



The Role of the Maendeleo Ya Wanawake Organization in Women's Economic Empowerment: Case of Abakhayo Women, Busia County (1978-2002)

Maureen Ajiambo Muleka,¹ and Pontian Godfrey Okoth²

^{1,2}Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology | Kenya

Abstract

One may be forgiven to assume that there are no women's movements in Kenya today. This is due to the trajectory that women's organizations have taken in the recent past. Apparently, women's movements presently appear to concentrate on the fight for/against issues which may be seen as less urgent such as women representation in leadership and politics; equal access to education and jobs; visibility in the media and literature; two thirds gender rule; etcetera. Seemingly, the expectation of the public is women's organizations that have a direct and tangible effect on the women concerned. Perhaps this is a carryover from the pioneer women's organizations such as the Maendeleo ya Wanawake Organization (MYWO), whose basic aim was to directly impact and lift the socio-economic status of women without having to inject in feminist, or competitive energies. The period 1978-2002 is considered the Golden Era of the organization, which, on realizing that it would be difficult to change the lives of women without economic independence, embarked on introducing income generating projects across the country. "How can women's organizations help foster women's economic empowerment?" The paper attempts to answer this question by exploring the role MYWO played in the economic empowerment of Abakhayo women in Busia County.

Key words: economic empowerment, economic mobilization, MYWO, women's movements.

1.0 Introduction

The concept of empowerment is a core construct in the contemporary world, punctuated by women empowerment, financial empowerment, political empowerment, community empowerment, group empowerment, among others (Tandon, 2016). Empowerment herein is a process or an act of giving authority/power to one or a group of people. It is bequeathing power/authority with a deliberate intention of begetting balance (Sharma, 2020).

Empowerment of women denotes that, women shall enjoy human rights in practice, regardless of gender, as normatively desired. This is instrumentally valuable in prompting agency and economic vibrancy among women to realize and develop their full potential as leaders, talented and productive workers, mothers, caregivers, and often more responsible managers of households (Kardam & Kardam, 2017). Economic empowerment of women refers to providing the necessary rights and responsibilities to women to make them self-reliant (Sharma, 2020).

This study draws from the five levels of the women's empowerment framework, namely, welfare, access, conscientization, mobilization and control where the welfare level denotes an improvement in socio-economic status such as improved nutritional status and income; access implies ability to reach resources and services and organization arising from increased access to resources and services; mobilization implies women pulling together resources for economic empowerment; and control implies women being able to take charge of their economic situation by venturing into various activities (Leder, 2016). But one needs to understand that these five levels of women's empowerment are not really a linear progression but helical and circular along with being inter-connected.

The above levels summarize the goals of the Maendeleo ya Wanawake Organization, a countrywide organization with the aim of lifting the status of women. This study focuses on the impact of the Organization on women, in line with the fourth level, through a reflective study on the Abakhayo women of Busia County, Western Kenya. Although the Organization has had a long history, this study focuses on the period between 1978 and 2002, which was the most active period of the Organization as compared to later times when it became affiliated to and recognized by the KANU-run government led by Daniel Toroitich arap Moi, the second president of independent Kenya.

1.1 Problem Statement

Many studies reflect the history of the women of Kenya. Various studies historicize the position of the Maendeleo ya Wanawake Organization in women empowerment in Kenya but very few studies interrogate the success or failure of the organization's activities on specific groups of women, a gap this study sought to fill by assessing the impact of the organization on Abakhayo women during the period 1978-2002.

1.2 Study Objective

This study intended to carry out a reflective study of the impact of the activities of the Maendeleo ya Wanawake Organization on the Abakhayo women as a way of assessing the economic impact the organization had on women at its peak, that is, 1978-2002.

1.3 Theoretical Framework

The study was based on the Agency Theory as propagated by Steven Ross and Barry Mitnic (1973). The Agency Theory attempts to explain relationships and self-interest. It describes the relationship between principals/agents and the delegation of control. It explains how best to organize relationships in which one party (principal) determines the work and which another party (agent) performs or makes decisions (Jensen and Meckling, 1976; Schroeder et al., 2011). To put this into context, David Anderson notes that African studies must always emphasize African agency to development (Anderson, 2002). Agency conservatively denotes acting on behalf of someone else or being a tool through which an agenda is achieved. Maendeleo ya Wanawake Organization in this case was one of the agencies through which Abakhayo women were economically empowered.

1.4 Review of Related Literature

This study sought to discuss women's economic empowerment and the role of the Maendeleo ya Wanawake Organization. The study, therefore, identified and reviewed empirical literature that discusses the main themes. The critical review outlined in this study is based on the history of women's empowerment in Kenya and the space women's organizations have taken to help empower women economically.

1.5 Methodology

Being qualitative research, this study used a historical research design that involves analysing past events and developing conclusions. The study adopted a critical analysis of available secondary data, heavily relying on archival sources and newspapers. Primary data was collected from oral interviews with eight persons, contemporaries of the selected period.

