in developing countries showed that projects failed when participants were expected to perform too many complex tasks and when welfare oriented organisations attempted to develop production oriented projects. Women's programmes in developing countries have repeatedly and systematically translated production objectives into saving, handicrafts and other traditional female activities during implementation. This has failed in part because the tasks were excessive and non-familiar to the women and in part because they had little economic potential.

To have an impact the groups needed to focus on breaking down existing

conceptions and practice of the sexual division of labour. They would also have to concentrate on specific women needs. Women groups were defended in Kenya on the ground that their existence gave women more power. But women could only have power if their activities challenged existing power relations. Women's acquiescence in their lack of many skills and their dependence on government for support confirmed their lack of power.

The ILO Report of 1985 noted that the plethora of anti-poverty and development programmes launched for and by developing countries failed to improve the lives of rural working women and in some cases had actually worsened them. Pala (1984) stressed that the solution for women problems was a must because women were a vital resource and their oppression was a violation of human rights. Given the knowledge of these factors, why were solutions not obvious? The reason is in the choice of ineffectual means of achieving perceived ends and in an underestimation of the rigidity of the established structure of society. The women's activities introduced mainly in the post-independent period had numerous pitfalls because the activities and products were marginal and or irrelevant to rural needs and was outside the mainstream of development. Their failure could have been due to a weak commitment to improving the condition and status of women or even the desire to create an illusion of support without addressing the fundamental areas where change was necessary. Conclusively what we are saying is that changes brought about or encouraged by the state we hence such programmes and structures simply enhanced the patronising of women by male politicians within the dynamics of Kenyan politics, and indeed the exploitation of women's groups by politicians was common.

In spite of its ups and downs, the women's movement in Kenya is a visible force in society. Indeed it has been the activism and organizing by women that pushed gains in politics, where in 2002 for the first time in the country's history 29 women entered parliament, while several others got into various important levels of political decision making. In recent years, also several critical bills in favour of women passed through parliament. They include the Gender Commission Bill At the same time lack of harmonization of laws and persisting low levels of legal literacy among women continue to stand in the way of effective change. A number of other challenges include inadequate levels of coordination and partnership amongst women's

organisations, lack of investment by government of resources toward women's empowerment, inadequate and often conflicting policies, over-dependence on donor funding for programmes to support women. The movement has probably more power than it realizes and could take a centre stage position in demanding accountability to gender equality across the board

In this context, women's organisations operate as protagonists of women's rights and service providers to women's needs. Neither the government nor civil society organisations have been able to address women's problems adequately. The Women's Bureau has not performed well, laws and judiciary are still discriminating women, and their access to services remains limited, while traditional norms and practices affect women negatively in many ways of life. Human rights organisations have failed to carry a women's agenda, the same goes for the media, trade unions, faith-based and political organisations. With few exceptions, male leaders of civil society have shown limited understanding of the scope of gender-based discrimination and of the significance of women's empowerment for development. So, women feel the need to organize separately and to serve women's interests.

The minimal achievements of women have led to their recognition as an important forum for development, and challenging existing gender relations, at the grass roots since Nairobi and Beijing the whole notion of women organising has survived and continues to expand. Women in Kenya continue to find that there's strength in numbers. As the adage goes, sticks tied together cannot be easily broken. Perhaps this is what Kenyan women have in mind as they form cooperative groups all across the country to deal with social economic and political problems that particularly engulf the rural areas.

Following successes, the phenomenon of women's organisations and groups has compelled many women to form associations. The bottom line of every group is to have each member live a better life, where she feels loved and cared for, hence pulling many from lives of solitaire anguish and despair. Moreover, such groups have become a forum for discussion and the exchange of ideas, which has been lacking for so long (News and Views on Africa from Africa).

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