Background of the Role and Status of Women in Africa in General and Kenya in Particular

At the outset it is first important to understand the term ‘Role’ and ‘status’ before undertaking the study of the role and status of women in Africa in general and Kenya in particular. Role is the expected behaviour associated with a social position and status “as a position in a social system, such as ‘child’ or ‘parent’”. A position is simply the label or the means of identifying a particular social role and often in the literature on the subject; the two terms are used interchangeably. To define a social position is to state the essential or minimal features of the expected behaviour or role. However, the terms are only analytically separable if one assumes that, “status defines ‘who’ a person is, while role defines ‘what’ such a person is expected to do”. Status is also used as “a synonym for honour or prestige, when social status denotes the relative position of a person on a publicly recognized scale or hierarchy of social worth.”

2 International Encyclopedia of Social science, vol. 15, London,
Here in this context, role and status refers to the position of women in a society defined by her designated rights and obligations. Role is a relational term and it is the dynamic aspect of status. A woman in its diverse role is a mother, wife and a career woman. These roles may not be convergent nor be given same importance. It is true that her role is diverse.

In several studies the image of African women has been consistently projected as victims of Patriarchal and traditional customs and practices. They are projected as a non-actor being, confined within the domestic space. Christine Quanta observes in her Women in Southern Africa:

The African woman of the rural areas is portrayed as little more than a slave who goes about her tasks with silent acceptance. She has no past and no future, given the inherent backwardness of her society. Her consciousness about her oppression is awakened only when she comes into contact with western women, and she is surprised by their comparative freedom, she never speaks for herself but is always spoken about. This image is protected with such consistency that it has almost been transformed into fact by mere
repetition. In part, this notion extends to Africans as a race, so that African women come to be perceived in this way not because they are women but because they constitute a section of an oppressed race.⁴

Women throughout Africa do much more than their share of the work in many spheres of daily life. They maintain households, fetch firewood and water, work in the fields, sell goods in the marketplace, and more.

However divergent to this popular belief, African women in the pre-industrial period enjoyed great freedom throughout the continent. They had both legal and social equality, which helped them to rise to prominent positions and become successful heads of state and military strategists. In many parts of Africa, women played a significant role in agriculture and their economic contribution were therefore greater than in nomadic hunting and pastoral societies. It is argued among many historians that women may have discovered agriculture in prehistoric times. The legend of Osiris and Isis, the Egyptian god and goddess of fertility lends credence to this view. Isis was the sister and wife of Osiris, and she was also the goddess of corn, being said to have invented

it. At harvest time, elaborate ceremonies were performed to honour her as "the creator of all green things." African women have enjoyed economic and political freedom in the pre-colonial era. However, the economic independence and political rights of African women should not undermine the fact that the male sphere was often accorded particular advantages even in the pre-colonial period.

Colonialism was a watershed in the cultural history of Africa. The colonial rulers imposed an alien set of social standards in the colonized societies, which undermined and crippled the socio-political status of African women. Women status was considerably lowered by various kinds of social forces, patriarchal prejudices and colonialism. The shift in the status of African women can be attributed to diverse processes of socio-economic changes. Fredrick Engels in his historic treatise The Origin of the Family, Private property and the state, argues that the exploitation and oppression of women has its origins in the emergence and development of a society stratified along class lines. In the primitive communalistic society, men and women were equal and a division of labour existed. Women managed the household, while the men procured the food and implements required. Property was communally
owned. With the emergence of different classes and society. There “developed a hitherto unsuspected surplus of wealth and created entirely new social relationships.” The dominant role of man in the new forces of production relegated women to the background as co producers in the household. Thus the women’s task within the household lost its public character. “The wife became the first domestic servant pushed out of participation in social production.”

Colonialism had a retarding effect on the lives of African women. They experienced a substantial loss in the economic and political status. Noted anthropologist Evans Pitchard stated that:

From the outside and our point of view we may say that she (non western women) has an inferior position and she herself may feel this to be the case, but she is not resentful on account of it. She sees herself as different from him, but . . . it is for her less a matter of level, then of differences of status. Primitive women do not see themselves as an underprivileged class as against a

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class of men with whom they seek to gain social equality. They have never heard of social equality?\textsuperscript{6}

Capitalism was a deathblow to the status of women in society. This marked decline in this status of women attributes to the collaboration between Capitalism and Patriarchy. Kate Millet observed in *Sexual Politics*:

> One of the most efficient branches of patriarchal government lies in the agency of its economic hold over its female subject. In traditional patriarchy women, as non-persons without legal standing were permitted no actual economic existence as they could neither own or earn in their own right. Since women have always worked in patriarchal societies, often at the most routine or strenuous tasks, what is an issue here is not labour but economic reward. In modern reformed patriarchal societies, women have certain economic rights, yet the “women’s work” in which some two third

of the female population in most developed countries are engaged in work that is not paid for."\(^7\)

Accumulation and creation of private property was encouraged by capitalism in Africa during the colonial rule and it resulted in the rise of social classes that were unequal from the economic point of view. Man as the wage earner was considered a ‘superior’ in this system. The patriarchal practices substituted the matriarchal system, which prevailed earlier.

