"Grammar of Patriarchy": Women and Elections in Kenya

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Abstract

The Kenyan general elections of 2017 registered a marked improvement from the 2013 elections in the number of women elected to serve in different capacities. The elections saw the first ever women governors and senators emerge victorious from positions that were previously held by men only in 2013. This paper attempts to understand the grammar of patriarchy that stands in the way of women participation and engagement with elections. Drawing examples from recent events, the research argues that cultural traditions and the attendant stereotypes as well as the media perpetuate the patriarchal discourse that will have an overall effect on participation of women in politics.

Keywords: Women, elections, patriarchy, Kenyan media, sexism.

"Gramática del patriarcado": Mujeres y elecciones en Kenia

Resumen

Las elecciones generales de Kenia de 2017 registraron una notable mejoría en el número de mujeres elegidas con respecto a las elecciones de 2013. Las elecciones vieron a las primeras gobernadoras y senadoras salir victoriosas solo en 2013. Este documento intenta comprender la gramática del patriarcado que se interpone en el camino de la participación y el compromiso de las mujeres con las elecciones. Tomando ejemplos de eventos recientes, la investigación argumenta que las tradiciones culturales y los estereotipos acompañantes, así como los medios de comunicación, perpetúan el discurso patriarcal que tendrá un efecto general en la participación de las mujeres en la política.

Palabras clave: Mujeres, elecciones, patriarcado, medios de comunicación de Kenia, sexismo.

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1. Introduction

Despite gallant and concerted efforts over the years to improve the involvement of women in elections, the election platform in Kenya is still largely dominated by men. There are many ways in which elections are gendered in Kenya. Candidates and the media who are tasked with the responsibility of telling the stories of elections are mostly men. As in many patriarchal communities, "gendered language permeates the landscape as elections are described in analogies drawn mainly from the traditionally masculine domains of war and sports" (Aulette, Wittner & Blakely, 2009: 361).

The expectations about the appearance and behavior of candidate is gendered, in ways that perpetuate the patriarchy stereotypes entrenched in the cultural traditions of many communities in Kenya. This paper dwells on what I term as the "grammar of patriarchy" in Kenya during elections in a way to highlight the challenges that women politicians in Kenya face. However, despite these many hurdles, the research notes that there have been significant developments in relation to their participation in the electoral and political processes in Kenya.

October 2015 saw Mexico City host The Women in Parliaments Global Forum. The theme of the meeting revolved around influence and power of women in parliaments. The choice of Mexico was deliberate because the first UN Conference on Women in 1975 was held in the city. Kenya was well represented, with a number of female legislators gracing the occasion. Former Senator Zipporah Kittony was feted, for the virtue of having been a participant in the first conference 40 years ago, and for her long illustrious career as a woman leader.

Kenyan history has had a long tradition of recognized female leaders, before and after colonization. History is replete with examples of heroic acts by freedom fighters like Mekatilili wa Menza, Muthoni Nyanjiru, among many others who not only put their lives on the line by challenging the colonialist, but served as sources of inspiration in the fight against colonialism.

In the period after independence, courageous women leaders like Chelagat Mutai that stood their ground in the Kenyan parliament, in the face of leadership that was strongly defined by patriarchy and communal values that relegated the role of the woman to the kitchen.

Prof. Wangari Maathai single-handedly saved Karura Forest and Uhuru Park from greedy entrepreneurs that definitely had the support of the system. Like her predecessors, the world renown conservationist paid for her gallant efforts with tears, sweat and blood, but her green initiative

is one legacy that she will always been remembered for, in addition to her Nobel Peace Prize in 2004.Her influence is of global proportions. In 2015, in Peru, the city of Lima dedicated a park in honor and to the memory of this Nobel laureate.

2. The Prevailing Situation

It becomes clear then that Kenya as a country does not have a shortage of women leaders. However, despite having such important female figures in the history and politics of the Kenyan nation, there are serious challenges that shape the country's contemporary political dispensation. The 2010 Kenyan Constitution guarantees representation that should reflect the face of the nation, especially in terms of the gender equality. Article 27 (8) of the Kenyan Constitution "requires that the state shall take legislative and other measures to implement the principle that *not more than two thirds* of the members of elective or appointive bodies are of the same gender".[1]

The Eleventh Parliament, elected in 2013, had 18 women in the Senate and 69 MPs in the National Assembly[2] Kenya's Parliament was then ranked 100th in the world in regards to percentage of women in parliament.[3] Kenya had 27% women in their Senate and 19% in the National Assembly. The numbers in Senate were buoyed by the nomination policy that obligated political parties to ensure gender parity. Similarly, in the National Assembly, 47 of the MPs are the female county representatives.