2.0 Economic State of Women in Kenya Up to 1963: An Overview

Since time immemorial, African women and the economy have been inextricable. Depending on the values of different African societies, women have had varying degrees of economic power and independence. The never-ending patriarchy in most systems has placed them under the authority of men (fathers and husbands) economically but the role of women in the economy is indissoluble. Boserup (1989), while trying to explain gender roles in economic development and division of labour around the world, gives a lot of importance to the role of women in the African society as that of sustainers of the community. According to Boserup, Africa is a region of female farming *par excellence*. Food production and tasks connected to food production were a monopoly of the women throughout African history. The United Nations Organization acknowledges this fact as it notes that 80% of agricultural production in the world is owed to women (UNDP, 2018).

As such, it is expected that due to this vital role bestowed on the women, they should be viewed highly in society. However, as Boserup notes, this is contrary to the reality of the African women, a concept supported by Ndeda (2019). Ndeda notes that although ownership of land and inheritance in the African society was exclusively a preserve of the males, women had free access to the land and food production was mainly by the women. This should have earned a status for the African women but antithetically, women were still seen as subordinate to men and their main role was reproduction for the continuity of the community (Ndeda, 2019).

When British colonialism arrived in Kenya in the late 19th century, its impact on the then existing state of women was unforetold. Although it would generally be assumed that colonialism and westernization would vindicate African women from the supposed 'chains' of economic subjugation, many scholars feel that colonialism worsened the state of women in Africa. It would then take years for Kenyan women to regain their position as key players in the

economy. Colonialism assumed that women in the traditional African society were disempowered economically, a concept that may not be entirely true. The colonialists would, therefore, continue this assumed subjugation of women but from a Victorian angle.

As Ndeda says, women in the African traditional society may not have been allowed to own means of production but were allowed to use the means of production to feed the communities. To the African women, being allowed to till the land and provide for their families, was enough economic empowerment. Women were allowed to do other economic activities such as trade, crafts, fishing, gathering, etcetera.

First, colonialism took away from women the right to access land. House-Midamba (1990) argues that the status of Kenyan women deteriorated further during the colonial era as the colonial government legalized patriarchy through measures such as the introduction of individual land ownership and acquisition of title deeds which allowed only the males to own and inherit the land. This denied the women free access to the land they had previously cultivated, being the producers.

Secondly, according to Onsongo (2011), colonial laws disrupted and displaced women's gender roles through the introduction of cash crops, formal education, and the introduction of a monetary economy. While some men secured employment, either on cash crop farms or as clerks in government offices, women remained in rural areas and reserves producing subsistence food. The colonialists grouped women together with the children and thus they put women's labour on the periphery. Alam (2007) argues that women's labour was deemed important on the cash crop farms only when the colonial administrators realized that many men had migrated to towns leaving women on the farms. This showed the colonialists thought the women were inferior to men and could only work as their assistants since women had nothing to contribute to the economy except in the absence of the men. In addition, women would be held back in the rural areas (being denied the chance to seek economic means in towns) as a way of ensuring that the men would come back to the rural areas and still supply labour to the colonialists. This portrayed women only as a tool or a means to an end.

Since the colonial government was mostly interested in male labour, concentrated strategies to improve the males into skilled and semi-skilled workers were put in place. The main strategy was the provision of education. This would equip the males with skills to fit into the available clerical jobs on farms, industries, mission stations and government offices (Oduol, 1993). Therefore, the

initial schools were meant for the boys. With time, the African fathers adopted the same mentality, thus, only educating the boys. The girls, on the other hand, were drawers of wealth through bride prize, which was then converted into school fees for the boys.

The role of the women would then be mostly to ensure there was enough male labour by giving birth to more males. The government would then take interest in the women's education to only ensure that women were taught basic home science which would enable them to bring up a healthy male labour force. They would, therefore, be taught hygiene and childcare to reduce the high mortality rate to guard against reduction of the much-coveted male labour force (Sheffield, 1973).

While a few girls (whose parents accepted conversion to Christianity) were allowed to pursue elementary education, many boys were excelling in education. After elementary school, boys then proceeded to secondary schools, as such schools were available for African boys by 1926 (Doroba, 2018). This excellence would later translate into economic empowerment for the males. The girls, on the other hand, were forced to wait until 1948 to access post-primary education when the first secondary school for African girls would be established – 22 years after the establishment of the first African boy-school. This difference led to a series of missed opportunities for the girls, and this delayed take-off for the females would haunt them for decades, with serious economic implications.