However, colonialism is not the only factor that had undermined the position of women. And it should not be considered that political and economic independence in various parts of Africa is equivalent to equality among sexes. In fact, women were subordinated in numerous African societies through culturally legitimate ways. For example many societies had menstrual taboos, keeping women apart in menstrual huts. In many parts of East Africa like Kenya, women kneel in front of their husbands. There were other cultural practices, which seemed to be socially approved ways of suppressing women, One of them is clitoridectomy. Many anthropologists, including Jomo Kenyatta in

his *Facing Mount Kenya* defended it as an integral part of many cultures as Kenyatta says:

> Clitoridectomy, like Jewish circumcision is a merely bodily mutilation, which, however, is regarded as the condition sine qua non of the whole teaching of tribal law, religion and morality.\(^8\)

These male societies were perhaps designed to ensure women’s submission. The practice of female circumcision, render women sexually subordinate while not the men.

However, African women have participated along with their men counterpart in various struggles in spite of persistent pressure from the male dominated state power. For instance, the Igbo women played a very significant role- in the Aba riots in 1929 against the British Policy of taxation. They had also participated along with men in the Anzanwan freedom struggle, the Mau Mau struggle, the Biafran war, the struggle for a better way of life in Senegal from 10th October to March 1948, the Namibian freedom struggle and anti-apartheid demonstrations in South Africa.

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Women in Africa have played a variety of roles including those of warriors and political functionaries over and above the role of producers of subsistence. Such roles compels us to reject the usual role categories by which women are assessed and defined - mistresses, prostitutes, wives, girl friends and grant recognition to them as prophets, decision makers, heroins, martyr, social reformer and challenger of their status quo. Therefore, they are integral members of the society who contribute significantly to the welfare of their nations and communities In ‘Perceiving Women as Catalysts’, Felix K. Ekechi challenges stereotypical portrayals of women as always subservient or submissive to male authority figures. He provides a historical deconstruction of gender in which he demonstrates that African women have actually been vanguards or catalysts of change in their respective societies.

A brief background study about the role and status of African women in general and Kenyan women in particular has been taken up in this context.
Role and Status of African Women

Studies of women in Africa are consistent in showing that although there have been some gains for women, such as greater educational parity with men or official statements professing support for gender equality, overall, the prospects for women are ominous in many areas. April Gordon writing on Women in Development brings us this unique perspective on the subject. As in other parts of the world, African women have neither the political, legal, educational, nor the economic opportunities of their male counterparts.

Men in Africa overwhelmingly dominate the institutions of society and have used their positions more often than not to further the control and advantages men have in both the public and domestic arenas. We must note that African societies and gender roles are highly diverse; this makes efforts at generalization somewhat tentative and not applicable to every society.

In discussing the conditions peculiar to Africa that affect women's status and roles, several general factors must be kept in focus. One is that the overall economic and political problems of Africa make life difficult for most African men as well as women. Inequality, oppression, poverty, and lack of opportunity are
widespread societal concerns. Nonetheless, women as a group suffer more and have access to fewer resources and opportunities than men do. In addition, important is that class as well as gender influences the status and opportunities of individual women. That is, girls born to more elite families will typically have the opportunity to acquire a good education and prestigious career, although they are unlikely to achieve great political or economic power on their own. However, they are prime candidates for marriage to the African men who do wield power and influence. This contrasts dramatically with the model or nonexistent prospects that their peasant or working-class sisters have.

The results are that although women as a group suffer from inequality, the interests and perspective of elite women often diverge from those of poorer women. Last, the form gender inequality takes in Africa reflect indigenous, precolonial and European influences. European expansion into African during the colonial period both undermined sources of status and autonomy that women had and strengthened elements of indigenous male dominance or "patriarchy." At the same time, Western gender ideology and practices that promote male dominance and female dependency have been superimposed on Africa.
Since independence, Africa's male leaders have continued to add laminations to the patriarchal structures they inherited from their colonizers, often so with the support of Western international investors and donors whose "development" assistance mostly goes to men. As the following discussion shows, the culmination of percolonial and colonial and postcolonial history indicate that women in general will continue to lose ground economically, politically and socially unless concerted efforts are made by women themselves, African governments, and the international community to ensure that the fruits of development are extended equally to women and men.

**Women in Pre-Colonial Africa**

Despite problems of the reliability of data, some patterns of gender relationship were prevalent if not universal, in Africa before the period of European penetration. Politically for instance, African women in most societies have been influential political actors in informal ways, if not through formal political roles. Women varied from being highly subordinated "legal minors" under the control of their menfolk among groups like the Tswana and Shona, in Southern Africa to holding positions as chiefs among the Mende and Serbro of Sierra Leone and "headmen" among the Tonga of...
In some societies, women even had formal roles in male councils. The figure of the queen mother in many societies of western Africa was very influential, and it was she who selected the King. Women warriors fought for the fon (King) of Dahomey, and powerful warrior queens led their people on battle. Notable examples are Queen Amina of Hausaland, who led the earliest and most effective resistance against the Portuguese.

In addition, Africa's women organizations existed that acted as parallel authority structures to those of males. These included women courts, market authorities, secret societies, and age-grade institutions. Most generally, parallel authority structures allowed men and women to exercise authority over their own sex and activities. One example of parallel male-female organizations was societies that conferred honorific titles upon accomplished members of the community. Both titled men and women had a great deal of prestige and exercised considerable influence. The ekwe title, associated with the goddess Idemili, is a case in point. This title is taken by high-status Ibo women of Nigeria, and the most powerful of these women, the agba ekww, reputedly was the most powerful political figure among her people. In other instances the goddess-focused religions provided a basis for women to contro
major religio-political functions through societies dedicated to the goddess. Among these religious leadership roles held by men as well as women, included those of shaman, diviner, and spirit medium.

