



Rural Women's Perspectives on Marriage and Related Issues: Analysis of Personal Narratives from Kenyan Women

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Abstract

This paper is based on personal stories as told by Kenyan women. The stories were compiled by the author in 2001 and 2002 when interviewing Kenyans on their views regarding the new constitution. The paper identifies issues raised by women during the women only sessions which focused on the women's personal lives in the context of marriage, polygamy, motherhood and experiences of domestic violence, among others. The paper is guided by the feminist theoretical perspective which argues that if you want to know about women, you should start with women, for they know. African feminism also argues that though the struggle for women's liberation is a struggle that all should engage in, including the state, policy makers both men and women must set the pace and lead the struggle. It is they who will define what marriage is for them, whether polygamy is a desired arrangement and say *no* to domestic violence. It is the women who must clear the path that they, the men, and the African communities must walk on their journey towards more women friendly societies. The paper focuses on: marriage, the place of the first wife in polygamous marriages, motherhood, widowhood and domestic violence. The author concludes that feminist research is bringing new knowledge and perspectives to the traditional African view on the institution of marriage and mapping the paths towards new societies.

Key words: Marriage, Motherhood, Polygamy, Feminist Theory, African Feminism, Constitution, Patriarchy.

Introduction

I have often read the *Song of Lawino* by Okot P' Bitek and I must admit that I have always loved it. As I was working on the introduction to the collection of *Warukenya's* stories in the now published *Reclaiming My Dreams*, (2010) and listening keenly to the variations in Wanjira wa Rukenya's stories, and how as an artist, she has subverted some beliefs and cultural attitudes, I asked myself, 'If Lawino, the famous protagonist of Okot p'Bitek's *Song of Lawino* (1969) were to speak for herself, what would she say?' Since then, I have listened to many women speak about their personal lives, about marriage, motherhood, about men and about women. I have listened to African women writers such as Margaret Ogola in her story, *The River and the Source* (1994), to Lema Elieshi's *Parched Earth* (2001), Micere Mugo's *Writing and Speaking from the Heart of My Mind* (2012), Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah* (2014) or Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter* (1981). I have listened, too, to many African American women poets and novelists among them Toni Morrison, Angela Davis, Fabu Mogaka, Sojourner Truth as well as to many African female singers and I am convinced that as writers and critics we need to

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move further in our search for a more comprehensive vision of the world, that is so well articulated by women poets, writers and critics.

As we reflect on our history and the dual nature of our world we need to listen to women speak about key institutions such as marriage. The current history of the world, literature and of science gives us a lopsided world view with outdated philosophies and values. In this spirit, I believe that the Kenyan constitution is so friendly to women and other traditionally excluded groups because women and these other usually marginalized groups were approached and they spoke for themselves and determined what they wanted to see engrained in the constitution. Their views were collected, processed and then presented to and discussed with various stakeholders including political parties, faith groups, trade unions, professional bodies, regional and district representatives, civil society organisations as well as women's organisations.

Like the protagonist in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1947), women have been looking for themselves, and asking everyone else, except themselves, questions that only they could answer. But first, they had to discover that they are invisible and inaudible to the world. They told narratives to children, sang lullabies to the young ones, prayed to God to look after them when men deserted their beds and looked for younger women, kept the pain in their hearts when they were barren and as the Maasai women's prayer tells us, they prayed:

My God do not leave me at the mercy of the man,
At his habitually moody whims
He that rounds the village
Arriving when loneliness has filled the house
Setting on the walls as well as on the bed
Not at the mercy of a wanderer with unsteady affection
He whose mother had completed all the rituals due to him
He to whom guests come saying
My friend my dear, where will you spend the night?
(Kipuri, 1983:19)

The woman of Africa today is beginning to define Africa's social, economic and political realities for the future. The other half of the story of Africa is coming to the fore; it is more audible and assertive. The African woman is bringing the female experiences to the elder's councils and demanding to be heard. She is defining the female past and shaping the future of Africa. Her voice is being heard through constitutional provisions and feminist pathways. She is defining herself through literature, political representation and other leadership areas. She is demanding to be heard through poetry, short stories, novels and songs across Africa's national borders. She is occupying different spaces, defining motherhood, marriage, polygamy, love, culture, family, for herself and her society and demanding to be heard.

