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### Interrogating Impediments to Women Participation in Political Leadership among the Abagusii in Post-Colonial Kenya

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The trend on elective political positions in the Gusii region shows that, women have not been getting equal opportunities as their male counterparts in elective seats of members of parliament, the seats of the governor, senator and members of county assembly in the counties in Gusii region. The objective of the study was to establish challenges to women participation in political leadership among the Abagusii Community from 1963 up to 2015. The study was guided by the feminist theory. According to this theory, the discrepancies in the decision-making in societies emerge from a social framework that espouses inequality. This study was based on qualitative approach and phenomenological design. The target population was made up of 682,481 women participants from the 8 Sub-Counties and 29 wards in Kisii County from where a sample size of 422 respondents was sampled purposively. The research instruments were interviews and focused group discussions from key informants. Archival sources were used as well as secondary data from books, articles published in journals and periodicals, unpublished articles and newspapers. Piloting was carried out in Kisii County on 10% of the sample size to test dependability and credibility. The data was analyzed thematically and presented qualitatively in the narrative form. The findings of this study are that cultural factors, stereotyping of women, economic factors, political barriers, lack of husband support, stigmatization, and gender-based violence are among the factors that have contributed to low participation of women in political leadership among the Abagusii community. The recommendations of the study were change in cultural perception towards women, gender equality awareness, emphasis on women empowerment and amendment of political party policies this will bring gender equality in leadership among the Abagusii.

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## INTRODUCTION

Women participation in political leadership in Kenya has been low since the attainment of independence in 1963. In the Gusii region particularly, where women form more than half of the population, marginalisation is depicted by the fact that no woman has ever been elected from the 1st to the 11th parliament with only a few being nominated meaning that majority only participated as voters. The scope of this study, therefore, is to explore the factors that have contributed to the marginalisation of women in political leadership among the Abagusii.

### Background to the study

The level of women's participation in politics in the 19th century has been low and over the years, equal participation of women in politics has not been achieved. Women in government in the modern era are under-represented in most countries in the world in contrast to men. Globally, the political participation of women in politics is increasingly low. Global improvement has been made towards the recognition of women's political, economic and social equality. International agreement and conventions have persistently stressed on the importance of women's equal participation in political leadership. The 1995 Beijing Platform, for example emphasized that women's equal participation in decision making is not only a demand for justice o democracy, but also be seen as an important condition for women's interest to be taken into account. (Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing, 1995).

Globally there are 37 states in which women form less than 10 per cent in parliament in single or lower houses as at December 2014 (Inter-

parliamentary Union: Women in politics: 2014). On a global scale, women face challenges and are not advancing enough to leadership roles and contributing to influential decision-making roles. In women parliamentary representation, women represent only 20% of ministers globally (Inter-parliamentary Union, 2013).

In Africa, most countries have attempted to address the political empowerment of women successfully. Six Africa countries: Burundi, Mozambique, Rwanda, South Africa, Tanzania and Uganda have achieved the critical index of 30 percent or higher women representation in their national parliaments. These countries have attained this milestone because they recognized the importance of equality between women and men in decision making and they put in place changes in their electoral and parliamentary processes (Sirleaf, 2010).

The new Kenya constitution (2012), promotes the participation of women and men at all levels of governance and makes provisions for proportion representation. In addition, each of the 47 counties is required to send one woman representative, creating a female representation within national assembly parliament of 16%. Despite all these efforts, women are still marginalized in elective political positions as compared to their male counterparts; hence it is clear that deeply rooted and persistent obstacles still hinder the progress of women and their participation in the process of decision making in politics. The study therefore analyses impediments to women participation in political leadership in post-colonial Kenya particularly among the Abagusii and will be a starting point in seeking solutions to the problem.