For most women, power was (and still is) exercised indirectly and informally as sisters, mothers, and wives within the extended family system and was closely associated with women's economic power. Where women had rights to land, animals, labor and the products of their own or others' labor, their status was higher than if such resources were under male control. Enhancing women's position was the critical role they played in the sexual division of labor within their households. Women were producers: they grew most of family food, tended animals, and made tools and other articles used by the family. They cooked, helped construct residences and other buildings, hauled wood, and so on. In most instances, women also sold their surplus in the markets thus dominating these commercial activities and demonstrating their business acumen. Women were also reproducers in societies where children were wealth, old age security and the guarantors that one would be venerated as an ancestor after death and not forgotten.
**Women in Colonial Africa**

Africa's forceful integration into the expanding global capitalist economy dominated by the European powers in the 1800s, brought along new constraints on its women. The commercialization of agriculture through the introduction of cash crops altered the customary gender division of labor in ways mostly disadvantageous to women. Men were taught to grow new cash crops such as cocoa and coffee for export, while women continued to grow food crops for the family and local consumption. Men were forced into the wage economy to work in the mines, on the plantations, or in towns; most women remained in the rural areas, often assuming the responsibilities their absent menfolk could no longer perform. Schooling and the teaching of new skills were made available primarily to males. Overall, although both men and women were exploited within the colonial economy, men gained some access to important resources such as money, skills, land, and education that were less available to women.

Men also gained political advantages as customary sources of female power were ignored or undermined. Europeans imposed their own prejudices about the proper authority of men over women by dealing with only with male leaders. All-male "native authorities"
were created in many areas to allow some local government, based on frequently arguable "traditional" or "customary" laws. Tradition was usually interpreted in ways that favored men's control over women, allowing men to gain at women's expense.

**Women in Post-Colonial Africa**

In many ways, the problems of women since independence are a continuation of policies and forces set in motion during the colonial period. Ironically, Africa's gender relations which were transformed during the colonial period to further European economic and political exploitation of Africa continued to be justified by appeal to "African tradition." Despite women's contributions to the struggle for independence and equality for all, the new African states and social institutions became highly Africanized replicas of their colonial predecessors.

The advantages, which men had gained in access to education, jobs, and property, enabled them to gain control of most of the wealth, jobs and leadership positions in newly independent African Countries. Male control of formal political power in Western-style political systems is widely portrayed as a natural extension of such male-dominated African institutions as chieftaincies and council of elders. While these might appear to be...
in consonant with previous gender roles of African societies in which men and women had distinctly different roles in the division of labour, current role expectations are operating in a very different economic and political environment.

Today development and modernization theorists have neglected the vital role of women, especially rural women, in the economic life of African nations. This neglect has obfuscated the nature of national development and has resulted in failures to prescribe national solutions to economic and social problems. And, not only is the economic role of women underestimated, it’s seems clear that their political, cultural, and social contributions are overlooked. Rural women have always formed the most productive sector of African society. They are indispensable yet they are marginalized in development plans. An example of such marginalisation is the manner in which modern equipments and skills for farming have been geared to the expressed needs of males resulting in more rather than less work for women. Statistics compiled concerning work activity done by women are biased⁹. They maintain households, fetch firewood and water, work the fields, sell

⁹ See Annexure - I
goods in the marketplace, and more. However, the fact that their numbers in the modern work force are insignificant compared with their percentage of the population is taken to mean that women do not work.

Family food production is the most common task undertaken by women, even in areas were men once played a role in clearing the land, male migration to urban areas or to other countries for employment has left the entire responsibility to women. Many women are in fact, if not in law, household heads and have sole responsibility for family welfare. In addition to being a food producer rural and some urban women are distributor of goods. Women are engaged in the market trade in Africa. But the perceptions and role definitions of these female entrepreneurs are distorted. Women are also employed in non-farming occupations in Africa. They are engaged in various activities of commercial activities, but few are found outside the local and national trading areas due to the attitudes, restrictions, and constraints they face when attempting to go into large-scale business. Women seldom have the opportunity to acquire the necessity to enlarge their businesses or share in the benefits of modernization.

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10 See Annexure - II
Even surveying the modern sector of the economy, employment is defined in a manner that discriminates among women. When traditional sectors of the economy are surveyed (and the work that women do is quite impossible to overlook, it is the cash crops, especially the export crops, which are classified as agricultural economic employment areas. Food produced by women is for subsistence purposes—it feeds the families of the nation. But because it is not generally sold, it is not measured in the production figures; so female producers are not employed. It is this sort of biased conceptualization of work that leads to the conclusion that women do not play a significant role in the development of their countries. In the sector of paid employment, women are less occupied. Their economic participation is substantially lesser than that of men. 11

Many women went into the post-colonial era with high expectations that the newly independent governments would meet their demands, which could be described as African feminist. Many of the new states attempted to meet some of these demands by offering more education and health care and expanding the economy. In African state that underwent protracted liberation

11 See Annexure -3
struggles, the advance of social and economic rights for women is higher than other states. For, as freedom fighters and participants in the struggle, women and men were transformed as part of that struggle. The rights and dignity of each individuals in the struggle were generally recognized by all concern, and when independence was won, these transformed attitudes made the practice of sexism less of a problem than it proved to be in the areas where independence were negotiated. In the countries where transformation through struggle did not take place, the legacy of oppression carried over in to the independent period, where women faced additional barriers to advancement; they were now excluded from development planning and their work became characterized as non-economic activity. Presently with stagnate economies demands for improving the lives of women were no longer a priority for those in state power. In addition, some of the new elites found it convenient to blame women for the problems created by the states and an economy that they could not control.