A good example of a missed opportunity was the '*Mboya Airlifts*' of 1959-1963 which saw many Kenyan students go to American and Canadian universities for further studies under the sponsorship of John F. Kennedy's administration. This was meant to produce an African elite class which would help in the Africanization of the soon-to-be independent Kenya (*The East African Standard*, Dec 2, 2016). Unfortunately, not many women benefitted from this lucrative opportunity due to low education or total lack of it as out of the first batch of 81 students, only 13 were female. The aftermath would be the birth of the post-independence working class that lacked female representation. The main consequence of this would be that the males would quickly take up early government jobs in the post-independence Kenya, thus their economic empowerment (Masinde, OI, Busia, 15/10/21). However, another question asked would be if the women who went to study abroad benefitted from the program. The simple answer is 'yes' but with a notable concern. The women who were absorbed by the program went for '*lower*' courses thus accessed such jobs. Miriam Chege, for example, applied for a Food Science degree through the Nyeri

Catholic Diocese (*The East African Standard*, Dec 2, 2016). She landed at St Mary of the Woods College in Indiana State and on coming back, she couldn't fit in the highly paying government jobs as her course was irrelevant to the situation at the time. She completely failed to get a government job in 1965. She secured a non-governmental job later when the Catholic Church offered her an appointment as head of nutrition at Catholic Relief Services in Kenya. Ms. Chege notes that women graduates joining the public service faced a tougher climb to the top. "*Women got jobs as assistant secretaries, the lowest position of a public officer,*" says Ms. Chege (*The East African Standard*, Dec 2, 2016). The men, on the other hand, were absorbed into high cadre jobs. They became heads of ministries and the provincial administration as well as ambassadorial appointees. This gave the men a better economic footing. In summary, when women missed out on acquiring the main tool for empowerment – proper education, they would then miss out on economic empowerment. This called for a lot of drastic measures to salvage the sorry state of women at the time.

3.0 The Birth of the Maendeleo Ya Wanawake Organization

Ndeda (2006) notes that by the early 1940s, the colonial government realized that the social welfare of the African was directly tied to the political success of the colony. The colonialists, therefore, began to show concern for African life and by extension, African women. They had to redress the situation of African women due to pressure from the international community as well as the European women in Kenya.

The only body fighting for African women at that time was the East African Women's League, which did not reach women at the grass roots (Ndeda, 2006). In 1945 Major H. Sharpe expressed his concern that women were not being mentioned in studies. He stated that unless the standard of African women was raised appreciably, the men would not improve and "*one could not expect a sense of responsibility in the African male unless and until the woman's side was improved*" (*The East African Standard* 12 June 1950).

There was, therefore, late realization that the African women "*so often maligned and so often misunderstood played a far greater role in the day-to-day life and behaviour of the Africans than was generally understood*" (*The East African Standard*, 12 June 1950). The temperament and ability of the housewife left the mark not only on the character and behaviour of the children but affected the actions of her husband. It is for this reason that the colonial government

responded to the European women's call to better the status of the African women in the colony.

European women understood the plight of the rural women who were confined by many children, daily farm chores and meagre cash resources and isolated from larger groups of women with similar interests (Ndeda, 2006). Part of the motivation to organize the groups was the realization that African women were lagging behind African men in development. Eleanor Grant, prominent in the East African Women's League, pointed out this discrepancy in 1952. She stated,

The backwardness of African women is a menace to the balance of East African Society, from reasons humane, economic, and hygienic; there are already signs that the advance of African women may come as rapidly and sporadically as has happened in the past decades with men, and it is obvious that European planning, direction, and sympathy must be forthcoming to meet the tide (Ndeda, 2006)

It is, therefore, through the efforts of the European women within the colony that the Maendeleo ya Wanawake Organization was birthed. This became the first organization to fully look at the African woman with a positive eye. The formation of this organization laid ground for the women's organizations that later championed the rights of women and fought for women empowerment in the social, political, and economic spheres. This, therefore, became the beginning of the women's movement in Kenya.

3.1 Maendeleo ya Wanawake Organization: at the Grassroots

The Maendeleo ya Wanawake Organization was established in 1952 at the height of the struggle for the independence of Kenya. It was formed as a non-political organization, charged with the duty of mobilizing all Kenyan women and promoting their welfare from different dimensions (KNA/REF: AMP/5/58). According to Audrey Wipper's *the Maendeleo ya Wanawake Organisation: The Co-optation of Leadership*, MYWO was the largest voluntary association in Kenya and the only one with a countrywide network of clubs. At the beginning it was organized by a small group of European women under the colonial government's Department of Community Development and Rehabilitation, to promote "*the advancement of African women*" and to raise African living standards (Wipper, 1975).

It started when Nancy Shepherd, Assistant Commissioner for Development and Rehabilitation and a daughter of one of Kenya's pioneer missionaries, the Venerable Archdeacon H. K. Binns, began to organize women's clubs with the aid of volunteers. Professional leadership was supplied by the Commission of Development personnel but the main motivating force came at the local level through volunteers. The wives of administrators, missionaries, technical advisors, and settlers organized branches (Wipper, 1975). African assistants were trained so that, in time, the branches could function under their leadership. From the outset, MYWO came under the patronage of upper-class colonial women, including Lady Mary Baring, the Governor's wife; Lady Eleanor Cole; Lady Worley; Mrs. A.J Beecher, wife of an Anglican Bishop; Mrs. C.H Williams, wife of a P.C; Mrs. T. Hughes, wife of a Provincial Agricultural Officer; the wives of the executives of Roster man Mines; and members of the East Africa Women League (a European voluntary association founded in 1917 for the advancement of women) (KNA/REF: AMP/5/58).