However, in 2017, these figures improved considerably in relation to women representation in Kenyan politics. This has been seen a major step forward, "albeit an incremental one", in electoral politics, as the figures below indicate:

> Compared to the elections in 2013, more women won seats at all levels, except for the presidential race, which remained exclusively male. For the first time, women became governors and senators (three of each in 2017, compared to none in 2013), while more women were elected to the national and county assemblies (23 members of the national assembly in 2017 vs. 16 in 2013 and 96 members of county assemblies in 2017 vs. 82 in 2013). Women running as independent candidates were also elected for the first time. While these are positive changes, women comprised just 9.2 percent of the 1,835 elected individuals in 2017, a marginal increase from 7.7 percent in 2013. (NDI [National Democratic Institute] and FIDA [Federation of Women Lawyers in Kenya], 2018: 6)

The figures are represented in the table below. These include both elected and nominated leaders, drawing a comparison between the performance by women and men.

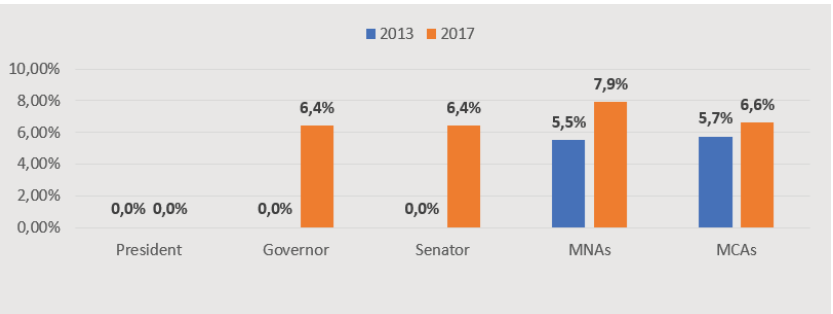
Table 1.
2017 Elections results by Gender.

	Elected		Nominated			%Women
Position	**Men**	**Women**	**Men**	**Women**	**Total**	**(Elect+Nom)**
President	1	0	--	--	1	*0%*
Deputy President	1	0	--	--	1	*0%*
Senator	44	3	2	18	67	*31%*
MNA	267	23	7	5	302	*9%*
WMNA	0	47	--	--	47	*100%*
Governor	44	3	--	--	47	*6%*
Deputy Governor	40	7	--	--	47	*15%*
MCA	1334	96	97	650	2177	*34%*
TOTAL	**1731**	**179**	**106**	**673**	**2689**	***32%***

Source: NDI and FIDA (2018). *A Gender analysis of the 2017 Kenya general elections*, p.30.[4]

The graph below represents the comparison between the 2013 general elections and the last election in 2017.

Graph 1.
Women as percentage of elected leaders 2013 - 2017.



Source: NDI and FIDA (2018). *A Gender analysis of the 2017 Kenya general elections*, p. 30.

In comparison, today in Mexico, 48.2% of the seats in the Mexican Congress are held by women, and 49.2% of the seats in the Senate.[5] The numbers for Kenya are 21.8% and 30.9% respectively. Women have had influential roles

in Mexican politics since 1953, when the Constitution enshrined the suffrage of women after long years of advocacy by women's organizations.

These figures in both countries represent huge strides towards ensuring gender parity in representational politics. The rising number of women legislators in both the Kenyan National Assembly and the Senate can be attributed to the implementation of the new constitution. However, whereas the constitution lays a strong legal basis in women empowerment, this does not reflect on the mindset of the Kenyan society.

The numbers, however rosy, still fall short of the two-thirds majority rule envisaged in the constitution that argues that not more than two-thirds of the members of elective bodies can be of the same gender. Recent efforts to have the parliament obligated to observe the two-thirds majority rule have hit a brick wall, thanks to the dilly-dallying of the politicians who have endlessly postponed the deliberations of this constitutional framework. But as it stands, both the legislature and the executive arm of the government are in direct contravention of the dictates of the constitution that are clear as regards to the gender parity.