There are still a number of misconceptions about women's role. While African nations spouse the notion of self sufficiency, especially in food production, the group that most feeds most of the families-women-is still only marginally included to the decision
making process and only cursorily considered when estimates and plans for self sufficiency are planned. An accurate assessment of the female role suggests that they do the work and contribute significantly to political and social advancement in their nations. They are entitled to the power that goes along with their role.

Through most of these contemporary periods, most women continue to live in rural areas, meeting their obligations to their kinship relations by farming and trading. Those who live in urban areas also find that they carry a heavy burden in feeding their families. While most women struggle to survive, women have become increasingly stratified by class, a process that began several centuries ago. Some women have more access to education, employment, and/or capital than others. However, even elite women’s suffer from an ideology that restricts women’s options and sets up images of the ideal women that few can emulate. Despite these problems women has resisted their oppression as women and developed political movements that is sensitive to Africa’s place in world economies but also holds economies responsible for the gender inequality that they face. Apart from that, they play a very significant role in the political sphere today; because whatever benefits they gain whether in the political front or economic and
social space, are usually passed on to their families and ultimately, their communities and countries. Their pivotal role in society, which goes unnoticed in history and culture, should be therefore accorded recognition.

Role and Status of Kenyan Women

Kenya- A Background

Before initiating a study regarding the position of Kenyan women, it is relevant here to have, a brief background study of Kenya. Kenya located in East Africa with a total area of 580,367 sq. km., excluding inland waters\textsuperscript{12} is a country of more than 24 million people who are divided into more than 40 ethnic groups with their own language and indigenous religion. Kenya is "one of the 49 low countries of the world. It is also one of the 45 countries considered by the UN as Most Seriously Affected (MSA) by recent adverse economic conditions." Over the past few centuries, most Kenyans have come to identify with Roman Catholicism, Islam, or various Protestants denominations. People with primary education and above speak English and Swahili, as well as their regional and local languages. Kenyan people have a history of movement, trade, and alliance in a wide variety of political structures. In previous

\textsuperscript{12} Africa South of Sahara 1990, London, 1990, p. 4
centuries, Nilotic-, Bantu-, and Swahili-speaking peoples shared this expanse of arid plateau and rain-fed mountains terrain, working as farmers and herders. Ethnic labels and boundaries were quite fluid. The British however, drew Kenyan territorial boundaries at the beginning of the twentieth century and, with their “thin white line” of force, law, and resources, gradually began the massive colonial social engineering project. Key elements in colonial control included squeezing taxes low cost labour from inhabitants, setting aside land (known as the White Highlands) and subsides for white settlers in area of high agricultural potential, building transport infrastructure to facilitate extraction and trade, and establishing a public-private distinction in which men were viewed as breadwinners and public spokesperson, and women as domestic helpmates. Christian missionary work, in its ideological, social welfare, and educational dimensions, also reinforced this public-private distinction. Kenyan people initially resisted to the structural grid of colonialism in diverse ways, reacting, cooperating, cooperating,


or ignoring new dictates. After a long arduous freedom struggle waged by Kenyan men and women, Kenya achieved independence in 1963. After independence, Kenya became a republic dominated by one-party politics. But later in 1991, it switched over to multiparty politics. Presently, the government upholds the democratic and egalitarian principles. Kenya's Republican constitution rejects any discrimination—racial, ethnic, class-bound, or sexual. The government stresses the equality of both the sexes. Kenya has no comprehensive state-sponsored social security system of welfare service, although there are some voluntary programmes sponsored by the National Social Security Fund. Much of social welfare is in the hands of private organizations and mutual aid societies. The women's organizations are not government-sponsored though government is involved with such groups.

Kenya's economy depends mainly on agricultural production. The three basic aspects of the Kenyan economy are: it is predominantly agricultural; a major part of its export earnings depend on a few selected cash crops and until independence this provides the base for a hierarchal racial structure with Europeans.
occupying the top, Asian the middle, and Africans the base. Taken together these three aspects explain the social status of women in post independent Kenya."\textsuperscript{16} Due to the absence of substantial manufacturing and mining industry, Kenya's post-independent economy continued to remain dependent on the export of cash crops. In 1966, agriculture employed about 1.2 million of Kenya's 1.6 million families and contributed more than one-half of the century's total exports."\textsuperscript{17} From 1966 onwards, the government encouraged Africans to go in for private farming, for which a programme of one million acre settlement scheme had been launched. By 1966 the Government had purchased about 1.1 million acre and settled about 29,000 families."\textsuperscript{18}

Market agriculture has resulted in to a large-scale unemployment of the Africans. It is on subsistence agriculture, therefore that the bulk of Kenyan population still lives. Since independence, most of the men started migrating to urban sectors in search of employment. With the result, the burden of tiling the land and raising the family fell on their womenfolk.