The main goals of MYWO were to improve the economic, social, and political status of women in Kenya by uplifting the standard of living of the rural communities to the level where they could help themselves to enhance their integral development and thus, the development of Kenya (KNA/REF: AMP/5/58). These goals were to be achieved through several objectives which included:

- promoting the qualities of integrity such as honesty, truthfulness, tolerance, service, and friendship as the foundation of all activities of the organization;
- developing the status and conditions of the life of women and girls of all communities in Kenya;
- stimulating discussions among its members on problems affecting women and children in Kenya and to take active steps to bring about solutions to these problems;
- encouraging and stimulating home industries by encouraging members to make, produce and create articles that were to be sold in a shop/s set up and run by the Organization for that purpose; and
- raising funds through subscriptions, gifts, loans, investments, and such other financial activities which can facilitate the achievements of the above aims (KNA/REF: AMP/5/58).

By 1954 there were more than three hundred MYWO clubs across the country and a membership of 37,000 women. That membership rose to 40,690 by 1955 with twelve European and two African Home craft Offices in charge. This rapid rise was attributed to the financial aid from the colonial government and the United Nations. By 1969, the membership was at 80,000 and 90,000 in 1970 (Wipper, 1975). The Organization had successfully penetrated the grassroots, connecting the Headquarters in Nairobi to the many women in the rural areas across the country. Activities would be discussed at the Headquarters in Nairobi and be funded and implemented at the grassroots among women, including such as the Abakhayo women in Busia District through their branches in the districts.

3.2 Maendeleo ya Wanawake in Western Kenya: A Case of the Abaluhya Women of Western Kenya

The Abakhayo, a sub-tribe of the Abaluhya community of Western Kenya, are found mainly in parts of Busia, Mundika, Matayos and Nambale. In addition to bordering other Luhya sub-tribes, namely, the Abasamia and Abamarachi, they also border the Teso to the north and the Baganda to the west (Gumo, 2018).

3.2.1 The Economic State of Abakhayo Women before 1978

Women's economic empowerment among the Abakhayo was never an issue of concern to the women themselves in the precolonial period because, according to Margaret Kunguru (OI, Mundika, 09/10/21), a retired Maendeleo ya Wanawake secretary for the then Busia District, Abakhayo women were freer as compared to other selected Luhya sub-tribes such as the Ababukusu where a woman was not even allowed to stand before men.

In precolonial times the Abakhayo women would engage in economic activities such as agriculture, trade, brewing of traditional beer and fishing. Agriculture was the most practised activity with women planting a variety of crops such as sorghum, millet, cassava, arrowroots, maize (though in small quantities), bananas, legumes, vegetables, etcetera (Gumo, 2018). This shows that although women did not own land, they could access it and till it by virtue of being a daughter or a wife. This was meant to ensure that the woman was able to provide for her family.

Trade would be practised mainly with the neighbouring Samia and Marachi sub-tribes as well as the Baganda and Teso tribes. The women would acquire types of food they didn't have, for example, specific types of bananas and beans from Baganda, pots and beadwork from the Abamarachi and baskets, brooms,

weaved fishing traps, mats and winnowing trays from the Abasamia. Fishing would mostly be done in River Sio and other small rivers scattered across the land (Aseka, 1989). Though not for sale, traditional brew was mainly for events and almost all women were taught how to brew it.

The onset of colonialism did not have a profound impact on the economies of the Abakhayo women at first. This was mainly because the western region was not hard-hit by issues related to land alienation, forced labour, severe taxation or drastic rural-urban migration of males as compared to the situation in Central Kenya. The introduction of cash crop farming and the money economy did little to change the state of Abakhayo women.

Cotton was the main cash crop introduced in the Busia region during the colonial period. While in other places women's labour was not valued, among the Abakhayo it was everyone's affair to work on the cotton farms – men, women, and children. Women even enjoyed to some extent receiving money from cotton proceeds (Kunguru, OI, Mundika, 09/10/21). It is, however, not a secret that the larger percentage of the proceeds would be left with the men. This may not have been an issue because at the time, women were not interested in the accumulation of wealth (savings) as they were mostly just in need of food. Many women were excited about the introduction of money as it improved trading activities (money was lighter). It was also easier to store it for future use (Kunguru, OI, Mundika, 09/10/21).

The status of the women remained the same until the introduction of a new land tenure system – private ownership of land, exclusively by males (Masinde, OI, Busia, 15/10/21). While initially women were allowed to till all land belonging to their fathers or husbands, this right would suddenly vanish when the colonial government began to divide land and issue title deeds. This began to restrict women's access to land thus reducing their empowerment. In addition, not everyone benefited from the new system. The colonialists would use the land as a reward system for the loyal Abakhayo men. First, they had to be Christian converts, yet they were not very familiar with the concept of conversion until sometime later. Second, they had to be proven to be loyal to the whiteman (Masinde, OI, Busia, 15/10/21). Therefore, catechists and colonial chiefs among the Abakhayo would be examples of categories of people who benefitted from the shift in the land tenure system. These were positions which women couldn't occupy at the time.