### Statement of the problem

Political leadership facilitates development and empowerment of individuals through structures and processes where decisions regarding the use of resources in the society are generated by both women and men. Women however are under-represented in political leadership in Kenya, despite the fact that the new Kenyan constitution promotes the participation of women and men at all levels of governance where article 81b of the Kenya constitution (2010) provides that ‘not more than two-thirds of the members of elective public bodies shall be of the same gender’. What the constitution does not provide for is the methodology to be used to ensure implementation. However, among the Abagusii, this percentage has not been achieved in elective public offices because no woman has been elected to the national assembly from the Gusii region since independence. Currently in the thirteen constituencies in Gusii; both Kisii and Nyamira counties, all the elected members of the national assembly, governors and senators in the two counties are male hence it is clear that deep-lying and persistent obstacles still deter the progress of women as compared to their male counterparts. Therefore, the researcher has been provoked to find out the impediments to women participation in political leadership among the Abagusii community and in turn seek solutions to the problem.

### Objective of the study

The study sought to explore challenges that women face impeding their participation in political leadership in the post-colonial period among the Abagusii.

### Scope of the study

The study was conducted in Kisii county located in western part of Kenya, 50Km East of L. Victoria. Kisii County has a population of 1,152,282 million, according to 2009 census report. The period 1963 up to 2015 was chosen because first, it is long enough to provide a deep insight into the study on the impediments to women participation in political leadership among

the Abagusii and second, it represents a period of political freedom post-colonization.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Empirical review

According to Sir Leaf (2010), limitation of women political participation is not only in Africa but global. Clinton-Rodhan (2003), Neumann (1998), Mathaai (2006), Thomas and Wilcox (2005) and Wanjohi (2003) observed that women participation in leadership and management brings a different perspective of political leadership. Epstein et al, (2005) and Neumann, (1998) both asserted that processes of decision making are of great concern to women leaders. Khan, (2010) and UNESCO, (2006) observed that illiteracy and low levels of education is a must disempowering factor for women’s development. Bannerjee, S. (2012) noted that female politicians face gender stigma from male members which undermine their ability to reach leadership role.

Dele Meiji Fatunla (2011), noted that there is continued dominance of political life in Africa by men which is not good for the continent. This is supported by Odhiambo (2006) who argues that African women are discriminated against from birth. Although women’s governmental representation in Uganda has increased, Ugandan women still suffer from unemployment and little or no access to healthcare. (Goetz A.M, 2002). According to Cole (2011), representation of women in leadership and decision-making remains a major gap in Africa and that there still exist some gaps that needs to be covered as women in politics continue to face varying impediments. Gordon and Gordon (1996) observed that with the advent of colonialism in Africa men gained political advantage as customary sources of female power were ignored. This is corroborated by Tripp (1996), who asserted that the prohibitive cultural attitudes against women involvement persist among both men and women. This is reflected in voting patterns and attempts to suppress women’s assertion of their political rights and views. Agbalajobi (2009), found that most customs often prefer sending male children to school over

females and this has marginally increased the illiterate women and stiffened their competition with their male counterparts in politics.

Onsongo (2000) and Kamau (2007) observed that restriction of movement of women in the early stages of colonial rule created male breadwinners and a sense of powerlessness among women, which continue to affect their participation in public decision making. According to Kanogo (2005), women were not expected to combine marriage and career. This is corroborated by Mathaai (2006), who noted that these contradictions continue to affect women's careers and how work places and politics are structured. Oduol (2008) and Omtata (2008), suggest that Kenyan women lack adequate training on political matters that can enable them participate effectively in the political field. According to FIDA (2012), pregnant girls continue to be expelled from schools. This is supported by Omtata (2008), who noted that retrogressive cultural and traditional practices impede the quest for women's leadership in Kenya. Omtata (2008) and Tripp (1996), cite poor socialization as the double burden syndrome to the girl child in Africa.

The literature has highlighted the gap on impediments to women participation in Gusii region of which none of the studies has articulated, the current study will therefore seek to fill this knowledge gap.

### **Theoretical framework**

This study was guided by the theory of patriarch an offshoot of radical feminism and gender theory where gender, as a theoretical construct was employed in the analysis and interpretation. Feminism attempts to identify relations between men and women by questioning, challenging and recognizing the existence of women oppression and aims at developing strategies to better gender relations. Feminism does not only deal with issues of justice and equality but also offers a critique of male-dominated institutions, values and social practices that are oppressive and destructive.