In the same spirit, this paper analyses a selected number of rural women's personal narratives documented during the collection of views at the constituency levels by the people of Kenya as they prepared to make a new constitution. The personal stories discussed here were collected in 2001 and 2002 when the Constitution Review Commission travelled all over the country to consult the people. These personal stories are recorded verbatim, transcribed and translated into English. The stories analysed here were recorded during women only sessions. Examining these women's personal

stories will help us have a look at what ordinary African women are saying about life in general, their personal lives and the marriage institution in particular.

The author takes the view that feminist ideology and feminist theory which also guide this paper are woman centred and are derived from the multi-disciplinary work of scholars drawn from the humanities and social sciences. The feminist theory broadens our knowledge and leads us to discoveries that help us develop a critical understanding of society in order to redirect our society's thinking towards a more humane and just society. African feminism also believes that although women's liberation should be the concern of men and women as well as the state and other institutions, women such as Akoko in the *River and the Source* (1994) must take the lead. The Feminist theory also benefits from feminist research that puts gender at the centre of social inquiry and this helps to make women visible and audible.

This author believes that women must dispel myths about African women and explode tired old notions of marriage, motherhood and male supremacy and move to unexplored and unexamined areas of women's lives. In this regard, women scholars must take the lead in this process of re-construction and create new knowledge and new perspectives based on women's experiences and their view of the world.

In his *Souls of Black Folk* W.E.B Du Bois (1904) refers to the problems of the black people in America saying:

Between me and the other world, there is ever an unasked question: unasked by some through feelings of delicacy; by others through the difficulty of rightly framing it. All, nevertheless, flutters around it. They approach me in a half-resistant sort of way, eye me curiously or compassionately, and then instead of saying, 'How does it feel to be a problem?' They say, 'I know an excellent coloured man in my town'; 'or I fought at mechanics Ville'; or 'do not these southern outrages make your blood boil?' (213)

African women have had to explain themselves to a world that does not seem to understand them. Women have been looking at a world, to which they are invisible. They have been living in the shadows. Coming out and telling their story and in their own style can only enrich our world view, our understanding of our history and shed light on the path towards our future.

In the following section, I have chosen a number of personal stories from women of different ages and from different communities and ethnic backgrounds. I chose to listen to their voices about marriage because according to common wisdom, marriage, motherhood and family are the expected status every African woman should achieve.

Analysis of Some Women's Personal Testimonies in the Review of the Kenya Constitution

This paper is guided by theoretical perspectives which argue that if we want to understand what women's lives, experiences and challenges are, we must begin asking the women themselves. They know. And if we want to know what women think or what their experiences with the world are, we have to look for new methods, for new ways of finding out and understanding their thoughts and experiences. Women know who they are, what they go through, what love is and only they can articulate their views and

experiences. As discussed in the introduction, this is a feminist perspective. For close to thirty five years, I have been seeking women's views on many issues, (Kabira 1983, Kabira 1985, Kabira 1987, Kabira 1994, Kabira 2010, Kabira 2012, Kabira 2014, etc.). Women never disappoint. They know. They have lived their lives and have accumulated experiences and generated knowledge that we must harvest.

The analysis of the personal stories that follow will help us look at what women are saying as they articulate what their issues are, their priorities and concerns.

This paper focuses on the broad theme of marriage and related issues. The choice of this thematic area is based on what the women themselves wanted to talk about when they had women only sessions. It is also very important for me because it appears that while national organisations and even community based organisations led by women, focused on broad issues that also affect women such as women's representation in political parties, female genital mutilation (FGM), broad gender based violence etc. which are very critical, ordinary women, when they spoke in private and in the comfort of the created space also focused on personal intimate issues such as relationships with husbands. This paper, therefore, focuses on such very personal issues around marriage as the position of the first wife in a polygamous marriage; the concept of marriage itself; womanhood and motherhood; polygamy; domestic violence and widowhood. The discussion will be based on information gathered from rural women of different ethnic origins and age groups. One of them is Akinyi, a young woman who considers herself old at the age of 24, married with four children and living in a polygamous home. Other contributors were Maria Kimaiyo, Monicah Makuti of the Sengwer Community Centre in the Rift Valley, Ijabo Nasiba, a Muslim woman from Fafi and Hawa Mahdi Adan also from Fafi in North Eastern Province.

