

A Case of Mixed Fortunes for Kenyan Women

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Historically, the social-cultural values of Kenyan Women have underlined the need to come together and assist one another over the years since the time of the colonial period (between 1900 and 1963). The trend has been changing due to the diversity of community activities shaped by emerging development challenges and the need to broaden the scope of women's activities into new frontiers. A case in point is the development work undertaken by community based women groups which are traceable to the early 1950s.

In Kenya, like in many other sub-Sahara African areas, women join together in groups for a common purpose for socio-economic survival and the advancement of its members. Usually such groups spring up spontaneously, and over the years, they have maintained a high degree of informality.

They are small, mainly community based and mostly integrated in the larger tradition of self-help which places high value on collective action. In Kenya, women have a long tradition of helping each other through mutual social support systems. The existence of many community-based women groups is firmly based on mutual social responsibility and accountability as well as the pooling of resources towards capital formation targets and resource mobilization for a common goal.

Prior to independence in 1963, the colonial state, together with various faith based organizations, promoted and encouraged the formation of women clubs/groups. The groups started from 1950s with the ultimate goal of informally training women to acquire new skills essential to their participation and promotion of their reproductive and community management roles. They were taught skills in sewing; cookery; knitting and embroidery; childcare and general sanitation; nutrition and hygiene. The role of these groups was to educate women in modern domestic chores and expand immediate families in the community.

Soon after, these initiatives attracted African women of Kenyan descent to establish Maendeleo ya Wanawake (Progress of Women) organization in 1952, the first umbrella women's organization. Created as a non-governmental organization with the aim of uplifting the standard of living of its members, it later acquired its current national

status as a grass-root driven women's organization. Other women's organizations dating to that period include young women's Christian Association (YWCA) and affiliated religious, professional and non-racial groups.

The social/ family/ welfare orientation has persisted over the years in terms of activities undertaken as well as in terms of objectivity and purpose of community based groups. However, with cash economy gradually becoming the order of the day, women's needs and roles have increased, compelling community based groups to embark on income generating activities and capital formation targets. All of these activities and targets trace their roots to women's traditional tasks within the household, such as, farming, food production, trading and handicrafts. For a long time these activities have prevailed and were carried out by group members collectively as group projects.

Since the mid-1980s, studies have revealed that actual cash incomes generated by community based women groups expanded into new frontiers, such as, real estate and saving capital mobilization. Although beset by teething problems such as choice of activities, illiteracy, inefficient leadership, this has not stopped community based groups from undertaking activities.

In recent times, socio-economic changes have offered new opportunities and income generation has led to the rapid growth of small scale enterprises run and managed by women. Nevertheless, welfare and business orientations are still interwoven in community activities.

The groups' original objectives have also changed to accommodate the rapid political and socio economic dimensions. The majority of the groups can be described as community activity driven formed with the motive of building women's capacity to help themselves by undertaking programs or projects that have direct impact on their lives and communities.

In a survey carried out by the Women's Bureau-The National Machinery for advancing status of women in 1992 indicated that there were 23,614 community women groups with a membership of an estimated 3 million countrywide. The survey further showed that whereas there were a handful of such groups by the end of 1960, half of the groups had been formed by 1981. During the interviewing period between the first world women's conference held in Mexico City, Mexico in 1975 and the end of first

decade of women in 1985, community based groups engaged in a wide range of activities and have grown by leaps and bounds.

Government of Kenya has recognized the contribution of community activity groups to development. The government has also co-opted these groups' programs into the National Development framework. According to the 1991 Community Activity Group Promotion Development Policy Guidelines, updated in 1999, the government promotes group formation and mobilization as a strategy for ensuring self-reliance and mobilization of community efforts to meet collective needs, such as, water, health care, social infrastructure as well as general urban and rural development.

Overall, a 2006 economic survey in Kenya forecasted that activities by community groups contributed to the GDP an amount of Kenya shillings 54 million annually, equivalent to U\$ 7.5 million or JPY 8.7 million. This is a sound indicator of economic empowerment.

On the political front, however, women account for over 51% of the population they are year over 51% of the population they are yet to realize their benefits of the numerical strength. This is due to overriding factors of patriarchal society that continue to affect institutional and human factors that hinder advancement of women. The net result is that women account for 4.8% of elected members to the National Assembly and 13.3% in civic authorities.

Besides numerical characteristics of political representation, there is often equally important question of participation where such participation includes being consulted. There is need of governance mechanisms that ensure accountability by all range of decision makers to promote best governance practices including participatory management to achieve social justice.



Photo: Community Activity Groups to deliberate on Groups Promotion