In a personal conversation with Josefina Vazquez Mota, a former presidential candidate in the 2012 elections in Mexico, she acknowledged the political transformation that puts women in more positions of leadership, but decried the patriarchal mentality that dominates large sections of the Mexican society. She agonizingly pointed out that she got lots of resistance and negative feedback, from women and men alike in her quest for the presidency. The situation is in no way different from the Kenyan scenario.

In Kenya, the numbers quoted above can be pleasing to the eye, but a lot remains to be done. Worth noting is that in 2013, no woman candidate in the senatorial or gubernatorial positions was successful. As NDI and FIDA (2018) contend:

> While women's representation did show a marginal increase in 2017, the fact that it continued to fall short can be attributed to factors beyond the incomplete nature of the country's legal frameworks and its non-compliant political institutions. A comprehensive review of the experience of female candidates shows that women faced the same challenges in 2017 that they did in 2013, namely: inadequate political support from their parties, particularly in the primaries; a lack of financial resources; gender-based violence; gender stereotyping; and patriarchal structures across society. (2018: 6)

Below, we consider some of the factors mentioned above, especially those that underscore the "grammar of patriarchy".

3. Interpreting the Grammar of Patriarchy in Kenyan Electoral Politics

Grammar of patriarchy in this research is broad and looks at those patterns that define Kenya's male-dominated politics over the years, and have had a lasting impact when one is to consider women and elections in Kenya. By using the term "grammar", what is implied, as rightly argued by Peltonen, Lindman, and Sarah (2017):

> …is the kind of *sense-making* that patriarchy contains; what makes *sense* if one approaches life from a particular angle, when humanity is divided into the (damaging) dynamics of "men" and "women", to be more specific. "Grammar", then, is… descriptions of the patterns in how we talk, how we think, how we judge, how we feel. (2017: 4-5) (Emphasis mine)

The research reveals the grammar of patriarchy by looking at those examples in the Kenyan context, drawn from the mainstream Kenyan media, which continually relegate the participation of women in elections to lower levels; whether it is in terms of female candidates during elections, or in the promulgation of laws that advocate for gender parity in political representation, as seen above. Grammar then goes beyond the linguistic sense to reveal that how we talk and act definitely gives an insight into how we live.

In the Kenyan political scene, one of the most conspicuous aspects is the venom directed at female public figures when their names come up for discussion. Highly performing female public servants have borne the brunt of a political class dominated by male species. Patriarchy aside, this denotes that there is an element of fear in such men of highly successful women, especially in politics. Recent examples of how women in public offices have been judged in the court of public opinion, as opposed to their male counterparts gives an indication that women are more strictly vetted and more harshly condemned.

In the recent past, cases of corruption against former Devolution Cabinet Secretary, Anne Waiguru and former Health Cabinet Secretary, Charity Ngilu, took more prominence, not because of the positions they held, but the simple fact that they were women.[6] This is augmented by the fact that cases involving their male cabinet colleagues took a lower profile, and have easily been forgotten, while these women public figures are constantly reminded of their past. The Kenyan parliament has on several occasions instituted motions of no confidence, or have threatened to do so, but glaring so against prominent women leaders and professionals. In

2018, the cabinet secretary of health, Sicily Kariuki was threatened with such a motion, mostly by male colleagues, but in a case that not only took a patriarchy angle, but an ethnic one too.

Male politicians, in their majority, have been known to effect revenge on female public figures and professionals who appear assertive and principled. In 2015, when Monica Juma's [7] name was presented to parliament for vetting as the Secretary to the Cabinet, there was a unanimous rejection from Parliament, but specifically so because the candidate had stood firm against graft and a culture of handouts when she was in the Devolution Ministry. As stated above, this patriarchal tendency is informed by an overwhelming sense of fear from male political actors towards women who have maintained professionalism and have refused to kowtow to male domination.