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid, p. 143
Women in Pre-Colonial Kenya.

In the traditional societies, the division of labour was apparent. Men went out hunting, while women went gathering fruits and vegetables in the forests. Women as wives, mothers and daughters were equal to men in the household economy as they played a significant role in agriculture. Women were well protected economically. Their usufructuary rights in land and cattle were well defined. As women met the subsistence requirements, it was beneficial to the family and village community, to give women, their land and livestock rights. The task allocation, the tradition rituals and the marriage rules did put women in a disadvantaged position compared to men. Inspite of these difficulties women enjoyed freedom and commanded respect in society. This is mainly because men had to depend on them for food and children. Moreover her labour was recognized. The question of who heads the family was non-existent. They lived in communities and where the community carried out disciplinary measures against the offenders of social rules.

Women in Colonial Kenya

In view of the development of dual economies under colonial rule, African women were confined to subsistence agriculture, while
men took over cash crop production. The colonial state had captured large numbers of men, sanctioned male control over women's labour, and interacted with kinship authority. While women worked extensively in agriculture, trade and household activities, working-age men increasingly migrated from rural areas in search of wage labors in the cities, or large farms, and on the coast. When men were forcibly or willingly removed from their localities and were unable to contribute to production, women had to assume their responsibility to maintain the continuity of the community. Nevertheless 'women's economic rights were undermined by land consolidation, as the system of use-rights that included women was converted to almost' exclusively male private ownership. Yet some space still existed for women to exercise their considerable economic influence in ways that thwarted official and male goals, given widespread male out-migration and female dominance in farming. For example, women farmers did not respond to the cotton growing promotions in the 1950s, given cotton production's extensive labour burdens, low prices, and use of land needed for crop production. In the deteriorating economic

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conditions of colonial period, women succeeded in maintaining both their agriculture production and their limited opportunities for capital accumulation, mainly through brewing beer or prostitution. The colonial economy therefore disrupted the pre-colonial task allocation between men and women and consequently women became not only backward but also overburdened with work and responsibilities.

In the colonial set up in accordance with the British principle of "indirect rule" used in Africa and Asian colonies, colonial officials designated chiefs (invariably men) as local leaders and vested these collaborators with the authority to collect taxes and maintain order. Under colonial alliance, politics was a male affair, except for several attempts to place a token women (to 'represent women') on local councils. But women also exerted their collective power in the political front as the colonial state consolidated itself. In the protests which occurred in growing urban centers like Nairobi, in the beginning of 1920s women were involved in the disturbances, shouting taunts, cheers, and ngemi (high-pitched cries) and agitating in the large crowds. Women sometimes demonstrated more courage than men in resisting colonial rule, as in the 1922
Harry Thuku riots. But much of Africans' political voice was raised within internal territorial boundaries, at the provincial level and especially in district-level units and below—boundaries that loosely corresponded with the previously fluid ethnic and kinship boundaries. Moreover, what was to become a patron-client orientation in politics encouraged the distribution of goods and services based on regional or 'ethnic ties, ignoring gender equity. Even today, such "cultural" politics frequently strengthens male dominance and pits ethnic localism against progressive nationalism.21

In the colonial era, as today, the Kenyan economy depended heavily on agricultural production, but only a fifth of the country's landmass is suitable for rain-fed farming. As Kenya's population grew in middle and later colonial years (1930-63), fierce competition

ensued over densely settled land in African areas and the huge farms and ranches in the White Highlands, on which settlers - a mere two percent of the population - made their livelihood. Land density was acute in the "African Reserves," particularly in the Central Province among the Kikuyu people, on whose shoulders the lengthy and violent nationalist struggle of the 1950s primarily rested. When it became clear that the white settlers would not give up control without a struggle, African guerrilla fighters took to the forest and began a decade long resistance movement that threatened settlers, divided the Kikuyu people (some loyalists supported the British), and created the opportunity in 1955 for greater African political representation and ultimately for independence negotiations. Women played a major role in this fight against colonialism. They went to the forest, provided food to the fighters, and converted homes into armories for storing guns.

As the physical conflict drew to a close, colonial policies established the framework for land reform to provide what were termed "progressive farmers" with legal title and thus a stake in the land and the incentive to pursue commercial agriculture. The Swynnerton Plan of 1955 was gradually implemented in African areas throughout the late colonial period and continued after
independence in 1963. After that, with the departure of some settlers from the White Highlands, the new government sponsored resettlement schemes to respond to ongoing land hunger. Not surprisingly, land reform was largely focused on men, dispossessing all but a minuscule number of women.²²

Kenya gained Independence in 1963 from the British Colonial Government under the leadership of President Jomo Kenyatta of the Kenya African National Union (KANU), a party that prevailed over the Kenya African Democratic Union (KADU). As of December 1991, Kenya adopted the multiparty system, which has seen emergence of a number of parties each with a different agenda. Each party has indicated interest in involving women in their policies or considering women's issues.