Radical feminists insist that women's subordination does not depend on other forms of domination, such as class rather, it is deeply embedded in individual psychos that is more difficult to change than class. Even though feminists share the same idea in terms of what gender oppression and women subordination might mean, they differ widely in terms of analyzing its origin and what constitutes women's liberation (Shulamith Firestone, 1970).

For instance, Shulamith Firestone (1970) points out that women's subordination is rooted in their biology rather than their reproductive physiology, arguing that only with the advanced technology such as 'test tubes babies', would women achieve equality and no longer depend on men. While other radical feminists argue that women are biologically superior to men because of their ability to give birth, some argue that it is not the set differences that should concern feminists but the social norms that devalue female biology like male dominance over women's fertility and sexuality on women's bodies. Men are considered to be the enemy and are exempted from their movement with a belief that women's issues are part of a general revolutionary struggle that one could not change the system within the established economic and political system and institutions. Radical feminists put sexuality, reproduction and patriarchy at the center of political arena where the conventional assumptions with regard to the women's place in society are challenged.

The relevance of the feminist theory is that it promotes equality for men and women in political, economic and social spheres. It attempts to understand and critique the role of gender in social relations, at the same time it focuses on women's ability to maintain the equality which is the basis of this research.

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The historical method of research was used in this study as informed by Cohen and Manion, 1994:45, this is an act of reconstruction undertaken in the spirit of critical inquiry designed to achieve a faithful representation of a

previous age. This was the most appropriate method for carrying out the study since it helped the researcher compile a systematic and coherent account of the events under investigation. The study employed descriptive design which according to Orodho and Kombo, 2002, is useful when collecting information about people's attitudes, opinions, habits or a variety of education or social issues.

The purposive sampling technique was used in this study to identify the actual respondents to be interviewed who had a sound appreciation of the subject. Hence, 422 respondents were purposely selected to be interviewed on the premise that one was above 18 years and eligible to vote, those who once held political office, current office bearers, and those who had participated in an election, but lost or had campaigned for candidates. Utilizing both primary and secondary data, data collection for primary data was done through the use of both interviews and questionnaires enhancing reliability where, the ten respondents were interviewed in Ekegusii, Kiswahili and English languages and the interview guides were divided into various sub-themes and historical periods under investigation. Whereas, secondary sources for this study were published materials collected from, Moi University Main Margaret Thatcher Library, University of Kabianga Library, Kisii University Library, Kisii Public Library, Nairobi University Library, Kisii County Government, and key government departments. Content analysis was used to analyze data and the results were presented descriptively. All the ethical procedures were followed where the researcher requested for permission from key informants by sending them advance letters explaining the purpose of the study.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The study found the following factors as impediments to women participation in political leadership among the Abagusii from 1963-2015.

### Cultural factors

Interviews with political leaders and other key informants in Gusii region brought elaborate

explanations on factors contributing to the marginalization of women political leadership among the Abagusii community. Culture is one of the factors that has continued to inhibit the progress of women in political leadership. The socio-cultural orientation females go through in their childhood to adulthood has consequently affected their participation in political leadership. Gender roles in the community in which women and girls are expected to engage in household chores make the women's place to be in the kitchen. Among the Abagusii, from birth the girl child was initiated into domestic roles as this was perceived as the female world. On the other hand, the boy child was socialized into leadership roles and was therefore introduced into such roles as grazing, hunting and guarding the homestead. These were considered male duties which hardened them for future leadership roles.

Researcher's findings indicate that women are primarily responsible for children's upbringing and home tasks. Women are expected to take care of their families that is, spouses, children, parents and even relatives, they are expected to keep the family together. These gender roles take most of the women's time and they have no opportunity to actively participate in other social activities like politics.

The assertion confirms observations made by Nzomo (1994) when she cited Dorsey et al (1978) that the socialization process affects women coming out since they were not brought out in the public domain as their male counterparts and this kept them away from participation in public life. The researcher's findings also agree with Reynolds (1999) who said that cultures socialize women from birth into strict roles that preclude them from public decision, making it much more difficult for them to obtain political offices.