The Status of the First Wife in a Polygamous Marriage

I want to begin this analysis with a controversial subject, i.e. that of the status of the first wife in a polygamous marriage in the African context. This was provoked by the reviewer of this paper who, after reading my paper, asked me what happened to the African status of the first wife. The question took me down memory lane when I used to visit my grandmother Wariara wa Njuguna who was married to my grandfather Kang'ethe wa Kihika. She was the first among sixteen wives. When I used to regularly stay there during the struggle for independence, the three first wives were on the same compound far from my grandfather's hut where we stayed with his five beautiful young wives. We used to go there because there was a lot of food in his compound and the young wives would always be told to give us food. I never asked what the status of my grandmother was but the one thing I remember is that my grandfather never visited those three first wives. When he passed by coming from Limuru, he would stop outside and ask, "*Mwari wa Njuguna, murio-okuo? (daughter of Njuguna), you are well?*", "*yes, we are fine.*" My grandmother would respond. He would then walk to the compound where he lived with his young wives.

This reflection made me ask myself whether our information/knowledge about the first wife in a polygamous homestead was ever the views of the women or that of the husbands. Like motherhood this could just be a myth.

I therefore, look at what some of the women's stories in this paper say about the status of the first wife. Akinyi says:

I am 24 years old. I want the constitution to protect old women like me. You see, when I got married, he was very good to me. He would come home every day with something for our child and me. Sometimes, he would bring half a kilo of meat or fish. Now he does not sleep in my house. He says I smell, I am dirty, I don't cook well and that I have grown old. I have four children now, the oldest one is eight years, and the youngest is one year old. I don't have anyone to help me with the children when I go working in the garden, or fetching firewood. I have to go looking for food every day". (Kabira, 2012)

Contrary to the myth of the dominant place of the first wife, Akinyi, just like Ramatoulaye of *So Long a Letter*, says that this idea that first wives are respected and have a leading place in polygamous households is just but a myth.

She tells us that when she got married, she got food often but now, her husband has two other wives and he abuses her all the time. He beats her when he comes home. He says she is dirty. So, she wants the constitution to protect her and old women like her. She adds that many like her are dumped after they have children. They are busy looking after their children and have no time for themselves. Husbands have all the time for themselves. They bathe with the water we fetch, they eat the food we cook. They look good when they go to meet other men. (Kabira, 2012)

As in the case of Akinyi, Maria Kimaiyo's husband moves on when he gets a job and marries another woman. The husband ignores the first wife. It is after the children come that the husband wants his own space. He wants to be taken care of. He leaves the responsibility of the children to the woman.

Monicah Makuti of the Sengwer Community Centre in the Rift Valley says,

When the man sees that you have given birth to many children, he marries another wife and brings her to your land by force. He can even take a piece of that land and sell it to buy another piece of land for the younger wife. And then he takes the only cow you had and takes it as the bride price for that woman or takes it for the younger wife to be milking. Now we would want the law to state that when a girl gets married and her husband is given his piece of land, the title deed should be written in the names of both the husband and the wife so that when he marries a second wife, the piece of land will continue to belong to the first wife. The husband should look for another piece of land and property for the second wife. Sometimes you find that the younger wife has gone to school and knows how to read and dress smartly and she is still young. Sometimes you find that she also has a job. So, you who do not have any job, are left with your children. (Kabira, 2012)

So, where is the glory of the first wife? It appears that this glory is in the minds of the communities. Women are giving their views on what happens to them as first wives or to their mothers who are first wives. So, maybe there was such a place for the first wife but again may be there never was. It could be a question of who told the story, was it a man who talked of the "respect" societies had for the first wife? What did this respect mean? Did it mean leave her alone like my grandfather and her first three co-wives? Did it mean, as in the case of Akinyi in this story and that of other women, let her stay at home.