The introduction of western education was the other change that affected the Abaluhya women's economic empowerment during the colonial period. Since

the government opted to provide education mainly to the males to produce skilled labour, education would eventually become a serious tool for economic empowerment. However, this was not a privilege for all children. First, only children of converts were allowed into the mission schools. Secondly, the males were given priority in the provision of education. Girls' education was very scarce among the Abakhayo at the onset of colonialism, a phenomenon that would continue for years. This was made even worse by the fact that until the 1940s there was only one centre providing education to Africans in the entire Busia District – Nangina Mission (Masinde, OI, Busia, 15/10/21). Very few parents would allow their girls to walk such a long distance in search of education. This would then have a ripple effect that would be felt for decades. Therefore, just like in most other parts of the country, women among the Abakhayo would eventually lag behind as they couldn't access jobs both during the colonial and the postcolonial periods.

When eventually the colonial government realized the need to lift the status of the women and consequently established a women's organization, MYWO, the wives of the Provincial Commissioners would take up the mantle of putting in place the various activities to lift the status of the African women (Wipper, 1975). However, this would be concentrated in provincial headquarters and their environs. In the case of the Abaluhya women, the fact that Kakamega was the provincial headquarters for Western province disadvantaged them as they were a bit far from the centre. Therefore, the initial women empowerment efforts hardly reached them (Kunguru, OI, Mundika, 09/10/21).

The coming of independence did little for the Abakhayo women since the Kenyatta government maintained the status quo. As Ms. Kunguru notes, women hardly recognized that independence had come. She goes on to say that the biggest change the women would see was that girls would now access education regardless of the religious status of their parents. The independence government urged fathers to take their daughters to school so as to empower them, but the response was slow. However, the number of girls attending school would eventually increase over time.

Although MYWO was still in action, after independence its economic impact on the Abakhayo women was very little. At the time, it had concentrated on social goals such as improvement of the African family life through the reduction of diseases and the mortality rate, childcare, hygiene, food preparation, etcetera. The economic goals swung into action mainly in the period after 1978.

3.3.2 The Role of the Maendeleo ya Wanawake Organization in the Economic Empowerment of the Abakhayo Women after 1978

When Daniel Toroitich arap Moi took over the presidency of Kenya in 1978, he immediately realized that unless he empowered the women and the youth, then he wouldn't achieve much growth in various spheres, especially the economic (Moi, 1982). However, at the time, 'vehicles' through which to achieve empowerment for women and the youth were scarce. Women organizations had not been strengthened enough to be used as tools of empowerment for the women and the education system was not updated enough to deal with the ignorance among the youth. Therefore, the new President had a lot to do, including increasing the number of schools and institutions for children and the youth to access education, as well as finding appropriate channels to empower women. Luckily, he did both.

President Moi's choice of MYWO as the sole channel for women empowerment was what propelled the Organization into new heights. The government had already been funding activities of the giant organization to reach women at the grassroots, especially through income generating activities in a bid to eradicate poverty. Since government funding wasn't enough to cover for the many activities of the Organization, the government sought to source extra funds for the organization to run its activities. Therefore, foreign donors and non-governmental organizations were allowed to come in. According to Ms. Kunguru (OI, Mundika, 09/10/21), any governmental or nongovernmental organization which had wanted to reach the women during the Moi era was strictly supposed to go through MYWO as it was the only countrywide women's organization dealing with women at the grassroots. This idea was invented and emphasized by the President himself as at the time the Organization had already established offices at the grassroots. This is not to mean that there were no other countrywide women's organizations. The Kenya National Council of Women and the Women's Bureau, for example, were already in operation but were mostly associated with elitist women. Thus, they failed to attract the membership of the rural women, including the Abakhayo women who were largely uneducated. Therefore, the Abakhayo women only benefitted from the government supported MYWO.

However, many a times, Moi, who died in February 2020, was heavily criticized for turning the MYWO into a KANU women's wing and using it to mobilize women to vote for him at the time when he stayed at the helm of the

country's leadership for 23 years, a fact that the former Nambale Constituency Member of Parliament, Mzee Masinde agrees with.

The government's realization that it would be difficult to lift the status of women without lifting their economic status, led to the launching of various projects towards the women's economic empowerment through MYWO. This was done across the country. Each district had a branch with various officials such as a chairperson, a treasurer and a secretary who would run the affairs of the women in conjunction with the regional office, which received instructions from the national office in Nairobi (Wipper, 1975). The Abakhayo women, therefore, operated under the MYWO's Busia District branch, which operated under the Kakamega regional branch, which was the then provincial administrative headquarters.