In African societies, it is believed that men lead and women follow (Grant 2005). This is proven in the study done among the Abagusii. From the researcher's findings, it was evident that men are the final decision-makers in the family level and even in matters relating to public issues. It is the belief of the Abagusii that when a woman is

married and dowry has been paid, she is a properly of the husband and has to obey in every decision. Generally, men are the ones who are expected to be leaders. It is also considered that culturally it is a sign of disrespect on the part of the women to express opinions in the midst of men.

Researcher's findings also indicate that women are discriminated against from birth, where the birth of a baby boy is highly regarded and celebrated. Among the Abagusii in particular, the birth of a baby boy is celebrated with three ululations while a baby girl attracts two ululations. This gender based cultural assumption and the subsequent differential treatment of boys and girls in the home hinders women advancement in political leadership.

### **Stereotyping**

According to the researcher's findings women have been portrayed as weak vessels, that women cannot muster the required strength to wither the storm of politics the tough (men) and success is achieved through use of masculine strength. This is a prejudice of the patriarchal society that have presumed that only men make good leaders because of their character perceived as strong, focused, assertive, aggressive and dominant as opposed to women perceived non-leadership characteristics of being emotional, and cowardly.

Investigations indicate that most men have been having and still have a low opinion on women in Gusii region; they still live in the patriarchal system that perceives women as secondary citizens whose place is only in the home and not in the public sphere.

This view portrays women as victim of nature and is an expression of the bias of the society against women which lowers women's integrity and hinders their advancements in the political domain. The political sphere is often viewed as an area where men have superior knowledge and women's ideas are deemed inferior. Researcher's findings also indicate that it is believed that men can push for action in various project to be put up in a given area as opposed to women who are

deemed as lacking the required courage and stamina.

There is a mindset that only men can lead, and this is a belief that women are docile, submissive, patient and tolerant of monotonous work and violence, for which culture is used as a justification (Hint 2004). Findings indicate that during political campaigns the men were sometimes overheard saying that time is not yet ripe for the women to be voted into elective positions in the region which still practices patriarchal pecking order when it comes to leadership roles.

Thus, women are encouraged to play minor roles since their place is in the kitchen and men are the decision makers. Voters are therefore reluctant to support women because of this retrogressive belief.

### **Economic factors**

From the interviews it was found out that lack of resources has contributed to marginalization of women in political leadership among the Abagusii community. It was found out that women may not be able to mobilize enough resources to compete with their male counterparts since the political domain is often heavily 'monetized' and women are always economically disadvantaged. This was witnessed by one informant who claimed that during her campaigns, women could ask her for money. "Others would tell me to buy them sugar and when I said I did not have money, they told me that I did not need their votes".

There are many people who judge good leaders by the amount of cash they can give out in form of handouts. It is those who give the most who are likely to get votes, unfortunately not many women can compete materially with men. The person aspiring is usually expected to have money, this is despite civil education that people should to select leaders without looking at financial handouts. It will still take some time before the impact is seen in the region as voter buying disadvantages women.

This is because many women do not have access to ownership of productive resources like land added to that is the fact that about 70% of the 1.3 billion women are living on less than a dollar per day (World Bank, 2001). This indicated that gender inequalities in developing countries inhibit economic growth, and there is correlation between gender discrimination and greater poverty, slower economic growth, weaker government and lower standard of living of the people (World Bank, 2001).

The Abagusii community is patriarchal. Almost all the family assets were owned and controlled by men. Men owned and controlled livestock, cash crops, and vehicles if any, land, and even houses. Women owned household goods which are associated with the provision of domestic care by the women and were not even considered to be assets. Land is the most valuable asset for most Kenyan communities. Women constitute more than 52% of the population yet they own less than 5 percent of the land. Despite this fact, women do about 70 percent of the agricultural work. Men assert their customary rights to land and the labor of their wives in order to accumulate income for themselves but were not obligated to share this money with their wives. Even in the working families where both the man and woman contribute to acquisition of property the general pattern remains, capital property such as land, house and car are invariably registered in the name of the man.