For my pleasure, I will get another wife and seek my pleasures away from this one. I will “respect” her as the mother of my children. She has her position of the “first” wife. I will go and look for pleasure outside but she is “respected” and has her “recognised” place.

Ijabo Nasiba, a Muslim woman from Fafi says,

They say that to marry four wives is allowed; that men can marry up to four women. But it does not say that you can marry four wives and then forget the first wife and her children. It is not right but you get that our people the Somalis, and especially the Muslims, have that problem. They get married again and then forget about the first wife and her children who continue to suffer. But when you try to speak against it, you are told that you are interfering with religion. When a man gets married to another wife, he forgets you. We are not saying that he sends you away. He still keeps you in the house. He does not divorce you but he does not take proper care of you and the children. Sometimes he disappears for years and pretends that you are not there. After some years, he comes back and stays with you for one week and then again goes away.

It does not matter that you are a first wife. But for the man, he has not sent you away, he “respects” you. This is the male view, that first wives are respected and have authority. Women do not have the same view.

The Concept of Marriage

Regarding marriage Akinyi says,

You see I got married a long time ago. It is now eight years since I got married. I was going to school but there was not enough food in our home. My father gave me to these people - my husband's people. I had grown up in the plains where nothing grows. There is famine all the time. It is very dry. We are not lucky like those nearer the lake who can go fishing. We are between the hills and most of the time it does not rain. They say we are in the area where there is rain shadow. We are eleven in my mother's house. My father has four wives, so there are many other children in my father's homestead. My parents could not feed all of us so I was given away to my husband's people.

She was given away to her husband's people. This is marriage. Her father had to look for someone to give his daughter to because they could not feed all the children. That is how Akinyi became a wife and gave birth to four children by the time she was 24 years.

As in the case of Akinyi, Maria Kimaiyo notes that husbands leave their first wives because they have many children. They do not like to be burdened by children. After they give birth, the responsibility of looking after the children shifts to the women. This is not what marriage should be. Taking care of the children becomes the woman's burden. It is not surprising that many men now complain that when the children grow up, they are only concerned about their mothers. She is the parent they know. The liability of sending children to school becomes the woman's burden but the women want a marriage where the husbands share the load of taking care of the children together with them.

So when we say marriage is the ultimate goal and fulfilment for African women, we are not referring to the views of Akinyi and many other African women. Clearly, Akinyi is saying to her husband, he loved her when she did not have many children, was able to take care of him and was beautiful for him to look at. Instead, when you have children

and you are burdened, men go to look for other wives. Polygamy takes away from you, just like Ramatoulaye of *So Long a Letter* (1981) says. She argues that contrary to perceptions, “*Many of us are dumped when we have children.*” So, how is it true that “Mother is gold” as the Nigerian proverb says? Akinyi decries the fact that women spend so much time taking care of others that they have no time for themselves while the husbands have all the time for themselves.

For Akinyi, therefore, marriage is meant to be a place where men are taken care of by their wives, where women are objects to please the men and when that glitter is gone and if he sees one who glitters more, he can move on and justify his move by saying, “*African men are polygamous*”. Polygamy is unacceptable to Akinyi and other women. On the other hand, her story tells us that she would like a situation where marriage means she is respected, where they both take responsibility for the children, where the domestic chores are shared; a marriage where her husband respects her, understands her and appreciates her.

Monicah Makuti of the *Sengwer Community Centre in the Rift Valley* tells us:

In our community, when a girl is circumcised, the father says he has now gotten wealth and starts to count cows or pieces of land. But when a man is born, they say he now has land and wealth. So I say we stop female genital mutilation completely because as soon as a girl from Sengwer is circumcised, she is forced to get married. The father wants cows and the girl is forced to go to another man's house.

This young girl gets married. She begins a life where her dreams are now transferred to her children like Akinyi, at the age of 24, she is an old woman and her dreams are deferred.

In the first part of this paper, we argued that it is important for women to speak for themselves. When we say we are talking about African culture, we need to ask ourselves if women subscribe to this culture. Clearly, in this testimony, Monica explains that girls are treated badly in society; circumcision is related to marriage, it is a sign that the young woman is ready for marriage and can be given to a man so that the father can get wealth. The father wants cows, so that the girl, against her will is sent to a man's house. She is now a wife. What is marriage for this girl? The girl's education is stopped because the father wants wealth. With circumcision and marriage, the girl's education is over and she now joins Akinyi and becomes an old woman at the age of 24.