The government's Department of Community Development worked hand in hand with the MYWO Headquarters to sensitize women on the establishment of self-help groups amongst themselves. Among the Abakhayo women, various initiatives were well received by the women who would quickly form self-help groups that would be used to channel money to the women (Kunguru, OI, Mundika, 09/10/21).

The Abakhayo women were already aware that they needed to work and so, when the MYWO brought farm inputs from the Kenya National Farmers Union (KNFU) in 1980, it was a relief for them. Commercial chicken rearing would become common as one of the projects introduced by the Organization. One of the biggest chicken projects in the area was established at Nakhomake, in Bukhayo West location (Nasirumbi, OI, Mundika, 11/10/21). Women were then given proper training on the care of the chicken to ensure the success of the project. This would see women keep thousands of chickens in various homes as a way of earning an income. Considering that the demand for chicken meat was high, the project was a big success for the various women groups as long as it lasted. Although the economic impact of the project was undeniable, sustainability was an issue leading to its collapse a few years later.

The women of Busibwabo in Busibwabo Sub-location received piglets for commercial purposes from KNFU through MYWO, Busia branch in 1984. The Organization facilitated the construction of good and modern pigsties which were able to accommodate hundreds of pigs. Mrs. Sarah Nasike would volunteer a section of her land for the project. Various members of the Busibwabo Women Group received training for the new project which went a long way in ensuring that there would be minimal wastage. The Project went on to benefit the women

group. From the proceeds of the pig farming, some were able to comfortably provide for their families and even pay fees for secondary education for their children (Nasike, OI, Busibwabo, 14/10/21). The Project would, however, collapse after about four years of operation and today, Ms. Nasike has converted the sties into rooms for her personal use. Other than pigs farming, dairy farming was also introduced at Mundika where grade cows were reared.

When the Lutheran World Relief programme, in conjunction with the Young Men Christian Association, decided to award women of Busia with fishponds, Ms. Nasirumbi of Mundika was lucky to be among the chosen few to host the Project as she had land adjacent to the river. MYWO quickly took up the training of the women of how to go about the business. A total of four ponds were constructed. The first harvest of fish generated a good income for the women. Nasirumbi would personally be able to pay fees for her son who was studying at Mundika Secondary School. However, after the first harvest of fish, the project dwindled. Today the ponds still exist but are not run by the women but the sons of Ms. Nasirumbi for personal gains. Other ponds were also located at Busende in Bukhayo East (Nasirumbi, OI, Mundika, 11/10/21).

Not only did the MYWO facilitate the keeping of animals but also the planting of various crops. A good example was the distribution of kale seedlings (commonly known as '*sukuma wiki*') in various places, including Nambale and Nasira in the 1980s. Women living in wetlands or near a river were considered as it would ensure proper supply of water for the kales says Ms. Nelima a beneficiary. The project was successful and it generally introduced the tradition of eating kales in the region, which had initially been assumed to be a town practice. Although the MYWO kales scheme finally fizzled out, many women independently continued to plant kales in their kitchen gardens and also for sale.

Other than agricultural programmes, MYWO supported women through credit. As a way of empowering women, the organization would lend women some money to start profit-making ventures. The women groups which showed seriousness and ability to pay back the loans were given loans at zero percent interest and a reasonable period of time to pay back. The women of Mukwano Women's Group in Matayos sub-location received money in the year 2000 to purchase tents and chairs for hire (Kunguru, OI, Mundika, 09/10/21). This initiative would be a long-term kind of initiative. Proceeds from the hired items would then be divided among the women for their various needs. Although the group collapsed before 2010, most women had benefitted from the venture.

Another example of a venture on credit was among the Pamoja Women Group in Buyofu who began catering services after buying items such as big cooking pots, plates, and cups. This was very beneficial once the public identified their ability to make work easier at events (OI, Ms. Kunguru). Women would better their living standards with the proceeds that came from the business. They would seek better healthcare and pay fees for their children. However, the items eventually remained in the hands of the custodian for private use when the group finally collapsed in 2012.

By the early 1990s, MYWO had already introduced the concept of table banking to its members. Women groups would start as a way of women supporting each other through merry-go-round pools. They would contribute money each month to the pool and then give it to the members in rotation. This helped the members to start private businesses, pay school fees or make savings for a rainy day. With time, the Organization began to encourage groups to start lending money to their members as a way of earning some extra money which they would then share at the end of the year, especially around Christmas or January to facilitate school fee payment (Sikali OI, Busidibu, 16/10/21). Some of the groups, which already had economic ventures, such as the Pamoja Women Group mentioned above, would use their proceeds as capital for their table banking. They would grow the money by lending to members at interest. Buna Women's Group which was formed in 1992 by teachers of Bukhayo West and Nasira, has maintained the practice of table banking till now, says the chairperson Mrs. Wilmina Sikali.