Female parliamentarian Millie Odhiambo, a human rights activist in her own right has borne the brunt of the patriarchy, once suffering from physical abuse from a male colleague in parliament. In political competition, she has always been chided by male colleagues for being childless. Odhiambo reveals that whenever she disagreed with some of her male colleagues, she has been dismissed as "a barren prostitute".[8]

It is not only the childless female politicians that are objects of ridicule and insults from the male political competitor. Women politicians who are single have also attracted sexist remarks in their quest for political office. Part of the speech below, by former Kiambu governor, William Kabogo, was directed towards former Thika MP, Alice Ng'ang'a, a single mother and a competitor to Kabogo;

> Na inyuĩ airĩtu aya anyinyi mũcarie athuri mũhike, tondũ nĩ inyuĩ mũratũrehera iũndũ ici cioothe na arũme maihũrĩte gũkũ. Ũkũgũtha mĩrongo itatũ na ĩtano ũtarĩ ũroona mũthuuri, angalia maneno yako. Inaenda mrama. Ĩ kana tiguo? Rĩu ona nĩtũgũcoka kuuga atĩ wenda gũcagũrwo, ũka na mũthuri mũkarũgama hau.[9]

> ...and you young women should find husbands and get married because you are the cause of all these problems, we are having yet there are men all over the place. Once you get to 35 years and you don't have a husband, you should find out what's wrong with you because you are on the wrong path, isn't it? Now we'll start the practice where if you want to get elected, you declare your intention with your wife or husband by your side.

Not only is a single mother accused of causing problems (which can be read as fierce competition to male-dominated leadership), but the male politician here seems to subscribe to the idea that only people in marital

unions are capable of holding positions of power and have a say in politics. He continues in his speech, which is rendered in vernacular to appeal to a wider audience within a selected cultural background:

> Mũndũ ũkũhota gũtwarithia mũciĩ na mbere ona bũrũri nĩ egũtwarithia. No ũngĩkorwo ndũngĩhota mũciĩ … no ũhote?
>
> Someone who is able to manage a home is equally able to run the affairs of the people. But if you cannot manage a home, can you manage public affairs?

The discomfiting, chauvinistic remarks that populate acres of space in the media, in popular culture, in the everyday talk that continually demean the image of the woman do not bode well with living the ideals of Kenya's progressive constitution. This aside, however, there has been a high number of youth and women candidates who have defied the flow of patriarchy and gerontocracy to emerge victorious.

The above examples clearly show that the expectations about the appearance and behavior of candidate is gendered, in ways that perpetuate the patriarchal stereotypes entrenched in the cultural traditions of many communities in Kenya. During campaigns, especially in those contests that pit a woman against a man, we are surely bound to hear loaded epithets directed against her.

The women candidates are bound to confront both patriarchy and tribalism during elections or whenever there are instances of political competition. These two factors are used potently by male candidates to deny the agency of the woman candidate but most crucially, to denigrate the image of women in leadership. Whereas the question raised above revolved around women who are single or childless, the grammar of patriarchy does not end there. For the married female politicians, the issue of their spouses is floated, but as argued above, with nuances of tribalism.

Gubernatorial candidate, and eventual winner in Bomet county, Joyce Laboso,[10] not only suffered sexist attacks from the supporters of her competitor, Isaac Rutto, but she was constantly given the "outsider" tag, because her husband hails from a different ethnic community than her own. She was always reminded that she no longer belongs to her community that populates most of Bomet County and that she should go vie in the county where her husband comes from. Despite all the attacks, she emerged victorious by becoming one of the very first woman governors under the new constitution.

The same played out in the contest for the Embu senatorial seat, where Lenny Kivuti urged residents not to vote for Cecily Mbarire, because if elected, she would "export resources to her husband's area" (Githinji, 2017). Her husband, just like the case above, is from a different ethnic community from her.

This is a common feature that is normally defined by the art of attacking the personality of the woman candidate instead of addressing issues during campaigns. Below are two examples from a popular Kenyan talk-show on national TV that underlie this concern. It is preposterous that the media insist on carry these interviews without thinking of the consequences of the perpetuation of patriarchy.

Former governor of Nairobi, Evans Kidero dismissed one of his would-be female competitors for the gubernatorial position, thus: "Nairobi is a serious city… you can't elect a cougar". Even without naming names, this was a remark aimed at one or two women who had expressed interest in running for the position in the 2017 elections. Worth noting is that the same politician, Kidero, had earlier physically assaulted Racheal Shebesh, a woman politician with whom he had difference of opinion in politics.