**Women in Post-Colonial Kenya**

Today Kenya is frequently projected as African success story. Its economic potential and growth rates are reasonably good. Women constitute over 50% of Kenya's population, but the majority of them are between the illiterate and poor in the country. A

number are still affected by customary laws and practices which have for so long perpetuated their oppression. In most of Kenya's ethnic groups, both historically and currently, women marry outside their lineage and join that of their husband. The present marriage puts women in a very disadvantageous position. The wife does not bring any wealth to the family, but instead is exchanged for wealth remitted to her parents and lineage. A husband and his male relatives have important material stakes in their control over female labor. They acquire rights to the wife's labor and custody of their children, a relationship solidified with the exchange of bride wealth from the husband's to the wife's family. In her husband's home, a woman produces and reproduces on land to which she acquires user rights as a wife and mother. Structurally, this puts a woman in a tenuous position, dividing her loyalties between her own family and other women.

During Kenya's early year of independence, an ascending class of wealthy men gained considerable economic and political power. Men with positions inside or with close access to insiders in government ministries accumulated great wealth through state subsidies, state licenses, and employment contacts, among other
means. In addition, the 1971 Ndegwa Commission gave official endorsement to civil servants' commercial activities and to conflicts of interest. Women's isolation from the state establishment excluded them from such politically tinged economic opportunities, and this distance still influences women's personal choices and political engagement today. Women's ability to access men's resources is tempered in several ways. First, women head a third of rural smallholdings, according to the 1979 census; among many, a feminization of poverty exists. Second, despite romanticized myth about household income pooling, the reality is far more complex, with women's access to family or male income uncertain. The majority of households depend upon women's income and resourcefulness. Third, polygamy is still practiced in Kenya, dividing a husband's loyalty among wives. The 1984 Kenya Contraceptive Prevalence Survey indicates that a quarter of married

women aged 15 to 49 are in polygamous unions. The harshness of this reality of limited access to economic resources merits a closer examination of women's engagement with the state and of specific policies that embrace women unevenly.

Until recently, women in Kenya have not been viewed as an important social stratum or even as a population base that politics ought to address. The 1965 *Sessional Paper on African Socialism* (written by Kenyan policy makers to establish a rhetorically acceptable vision of a mixed-economy, welfare, and self-reliant society) is silent on gender, as have been subsequent policy documents. Yet this silence exists side by side with highly gendered policies. In addition to land dispossession, women farmers have been routinely excluded from the distribution of agricultural benefits, especially the credit that is guaranteed with land title deeds. Subsistence production is largely the responsibility of Kenyan women. Men primarily govern access to land. Kenyan women have traditionally lacked full entitlement to land or to the labour of their children.

Until recently, educational disparities have existed, with glaring gaps at secondary and university levels that have obvious

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implications for women's employment in the formal labor force and civil service. In addition, women's few rights under the law are not easily exercised in this largely rural country in which customary practices often prevail.

Although not part of the official political agenda, allocation of male preference in the distribution of government resources and patronage (what we view as gender redistributive issues) is certainly political to the core. As Kenyan scholar Achola Pala Okeyo remarks, "For African women the subject of women's advancement is highly political because it is an integral part of our quest for justice not only at the household level but all the way within the local, national and world economic order." Gender politics threatened male interests and hence is perhaps more easily accommodated through the technical seemingly neutral language of policy discourse.

The issue of women's place in the economy and society entered the policy discourse through an influential International Labour Organisation (ILO) report on Employment, Income and


Equality in Kenya, published in 1972, which elicited questions about access and equity in women's educational enrollment, low employment rates, and burdensome responsibilities in rural agriculture.\footnote{International Labour Organization, \textit{Employment, Income and Equality in Kenya} (Geneva: ILO 1972), chap.18} In its report, the government declared that it was not aware of overt discrimination against women in the country. Women are employed in important positions in the armed forces, in the police, in the prisons and in government as well as the private sector. Yet, the government realized that more than equal employment opportunity and legal statutes were an issue, as reflected in new phrases and figures in subsequent development plans that claimed to recognize women's economic activity\footnote{Sessional Paper No. 10 of 1973 on Employment (Narobi: Govt. Printers, 1973), p. 64 as cited in Maria Nzomo, "The impact of the Women's Decade on Policies, Programs and Empowerment of Women in Kenya," \textit{Igus} 17, no.2.1989, pp.9-17.}

In present-day Kenya, women are increasingly acknowledged in public policy; they are also well organized and positioned to assume a larger share of official political space, should Kenya move toward democracy. To preempt that possibility, in 1937 KANU took control of the largest national women's organization, Maendeleo ya Wanawake, and party leaders chronically meddle in its affairs. As opposition forces now call for human rights, and constitutionalism
their leaders experience the same exclusion intimidation, and
official silence that women have undergone." While women's
organizations avoid the political fray, individual women challengers
make transparent the practices of the male political machinery.

Two women's organizations have achieved national
prominence in Kenya. One of the oldest national women's
organizations, Maendeleo ya Wanawake, formed under colonial rule
in 1952 but soon Africanized with dynamic leaders, achieved
reasonable success in mobilising women during its first decade. It
mobilized and trained women in domestic and income-generating
activities. The other, National Council of Women of Kenya (NCWK)
was founded in 1964 to coordinate women's organizations and was
long headed by the dynamic and controversial Dr. Wangari
Maathai, an internationally known environmentalist. Maathai is the
founder of the Greenbelt movement, which sponsored an
environmental program of tree planting in an increasingly
deforested Kenya. After the 1975 U.N. International Women's Year
Conference, the government established the Women's Bureau in

32 African Report provides sustained coverage of trials, detentions, and
assassinations over the past five years. Patricia Stamp, "Policies of Dissent in