MYWO understood the struggles the women went through and so the Organization began fundraising for the education of the children of its members. In Mujuru, Busibwabo sub-location, Spotlight Women's Group went a long way in raising funds for its members to take their children to school (Kunguru, OI, Mundika, 09/10/21). In the process, the organization facilitated the education of many girls, thus opening the door to their future economic empowerment. The children who benefited from this scheme went on to acquire jobs after their studies. The Spotlight Women's Group, however, no longer exists.

Another similar step towards this was the introduction of the Mlolongo Initiative which engaged the Abakhayo women by 1994. It was an initiative whose main aim was to mobilize resources through bringing together various small women's groups (Nafula, OI, Buyofu, 19/10/21). The groups all over Busia would hold events where each member would have an empowerment partner, locally known as *Afwoto*. Once allocated a partner, the women would be required

to research on the needs of their partners and prepare to economically boost them. The partners would then boost each other in various ways from fee payment, to buying household items or starting a business. The rest of the members would then support the partners with a small token as they awaited their turn to be lifted by their partners as well. The events were big and full of pomp as Ms. Nafula explains. The wave of these activities declined in the early 2000s.

After maize became a serious crop to be planted in Western Kenya in the 1980s, it began to slowly replace the sorghum and millet that had been previously widely used for preparation of *ugali* (Muleka, OI, 18/10/21). MYWO saw a gap in the processing of maize and consequently introduced posho mills to some of the women groups. Muleka witnessed the organization of a posho mill plant being established in his own village of Khung'ungu in Bukhayo East. Thus, through this posho mill, the women generated some money as they charged their customers for processing the maize into flour. Management issues, however set in, leading to wrangles that saw the project collapse.

Another posho mill was established at Matayos. This one would be even better than the one at Khung'ungu as its objective was defined. It was to process and package blended and nutritious flour for porridge with the aim of boosting children's immunity. This generated a good income for the women for a pretty long time but eventually also collapsed.

In 1992, a rice processing machine was installed in Nambale. This was done through MYWO under the supervision of the late Mrs. Okemo whose husband eventually became the Member of Parliament for Nambale constituency in 1997 (Masinde, OI, Busia, 15/10/21). The machine would allow women to clean rice grown in the wetter parts of Nambale and package it for sale. At the time, Nambale was thriving because of the presence of a cotton ginnery and a sugar distribution plant in the area. Although the rice processing machine cannot be accounted for today, it helped women to process and sell their rice profitably.

While he was the Member of Parliament for Nambale constituency, Mr. Masinde funded in 1997 the MYWO to bring seven oil pressing machines. Women groups in Mayenje, Nasewa and parts of Bukhayo West benefitted (Masinde, OI, Busia, 15/10/21). The machines were used to extract oil from groundnuts and sunflower seeds. The oil was then packaged and sold locally as very healthy oil. Mr. Masinde, however, laments that the projects eventually collapsed and there is only one such machine still functioning today.

In addition to the oil pressing machines, as a Member of Parliament, he also worked with MYWO to introduce exotic goats to various women groups in

Bukhayo West. The goats were mainly for milk production. The women were trained in the rearing of goats and the projects picked up well. Goatmilk has always been seen as more nutritious than cow milk. It is even believed to be medicinal. These facts increased demand for goat milk leading to good profits for the groups that ventured into the projects. The projects, however, dwindled in less than five years after their launching.

Dambakana Water Project was another major project by the MYWO. Its main purpose was to help women on Bukhayo West location to get piped water into their homes. This was under the sponsorship of the government of Netherlands (Kunguru, OI, Mundika, 09/10/21). Water was a major problem as most women relied on water from rivers and streams. The Project would, therefore, not only reduce the time taken to search for water but also ensure access to clean and safe water for domestic consumption. While water was important for domestic use, it brought relief to the women who had thought of venturing into various projects such as growing of vegetables and rearing various animals. Although Dambakana Water Project eventually collapsed in early 2000, it would go into the record as being one of the longest surviving projects perhaps because it was run by Ms. Kunguru herself as opposed to other projects which were initiated and left to the groups. It was a big success as more than 300 homes would be connected to piped water.

Another project was a machine to make bricks which was introduced in Bukhayo South. This and many other projects were carried out among the women for their empowerment.

It is paramount to note that due to financial challenges, MYWO was not able to reach all grassroots women in the period between 1978-2002. The government was not able to fully subsidize the activities of the organization following its loss of donors when it was co-opted by KANU in 1987. However, there were some women who were taking the initiative to mobilize themselves and by 1991, there were 779 women groups in Busia District. Of these, 404 groups were dealing with agriculture/farming activities; 79 were dealing with sales and provision of various services; 84 were dealing in financial matters; 33 - in handicrafts; 30 in manufacturing; 46 in labour/construction; 42 in social welfare and one was dealing in real estate. There were no groups dealing in education or transport activities and in total, 38,455 women were members of MYWO. This was way lower as compared to neighbouring districts such as Kakamega which had 1,285 groups with 50, 157 members (Kabira and Nzioki, (1993, p.47-48). The difference in this number is so because as compared to Busia

women, those in Kakamega were more enlightened due to the missionary factor as well as the fact that Kakamega was the provincial headquarter.