In another interview pairing two other potential gubernatorial aspirants, Miguna Miguna and Esther Passaris, similar sexist language was used against Esther, the woman politician. A talk show meant for political aspirants to sell their agenda once elected, Miguna, the male politician veered from campaign issues to launch a personal attack on Passaris, "Esther is so beautiful everybody wants to rape her. You are chasing men all over, nobody wants you. You think you're beautiful, you are not. Esther is just colour.[11] Without colour you are nothing" (BBC, 2016).

Apart from trivializing the crime of rape and gender-based violence, this interview goes a step further in underlining how patriarchy has constantly shaped politics and elections in Kenya. There is always negative campaigning by a man if he is running against a female candidate. One, the male politician will not shy away from aggressive confrontations in his campaigns against a woman, because the society has entrenched patriarchy in its values. Thus, the man will not care if the public deems him ungentlemanly.

Kenyan politics, whether during or after elections is laden with linguistic sexism, as can be seen in the examples above. Ikiara (2015) argues that because we live in a patriarchal society, the languages are a reflection of these realities. Male politicians will use derogatory terms in describing not only their female competitors, but also their male opposition. Even when the words are not derogatory, the intended meaning denigrates the

womanhood, though the society would see it as humorous. Another example is captured in an altercation between the president and the governor of Mombasa, where the former in a sarcastic mode reminds the latter, that *"mimi si bibi yako!"* (You cannot keep following me everywhere I go. *I am not your wife*).[12] The wife imagery here is interpreted in ways to show off political might against a perceived weaker opponent, but also a direct insult to the wife of the opponent.

The male candidate will not strive to show that they are in touch with women's issues while running a campaign against a woman. That in the political competition, patriarchy will always favor the male candidate, because culturally, epithets that are anti-woman are widely used and to a certain level and therefore, normalized. The examples above epitomize this concern.

But this also derives from cultural traditions, some of them that need a serious revising, going forward. The oral tradition in many communities in Kenya has perpetuated patriarchy and continues to view women as incompatible with leadership.

There are proverbs, oral narratives or traditional songs that have been passed on from generation to generation, but that cast the image of the woman in leadership in a negative light. Scholars like Ciarunji Chesaina and Wanjiku Kabira have well documented this in their research in different communities.

Wanjiku Kabira, in her research on oral literature has assessed the issues around the politics of gender and control among the Gĩkũyũ people. Important in her research on the representation of women in the oral narratives is how she captures the conflict in the community between the "need to respect the mother and the realization of the low status of women" (1994: 78). This is a paradox that is clearly evident in the contemporary popular culture and every day parlance of the community where the mother is revered whereas the wife or girlfriend is rebuked.

Kabira has captured the portrayal of women in the proverbs of the society too and this is the trend that spreads through the everyday life of the Gĩkũyũ. The woman in the oral literature of the society has been portrayed as "unreliable, disobedient, irresponsible, disloyal, disagreeable, adulterous, cunning, senseless, easily cheated, forgetful, not dependable, evil, trickster, lazy, etc" (1994: 79-80).

As Kabira argues, oral narratives and proverbs in Gĩkũyũ oral literature perpetuate this negative image of women thus contributing to "social gender constructs that call for control of women in society and legitimize

male dominance" (1994: 84). It is from this historical background that necessitates a need to comprehend the discourse of women and elections, not only in this community but in Kenya generally.

Whereas the above is largely on the oral literature of one of the many communities in Kenya, many oral traditions in the country exhibit the same bias against women and this has informed the way in which electoral politics are played out. This culture which relegates the role of women in leadership is rampant and could be partly be blamed for the patriarchy that has continually ensured that gender parity becomes a mirage. These cultural impediments hamper progress of the participation of women as aspirants, but also that influence the voting patterns of the women. I personally witnessed this when I was in the 1997 campaign trail of Charity Ngilu, the very first woman presidential candidate in Kenya.