33 On Maendeleo ya wanawake, see Nzomo, "Impact of the Women's Decade,"
Audrey Wipper, "Equal rights for Women in Kenya?" Journal of Modern African
the Ministry of Culture and Social Services in 1976. The calls of U.N. women's advocacy units for "women's machinery" in government finally paid off—and at minimal cost to the government. The bureau aims to promote awareness of women's work and needs among policy makers, compile and disseminate information, train women leaders, and promote income-generating projects. It registers women's groups and informal women's groups in rural areas that exchange agricultural labor, provide mutual support and religious fellowship, contribute to community development efforts, accumulate savings for distribution on rotational bases, and occasionally voice women's views in electoral campaigns. The establishment of the Women's Bureau has had a significant effect on changing the perception of gender politics, supporting local community politics and chipping away at the consistent male preference that operates in all government activity except primary education.

Seed money from the Women's Bureau provides leverage for grass roots women's leaders to participate in the District Development Committees (DDCS) that plan, coordinate, and manage government and community development efforts. The bureau also provides group leaders with "insider" brokers (community
development assistants, field agents for the Ministry of Culture and Social Services) who connect them with other possible sources of assistance.

The dominant male ideology upholds the view that if women have anything to complain about, they should blame themselves and not the government or society. Thus, for example, in 1985 a government minister felt no compunction in addressing a seminar by saying: I am forced to believe that the woman is lazy in her mind. She is too lazy to think. You women think and believe that you are inferior to men.\textsuperscript{34} In this way, the burden of responsibility has often been shifted to women; by working harder or developing the right attitude, they will move forward. The structure meanwhile, remains blameless.

In the 1989 Macndeleo election, Kenya's cautious press reported that men were squabbling over candidates, advice, and issues in this women's organization. One district officer revealed a "well -organized plot by some men' to "pose as women" in order to vote, though no impersonators were arrested. President Mol even commented that women ought to run their own affairs, though he changed rules several time about voter eligibility. In the end, the

\textsuperscript{34} \textit{Sunday News}, 25 May 1985, p-1.
elections provided the opportunity for key male politicians to ensure that their wives and sisters captured leadership positions. As such, the process reinforced the class and male dominance of Kenyan politics. Hilary Ng’weno, *Weekly Review* editor called the affair a "sorry statement...on status of Kenya women in polities."35

Thus, on the national level, official intervention co-opts and manipulates women's groups to support and legitimize the man-made political machinery. At the grass-roots level, where stakes are smaller, women have more room to manoeuver.

Once in Parliament, however, men ignore women's issues, and women's groups disdain political advocacy because of cooperation their organization's apolitical stance, or harassment. The two women MPs shoulder the enormous responsibility of enlightening colleagues and building coalitions in an atmosphere where it is "politically correct" to applaud male dominance. Former MP Phoebe Asiyo's account of the two-time failure to pass the Law of Marriage and Divorce tells the grim story well.36 The law fully addressed household relations; it strengthened women's rights to own property, to be protected from corporal punishment, and to avoid

polygamy. Asiyo quotes from the parliamentary debate: MPs said corporal punishment was necessary to discipline wives, and wives should be beaten, for it is a pleasure to her ... a way of expressing love in Luhya custom." A woman MP's query on why women providers did not have the right to punish their husbands invoked a defense of bride wealth; "because she has not bought [her husband]," The most vigorous debate occurred over polygamy, with lengthy rationales being offered in support of the practice: what if the first wife was childless, old, or rude? What if a man needed a nurse in his old age?

There are many examples, which illustrate, men's tight control over political process, which narrows the political voices, especially those of women. In electoral politics as well as for women's groups, much of the contest of Kenyan politics is over economic development plans, and the extent of state spending on social services.

As women make up a majority of Kenya's farmers, head households in sizable numbers, and are responsible for family food supplies, they are greatly affected by agricultural policies. Problems in the implementation of agricultural policy include a bias in the delivery of resources and technical support toward rich, large
landowners and toward men; an emphasis on export-oriented cash crops that detracts from food crop production (maize is a major exception); and marketing difficulties.

Kenya's political-economic elite has a strong stake in a healthy agricultural economy. They are among Kenya's largest farmers and ranchers (termed she landed gentry in some analyses), a pattern that accelerated following the sale of significant tracts in the White Highlands after independence. The large farm sector is less productive economically than the small farm sector, but large farm owners are politically powerful.37 This political-economic elite, consisting of agro businessmen, commercial investors, and managers and civil servants, represents 2.6 percent of landowners' but controls half of the land under cultivation. Absentee ownership has earned many the dubious distinctions of "telephone farmers," according to S. E. Migot-Adholla.38 Agriculture constitutes a third of the gross domestic product and nearly three-fourths of export earnings. Tourism, coffee, and tea are the top three foreign


exchange earners. This reliance on agriculture means that Kenya's overall economy could benefit if women farm workers-the majority of all agricultural workers-had incentives to be more productive. Yet institutions and agricultural services in Kenya often serve to restrict women in the agriculture economy.

Scholars and practitioners have long recognized the importance of providing incentives and stakes to those who are responsible for agricultural driven economic growth. Land reform programs routinely use such rationales but consider households the final unit of analysis-as though household were equitable structures in which incomes are pooled. Drawing on Amartya Sen's terminology, households are better conceptualized as situations of "cooperative conflict."  