Women see the marriage institution as a hindrance to the progress of their daughters. They want them educated and being able to take care of themselves. Men, on the other hand, have traditionally seen their daughters as a source of wealth. This is still happening in many communities. I remember giving a lift to a man from Kinangop on one of those days when I was coming from collecting the views and he was lamenting that he had four girls and needed money but nobody seemed to want to marry any of those girls. So, he did not know what else to sell. But Akoko of the *River and the Source* (1994) reminds the people of her husband's homestead that the dowry that was paid for her has brought out bitterness and that:

I have not borne thirty children in exchange for those cattle. Therefore, I shall lift their gloom and suffering and depart from here to my father's house. Be it known, my father was a wealthy man before receiving those

cattle and would have remained wealthy without them, for none of my twenty brothers is wifeless. Be it noted also that wealth I created in this home is more than double the number paid for me. Therefore, when I reach home, I shall request the council of J. Odongo to convene proceedings for a separation. My people will give back your cattle and you will give me back mine (32).

While Akoko's father, as in the case of the women in these narratives, is concerned with marriage and dowry, the same dowry becomes a burden for the young woman when she goes to her home of marriage. Dowry becomes a double edged sword. But as we said in the introduction to this paper, the struggle for women's liberation has to be led by the women themselves. Akoko in *The River and the Source* is leading this struggle. She claims the fruits of her labour and as she decides to go back to her home of birth, she takes the wealth that she has created. By narrating their experiences, these women are creating new knowledge that is important in the development of feminist pathways. They are re-defining marriage from the women's perspective.

Similarly, Hawa Mahdi Adan (from Fafi, North Eastern Province) testifies:

Our daughters are very young, as young as fifteen years but men come and lie to them about marriage. But after they have sex with the young girls and make them pregnant, they leave them. Because they spoil the lives of our children, we need help. Having sex with young girls and then dumping them is something unacceptable to women. Men enjoy their bodies but as soon as they are through, they do not want to take responsibility and when they marry them, they soon move to another girl when they get tired of this one.

For her, girls are not plates of rice that men can enjoy and leave. It is not something to be feasted on. Ijabo Nasib adds:

You know, there is something that pains us a lot... It is about men. You find that a man marries a woman and brings her to town where his family lives. The woman is forced to depend on his family even if that family does not offer her the assistance she needs. Then the man goes away to work and leaves the woman whom he forgets together with his children. The woman and the children are left suffering.

Clearly the issue of men's irresponsible behaviour within the context of marriage is something of great concern to women. Women, even when married, seem to be the sole carers of children while the men are depicted as irresponsible and just leisure lovers.

Openly, Ijabo wonders what marriage is about. She wonders whether women are married just to bear children and stay at home and look after them for the rest of their lives. Men, on the other hand, can have children but their lives must not be interfered with. They come to the women when they choose and go when and where they want. They do not want to be bogged down with problems of children and poverty. As Elieshi says in *Parched Earth*:

Marriage is like the rain in the cold, wet season, without an umbrella. You get soaked through to the skin before you know what's happened. You get possessed by the rain, by the wet clothes which cling to your body, marking you out like a claimed territory. Then you are imprisoned in that state, that of the rain falling on you and the clothes possessing your body like a territory. The choices are hard. You cannot choose between standing

still or taking off your clothes..... The choice open to you, then, is one; walking on, clothes and all. This way, you at least meet the rain head on, meet it and leave some of it behind as you walk, as you make the inevitable movement forward. (Elieshi, 2001: 141)

These are the words of Doreen, the protagonist whose experience of marriage and the whole institutional culture leads her to feel trapped and caged as one would be when walking in the rain. She is speaking like Akinyi, Kimaiyo, Ijabo and other African women.

It is clear that women are questioning the marriage institution and insisting on re-defining it for themselves and for the societies.