Based on these cultural obstacles, women who venture into politics during elections are judged purely on femininity rather than on substance. Due to this, the woman candidate has been forced to endear herself to the voters on the bases of appearances, rather than issues. Words like *manzi, supuu* and *warembo*[13] all bordering on the dialects of patriarchy are bandied around, every now and then. But as Joyce Laboso, a gubernatorial candidate in Bomet County argued during the campaigns in 2017, "I am not selling my womanhood, I am selling my leadership, but that said, they are bringing all manner of things which a male candidate is not told" (Sigei & Rono, 2017).

Those women who have succeeded in holding high office have often been perceived as exceptional women, who "act like men". When they act like men, they often face criticism for being unfeminine and unlikable. The gender ideologies give the stereotyped feminine traits of warmth, gentleness and compassion to women. One well remembers Martha Karua, being described as the "only man in Kibaki's cabinet" (Gaitho, 2009) in the coalition government.

4. Conclusion

Considering all the above factors that come in the way of women participation in electoral politics, and largely informed by the grammar of politics, there is reason to acknowledge the efforts that women continually put in the fight for political space in Kenya. Although patriarchy stubbornly refuses to give way, the rise of the woman politician is gaining pace. It is encouraging that it is the rural constituencies that are producing more and more women leaders, signaling a positive step towards actualizing Kenya's

democracy. These are some of the issue's politicians should be giving prominence in their campaigns.

In conclusion, it is clear that despite efforts, both legislative and from a human rights discourse towards improving gender equity in Kenyan electoral politics, a lot remains to be done. Constitution aside, there is a genuine need to redress issues that continue to disadvantage certain members of the society. The two-thirds gender rule could be a godsend from a policy perspective, but the society's mindset should complement issues that the constitution seeks to protect. Probably there are lessons that could be learnt from Latin America, where, despite the circumstances surrounding the stereotype of a *machismo* culture,[14] this is one region that has a produced a large number of female presidents; Argentina, Chile, Brazil to name but a few.

Notes

1 The Constitution of Kenyan (2010). Retrieved of https://www.wipo.int/edocs/lexdocs/laws/en/ke/ke019en.pdf.

2 The 2017 elections in Kenya witnessed an increase in the number of women leaders in the National Assembly and the Senate as well as in the gubernatorial positions. However, the numbers in parliament still fall short of the two-thirds constitutional threshold.

3 Inter-Parliamentary Union (2017). *Women in National Parliaments*. Retrieved of http://archive.ipu.org/wmn-e/arc/classif010717.htm.

4 The numbers and the percentages will slightly change following the election of Edith Nyenze as the member of the National Assembly for Kitui West in March 2018, following the death of her husband, Francis Nyenze.

5 http://archive.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm.

6 However, the two female politicians mentioned emerged victorious in the gubernatorial positions in their respective counties in the 2017 elections. Only three women managed to secure victory as governors, a slight improvement from 2013 where there was none. The fact that they have been able to overcome the hurdles presents a positive step in the recognition of the role of women in leadership in Kenya.

7 However, after the 2017 elections, Monica Juma was appointed by the president as the Foreign Affairs Minister; only the second woman in the history of post-independence Kenya to hold this position.

8 *The East African Standard*, May 25th 2015.

9 The speech was rendered in the Gĩkũyũ language that is predominantly spoken in the central region of Kenya. The Gĩkũyũ ethnic group is the largest in Kenya, accounting to about 22% of the total population of about 50 million, with about 44 different ethnic communities.

10 Joyce Laboso was one of the three women governors elected in the 47 counties in Kenya. She passed away in July 2019, leaving the country with only two women governors.

11 Esther Passaris is of mixed heritage; a Greek father and a Kenyan mother. Although beyond the scope of this paper, the theme of colorism in Kenya is very prevalent where slightly light-skinned people, in a country of a predominantly black population, are viewed as a yardstick of beauty. According to Nyong'o (2019), many Kenyans still ascribe to the notions of Eurocentric standards of beauty, a reality replicated in the pronouncements of the male politician above.

12 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gQAcvxZQZUg.

13 All these words are common in the daily parlance of the Kenyans, in reference to beauty in a woman. As argued, the woman politician will be judged, not on the issues she articulates, but on her appearances.

14 This is an ideology and attitude pervasive in most of Latin America that is known to favor masculinity and reinforces the idea of a woman as a second-class citizen.

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