Kenya has made remarkable progress in health-care since independence; life expectancy has lengthened, and infant and maternal mortality rates have dropped. But with the policy of charging higher healthcare costs are not necessarily disastrous, but fewer people, especially women, have the resources to pay.

39 World Bank, Kenya: The Role of Women, 1989, xiv, 1. 70 percent of export earning are thereby earned (excluding refined petroleum)

Women's unemployment and general welfare is disproportionately affected because the services cut are more likely to be staffed by women. Furthermore, demands on women's time and labor increase to fill the gaps in services.

At the same time, work in the informal sector expanded and real minimum wages in the formal economy fell - women constitute three-quarters of the informal sector, working as hawkers, traders, prostitutes, and brewers, occupations with unpredictable and generally low incomes. The government licenses better-paying informal sector work like vehicle repair and small appliance manufacturing, in which men predominate and where startup capital and credit are easier to acquire. Women's "illegality" makes them subject to persistent harassment, penalties, and confiscations of their goods.

Kenya was the first sub-Saharan African country to declare support for family planning in 1966, but the government itself now concedes, "limited program success." Only 17 percent of reproductive-age Kenyan women use birth control, and within that group, only half use such "modern" methods as pills, IUDS or sterilization. In the eyes of population technicians, the government responded to this dilemma with the right kinds of programmatic
moves. It elevated bureaucratic coordination of family planning to the Office of the Vice-President and Home Affairs; it integrated family planning and health programming; its largest women's organization distributes contraceptives; and it built clinics strategically to lessen the distance women have to walk for services.\textsuperscript{41} Kenyan culture, however is strongly pronatalist and women receive far stronger cues to reproduce than to use contraception. Surveys in the early 1980s reported that on average, women desire 6.2 children and men desire 8.7.\textsuperscript{42} Childcare complicates women's multiple roles and hampers their participation in public decision-making positions.

In sum, agriculture and reproductive policy strategies and reforms do not yet recognise women's concerns. This Jack of recognition limits policy achievements and endeavors to control women rather than empower them. Although a far-reaching family planning program could allow women to make their own choices, the current Kenyan government is unprepared to take such steps. In essence, male control of female productive and reproductive


labor is more important to national politics than overall economic productivity or women's reproductive health.

"If the men worked as hard as the women Kenya would be developed by now." This quote from a community development officer reminds us that development is not the sole purpose of the state. Kenyan political machinery is concerned with power and control over women remains unthreatened. It is therefore not surprising that development policy discourse and practice reaps such meager results in the areas of women's empowerment.

Although development policies rhetorically "recognise" women's work. Policy practice seeks to ensure women in a web of control. State, of course, are not impermeable monoliths; tiny cracks may appear at the centre, through Women's Bureau activities, for instance, and especially at the edges, where women seek to act in ways that advance their interests. In the meantime, development policy goals cannot be realized unless women share economic assets and political voice.

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At the national level women groups are cautious and scheme in which they have a role pitifully and temporarily shores up the regime. Locally women use whatever means possible to augment their meager incomes and to extract goods and services from politicians. At the same time, women seek a stronger legal foundation for their claims to equal rights so that discretionary cultural traditions do not control their lives. Yet women also recognise the lengthy struggle associated with enforcing more substantive legal foundations. Just as cultural constructions are not gender-neutral in their allocation of power, so the state is far from neutral, notwithstanding Kenya’s signature to the U.N. convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. In the meantime, women work, extract resources as best as they can, and build ties with others. They resist unfair practices when possible and use their political space wisely until democratic accountability finally exists for women in Kenya.

We argue that women's centrality to development goals has entered development discourse and practice in a tentative but control – oriented fashion. Stymied by a type of development “integration” that controls rather than empowers them, Kenyan women are politically active at the grass root level, where
institutionalized male political machinery is weaker, but are co-opted nationally, except for the few courageous Kenya's political-machinery in historical context.

Independence did bring any noticeable change in their role of women. However it failed to involve them equally with men in the functioning of the country's economic, political and social institutions. Independence only led to further dissatisfaction among women, as their expectations were not met. But one cannot altogether dismiss the active role of women in various fields. Her role as a political activist to emancipate women, her contribution in the country's economy and meanwhile providing food for her family and her role as a social reformer in emancipating the society from backwardness, like illiteracy, by educating her child needs to be granted recognition.

To conclude, the there has been a persistence change in the condition of Kenyan women. And this persistence change has been determined by the economic and political condition of Kenya. We find the economic participation of Kenyan women in multiple areas of activities. If we seriously look into the women's problem in Africa in general and Kenya in particular, we find that they have been heavily burdened with responsibilities. These responsibilities have
not been acknowledged by male-dominated societies. Virtually the contributions of women in social and economic change have been more than that of the men, but have remained unnoticed. Women have been generally considered in the production process in mechanical terms as means of production rather than lively conscious human production. Therefore women's role in socio-economic change has been a matter of unnoticed factor. By looking into the seriousness of women's contribution Ngugi Wa Thing'o has been very critical about the society and tries to bring women's contribution in to focus, not through radical imposition of his ideas by romanticism but by virtue of a pure humanistic approach, by recognizing them as the essential component of human society. The next chapter will be extensively analyzing Ngugi Wa Thingo's parameters of understanding the contribution of Kenyan women. It has taken a theoretical construction on the basis of this chapter which focuses upon the historicity of women's contribution.