Motherhood

At the age of only twenty four Akinyi declares herself old. She feels she is an old woman because she has had four children and lived a full life cycle. She was married, became a mother, the man moved on to other women, she has no dreams for she has transferred them to her children. Motherhood is meant to be the pinnacle of achievement for African women but Akinyi thinks otherwise. Being fully occupied with taking care of the children she has no time to take care of herself so her husband no more finds her attractive and has moved on. Having children is a pre-occupation that makes her old, haggard and not pleasing to her husband. The husband says she smells and she is dirty; motherhood has made her lose her *riri* (beauty). The man will go out to get another woman who can please him. As Lorna Goodison says in her poem:

I am Becoming my Mother;
Yellow/brown woman
fingers smelling always of onions
My mother raises rare blooms
and waters them with tea
her birth waters sang like rivers
my mother is now me
My mother had a linen dress
the colour of the sky
and stored lace and damask
tablecloths
to pull shame out of her eye.
I am becoming my mother
brown/yellow woman
fingers smelling always of onions.
(Lorna Goodison, 1986)

At the age of 24, Akinyi has no personal dreams. Any dreams that she might have ever had, have been transferred to her children. She has become her mother.

Maria Kimaiyo of the Sengwer Community Centre in the Rift Valley says

We the women of Sengwer have given birth to many children but we see that our husbands are leaving us because we have many children. So it becomes very hard for us to take care of those children, looking for food and educating them. But we don't have anything to take these children to school because even the cattle have been stolen. We are only left to till the land so as to take our children to school. I would want the constitution to help us the Sengwer women. When the husband sees that you have many

children, he goes away sometimes to look for work away from home but when he gets money, he does not bring it home but spends it away from home. Sometimes he can even go to another woman and the first wife is left suffering.

Is this the “joy of motherhood,” that our tradition refers to? The children become the mothers’ burden and she is supposed to rejoice and be glad. Burdened by childbirth, poverty, lack of economic power to take care of her children, deserted by the husband, the father of her children who goes looking for another woman, the woman can’t understand what the joy of motherhood means. Yes, African women want to be mothers, but they also want to share the responsibilities of bringing their children up together with their husbands. They want them to be fathers and take care of their children.

Ijawo (Fafi) introduces another angle:

You find that a woman gets married but she cannot give birth. The man does not know whether you will ever get pregnant even if he stays with you for centuries. For that reason, he leaves you and says, “This woman is not giving birth. She should stay at home. I’ll marry a second wife who shall give me children.” That is already interfering with religion and God’s affair because it’s only Him who knows whether you will give birth or not. I know it allows the man to get another wife but giving birth or not is God’s case. If a man marries a woman and then thinks the woman cannot give him children, then he should divorce her. That woman also has the right to look for ways to have her own children. It is not right to just keep her in the house saying she cannot give birth and then you go and get married to another woman as she suffers alone.

Ijawo has spoken and wants women to be free to get children from other men if she is not having children with her husband. If marriage is tied to motherhood, then she should be released from it or allowed to try with other men. In any case, men will also go away to look for other women to marry if you have many children and you are occupied with taking care of them and thus not taking care of him. Motherhood is a two edged sword. You have children, it is your responsibility and the husband can go where he is better taken care of and where there is peace. You have no children, your husband moves away to where he can get children and also be taken care of. Again, where are the joys of motherhood? Ijawo wants women to have the right to leave those husbands who want to go to other women because the wife has no children. They should give her the divorce letter, the money he owes her and her bride wealth.

Polygamy

As discussed in the marriage section, polygamy is something that women do not want to be associated with. Akinyi identifies polygamy and having many children as a problem. She has found herself in the same problem where her mother was, in a polygamous household and with many children whom she could not feed. All the other women relate clearly to this feeling. African women, according to these narratives do not subscribe to the philosophy of polygamous households. Most of the women who spoke to the Commission in these women only sessions do not believe in polygamous marriages. Their personal stories tell a different reality.

They do not accept polygamy. They see polygamy as a selfish arrangement by men that deprives the woman of her status, dehumanizes her and leads to a life of rejection. The

rejections, beatings, harassment, oppression have their impact on the women's body. It makes the bodies of women "look bad" as Monica says and then "he rushes to marry another wife and you are left". So, when the Kenya National Parliament legalised polygamous marriages in 2014, this was not done in the interest of women but to protect the interests and the power of men. It is to perpetuate a patriarchal system that women do not subscribe to.