Traditional inheritance tends to favor men not women, among the Abagusii property and resources in the family are controlled by men and women rarely inherit property from their parents, this puts women in a disadvantageous position economically. Hence poverty facing women in rural communities is their biggest hurdle in the quest to venture into elective politics.

It is clear politics in this country has been and still is very expensive; this affects women from venturing into the political process since most of them do not have resources. In a political culture where rigging and buying of votes is the order of the day, (bribery) women have always found

themselves at a disadvantaged situation. Men have the money while women do not have. For this situation, key respondents blamed the property ownership structure in the community.

### **Political barriers**

It was clear from the researcher's findings that political parties also play a very big role in marginalizing women in political leadership among the Abagusii. In political parties' women occupy junior positions and are not given opportunities to vie for senior seats in the parties. These political parties do not give women opportunities even if they try and more so getting a ticket to contest for a seat in a particular party for a woman is very difficult as they may be discriminated against in party nominations.

Basically, women operate in junior positions in political parties and serve as supports to male candidate. In Kenya women's representation in political parties and within the leadership positions in political parties is low, this low representation results into fewer women getting the opportunity to be nominated on party tickets to vie for political office.

The investigations revealed that all the political parties that had campaigned in Gusii region were led and dominated by males at the county level. The misconception that men have abilities is manifested in these party leaders who prefer men to hold key party positions, and prefer to nominate male candidates whom they believe will be in a position to compete 'effectively' with the other party candidates. They have had little trust or no trust at all on the abilities of women.

The nomination process of many of these political parties is flawed to the extent that deserving candidates in many cases are rigged out of the exercise. Women candidates are especially vulnerable as they are perceived as the weaker and more expendable candidates (Nzomo 2003).

Manipulations of the nominated process deter women from getting nominated on major party tickets which greatly reduces their chances of getting elected. This was confirmed by an

informant who vied for councilor seat in 2007 elections. She claims that the nomination process in her party ODM was unfair, she was rigged out of the party because the party members did not believe that a woman could represent them well as compared to a man, this contributed to her failure to secure the seat.

These findings confirm observation made by Oduol (2011) he sees lack of institutional political party structures with which to enhance women's participation which he blames for the low levels of women in politics this their limited representation in parliament and also within political parties. Thus, political parties and their leadership styles were found to have hindered women's active involvement in competitive politics in Kisii region.

### **Lack of spouse support**

From the researcher's findings it was found out that family issues are a challenge to women in leadership. Women who vie for political position lack enough support from their families who may see them as going against the cultural norms. Among the Abagusii, women who indulge themselves in politics may not get support from their husbands who may even threaten them with a divorce if they continue following their political ambitions. Politics is believed to be an area for men, who are associated with aggressiveness and toughness and men are expected to be the ones to enter into politics as opposed to women.

One of those interviewed, argued that many husbands were hindrances to the success of their wives in politics because they did not give them freedom to move and meet people at convenient times and places for fear that their wives will become unfaithful. While men coerced their wives and friends to vote for them, women were disadvantaged because they could not force their spouses and friends to vote for them.

In many instances friends discouraged such women's husbands from allowing their wives to join politics and warned them that they will lose the wives if they joined politics. Husband support plays a major role in women's success in politics.

This explains why majority of women in politics are widowed, divorced or never married. Those who are married if supported by their husbands enter politics when children are grown up. The same does not apply to men, many join politics with young families and expect full support from their wives despite the children being young. According to the women who were interviewed their husbands supported their political ambitions when the children were already grown up.

These sentiments are shared by many women around the world. In Probert's (2005) study of women academics in Australia, it emerged that eight of the ten women had broken up with their partners while they were studying for their PhDs. Politics may indeed be more threatening than academic progress. This lack of husband support is attributed to the fact that the men are socialized in a way that they feel inferior or threatened when their wives achieve more than them.

### **Stigmatization**

Researcher's findings indicate that among the Abagusii politics is believed to be men's domain and a woman who enters politics faces stigmatization as she is considered to have lost focus or is spoilt. Such women face a lot of mockery from the population who view them as having lost direction in life. Politics is also believed to be a dirty game and women are not supposed to enter into such a field.

Women in political positions who were interviewed said that once in power, they face a lot of stigma from men, who ridicule and undermine them at the slightest mistake they make just because they are women. This stigmatization of women arises due to the fact that men who have dominated politics may not feel comfortable when women start getting into what they perceived as their domain. Potential women candidates felt discouraged by the political style of their male counterparts who concentrated on abusing women politicians and labelled them as people who could not lead and whose place is in the kitchen. The few women who venture into the world of politics feel inhibited to speak especially when they are in large male-dominated meetings.

Those who are courageous to speak receive little attention and respect.

### **Gender based violence**

Electoral related violence is another challenge that women face in political participation. According to the findings women are considered a 'weaker sex' and they are more often targets of political violence. Male candidates are more likely to introduce political violence and hooliganism in their campaigns and attacks on female candidates and their families to intimidate them and make female candidates those who are aspiring to quit politics completely.

The threats target female politicians mainly due to their weaker physical make up and their peace-loving nature and violence against women may take various forms such as physical, sexual and psychological violence occurring in the family and the community at large. Omtatah (2008) notes that the threat of violence is insidiously used by men who advocate it as a way of discouraging women in politics and is a major deterrent to women's political participation and threatens to undo many of the gains that have been made towards political quality.

### **Lack of support from their fellow women on marginalization**

Researcher's findings indicated that women are their own enemies. This is a situation where women themselves are not ready to support their own that is another woman by voting for them. When a woman vies for a political seat fellow women campaigns against her and even spread negative information about the aspirant. This attitude amongst women is culturally based where they believe that their place is in the kitchen, suggesting that they were satisfied with their subordinate position. Some women have been socialized to contend the patriarchal structure that sentences them to subordination.

Investigations indicate that women have been the source of every undoing because they have little trust on the leadership abilities of their own gender; they prefer to vote for men for they associate masculinity with leadership qualities.

They are part of the perpetuation of the male chauvinism in politics, given the fact that they form the majority of voters.

Women leaders interviewed also testified that during their campaign periods some of their fellow women spread a lot of ill comments about them claimed at deterring voters to vote for them. At the same time, while in office after winning the seats, some women are fighting for their downfall while campaigning for male aspirants

### **Lack of time**

Researcher's findings indicate that due to the gender roles women play they lack enough time in leadership positions. Women are primarily responsible for bringing up their children; they are expected to take care of their family that is children, spouses and even relatives this takes up most of their time. Women's dual roles in work and the family put them at a disadvantage in running for political office. As long as women hold the primary responsibility of family care, it is difficult for them to meet the time and energy requirements of political office.

Among the Abagusii, women are also responsible for other home tasks, like to supervise farm work, cattle rearing among other household tasks. These gender roles take up most of a woman's time and balancing these roles with politics is a very big problem. Interview reports indicate that, most women lost during the elections mainly because they were not visible, there was need to provide women aspirants with an opportunity to meet with their voters and present their agenda. In this way, women aspirants would have been in a better position to fight it out with the male candidates.

Women politicians attribute lack of enough time to actively participate in political issues as one of the greatest challenges they face. They have to struggle to be at par with their male counter parts whose roles in the family circle are minimum. Women politicians have to attend to her duties in the office, get time to meet the electorates to listen to their issues. At the same time, she has to inspect development projects in her area. At the end of the day as a mother she is expected to play her role as

a housekeeper and homemaker and all other responsibilities that pertains a woman. As educated persons, Kenyan women are still expected to retain their tradition roles of being mothers and submissive wives, while` at the same time opening up new normative spaces for themselves (Maathai, 2006).

## CONCLUSION

The study has highlighted the marginalization of women among the Abagusii in the post-colonial period by highlighting factors that have persistently impeded women participation in political leadership, painting a clear picture behind the political culture of low women participation in political leadership among the Abagusii community. The study calls for a paradigm shift to change the state of women and achieve affirmative action according to the constitution of Kenya.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

This study recommends a change in cultural perception towards women, gender equality awareness, emphasis on women empowerment and amendment of political party policies that will bring gender equality in leadership among the Abagusii.

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