Domestic Violence

One of the major concerns of the women is domestic violence. On violence within marriage, Monicah says:

Wife beating is a common thing in our community. The law should stop this. Anyone who beats a woman should be jailed. But women, when you are beaten, you never report it. You just say, "Let him beat me. After all he took dowry to my parents." We do not want this because we continue to suffer and our bodies continue to look bad and when the man sees this, he rushes to marry another wife and you are left there.

These stories say a lot about different types of domestic violence, such as wife beating, desertion, neglect of wife and children, psychological violence, abuse, disinheritance, among other abuses. As Pearl Clearge says, "Domestic violence is the frontline of the war against women" (446)

Widowhood

On widowhood, Hawa says:

After the death of the husband, the woman is left with the children. She should also be allowed to inherit her husband's property. In most cases, the woman is disinherited and she is left together with her children to suffer. The people who take away the property of the dead husband are mostly family relatives from the man's side. When your husband dies and you have children, the relatives do not come to say sorry. But when you get married to another man after three years, the relatives come and take the children and all your belongings. They say that if you marry another man, they will take all the property of their deceased brother.

Marriage is clearly not about love, according to this woman. It is a different arrangement for both men and the community. The man leaves you for another wife when you are alive; you are expected to stay at the same homestead even after he dies and in addition you are also disinherited when he dies.

This paper clearly indicates that women have shared values of marriage and related issues despite the fact that they come from different ethnic communities. The human narrative is being told anew by these and many other women. When women speak, they are giving their side of the story. As artists, we must continue to listen to their story so that the dual nature of the world is born. If we address the concerns of women in the marriage institution, for instance, motherhood, widowhood, polygamy and women's concerns on domestic violence, we shall begin to shape the marriage institution and develop cultural values and attitudes that are friendly to both men and women, their children and the family as a whole. For many women leaders, the focus has been ensuring that women's interests are taken care of based on their experiences, their vision

of the world and of the future they wish to build for their children, their families and communities. The women leaders are fighting to ensure that all these concerns are taken on board when designing our national, regional and global policies.

This is important because for centuries, men have spoken for and on behalf of women on such critical issues as marriage, motherhood and domestic violence, among other issues. Women's voices and perspectives must be unmistakably articulated.

Listening to women speak must bring a new awakening, hopes and dreams in our study of verbal art in general and even in oral and written Literature. In fact, in all disciplines, we must continue to question our views on public knowledge about women and keep asking "is that the women's view?". We must begin to acknowledge that if we want to know about women's thoughts, feelings, experiences, hopes and aspirations for themselves, their communities, their Nations and the world, we must seek answers from them. They know.

It is necessary to vocalize these critical issues and struggles within a practical and theoretical framework which acknowledges that women have created cultural spaces where their shared meanings are being generated. They are speaking, claiming their past and shaping the tools by which to interpret the world for themselves and their communities as they challenge long held beliefs about them, their place in society, their feelings, their needs and even their wishes and perspectives. These personal testimonies tell us what women think about the institution of marriage, about motherhood, polygamy, the status of first wives in a polygamous set-up, domestic violence, among other issues. In addition, the personal testimonies tell us how these issues impact on women's lives.

These stories are from different ethnic communities in Kenya, namely, Luo, Maasai, Kalenjin, Sengwer, Somali, among others, and obviously women are speaking the same language. In their testimonies marriage, motherhood, polygamy and widowhood become a reality. As they articulate these stories and create a world with different values, women will not live in fear of living with a man who is a wonderer and arrives when "loneliness has filled the house" as the Maasai women's prayer says. They will celebrate womanhood and breathe the air of confidence. They will live according to institutional, cultural and social values, expectations and a philosophy they will have defined. This approach helps us, as Anne Oakley (142) says *to construct knowledge on the basis of women's voices*. As I end this paper I want to say with Mary Austine that *what women have to stand squarely on is not their ability to see the world in the way men see it, but the importance and validity of them seeing it in some other way* (1868-1934, p 458). Their way; it is a legitimate view of the world and all that is in it.

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