3.3.3 Women's Response to Maendeleo ya Wanawake Organization Projects on Abakhayo Women

Being that all women-oriented projects in the period between 1978-2002 were channelled through the MYWO, it is obvious that the organization had a positive impact on the women. However, as observed, most projects initiated by MYWO would collapse within 2-3 years of operation. One would wonder why it was so. According to Mr. Masinde, women did not take the projects seriously. Their commitment would, therefore, be at the very beginning but it would fizzle out over time an idea that Ms. Kunguru agrees to. This explanation makes sense.

Looking at it from another angle, it would be understandable that illiteracy among the women may have weighed the projects down. Many women lacked basic literacy and, therefore, had no idea about the modern concept of empowerment. This means that most of the women did not fully understand why the projects were being launched and the need for sustainability of the same. By 1978, not many women within the targeted groups could even write their names. Others still had the traditional mindset and they did not see the full picture of what the organization was trying to do. Another possible explanation for the collapse of the projects was group mentality. Women lacked a sense of ownership over the projects as they were launched to benefit many people – communalism. This may have led to lack of commitment towards the projects.

Euphoria may have been another problem. Between our study period, 1978-2002, it became fashionable to join women's groups. Therefore, some women joined for the sake of it. There were no intrinsic reasons for joining. Having a project being set up at your home was prestigious. However, the women did not understand fully what it takes to start such massive projects or what it takes to sustain them. In addition to the above speculative reasons, women groups may have lacked the support of the men. By the time MYWO was teaching about the concept of women empowerment, not many men understood it. As the society was still very patriarchal at the time, the men were sceptical of the concept of women empowerment and therefore, offered little support to their women even when a project was set up in their homes.

Wrangles among various groups would also cost the women their projects. Some projects would begin well but along the way, women would disagree on issues such as profit sharing or others would feel that the officials were benefiting more thus, they would leave the groups. Finally, the women also lacked business

acumen/skills to sustain the projects. Very few women were business oriented and the organization also didn't offer business studies to the women. Therefore, the projects would survive shortly as the women did not understand consistency in a business thus failed to reinvest after the initial returns from the business.

Despite the above-mentioned challenges, it is undeniable that Abakhayo women benefitted from MYWO's economic empowerment schemes. First, the women groups formed under MYWO brought about cohesion among women. Since they worked together on various projects, it gave them unity of purpose. This unity would enable sharing as well as exchange of ideas whenever they met, for example, they would exchange ideas on family planning. It was during these meetings that women would even share political ideas and mobilize fellow women to participate in political matters.

Women were empowered with knowledge and as the saying goes, "*knowledge is power*". This knowledge, as Ms. Kunguru testified, was drawn from the numerous women's conferences and workshops hosted or facilitated by the MYWO. As the secretary of MYWO Busia District for over twenty years, she attended various conferences, including the Nairobi International Conference of 1985. She admits that the Conference enlightened the women about their situation at the time and helped them realize what they needed to do by benchmarking with the other women groups in attendance from across the world. The leaders of MYWO in attendance would in turn enlighten the women at the grassroots. Other than acquiring knowledge, the conferences and workshops would be avenues for women to seek support as well as funding for their projects.

Armed with such information, women would then embark on various activities such as taking care of their household. Children and husbands would receive better nutrition and healthcare. This would go a long way in reducing infant deaths. For those who went on to directly benefit from the business ventures introduced by the organization, their lives never remained the same. First, they were able to raise their living standards since they had some more money to access proper diet, shelter, clothes, and basic healthcare. In addition, the proceeds funded the education of the member's children, causing long term impacts on the various families. The activities of MYWO, therefore, impacted not only on the lives of the women but also impacted on future generations.

4.0 Conclusion

It is right for us to conclude that the MYWO empowered the Abakhayo women economically through the above-mentioned projects as long as they lasted. Many

women completely changed their status and view towards life. Some may critique the Organization for failing to mobilize women into leadership positions which could have been a longer lasting solution to the idea of women empowerment. However, MYWO pushed for the betterment of women as it laid a foundation for the women's movement in Kenya. From its inception and through the colonial period and the early years of the post-independence period, MYWO may not have directly linked to mobilization of women to take leadership positions. However, this role inevitably emerged as evidenced by the role played by the women movement in influencing the governance and politics of this country, under the leadership of women such as Phoebe Asiyo, Prof Eddah Gachukia and the late Jane Kiano, among many others.

5.0 Recommendations

This study recommends that more attention is drawn towards studying the role of women's organizations in women empowerment. It also recommends that MYWO, which is the oldest women's grassroots organization be repackaged and marketed to the younger generation as it faces the threat of irrelevance. Lastly, the study recommends more studies on the impacts of women's organizations on specific groups of women to be intensified so as to get the real picture of the contributions of women's organizations to women in Kenya.

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Oral Interviews

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| Alice Nafula (71) at Buyofu –
19/10/2021 | Phillip Masinde (85) at Busia –
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| Benedictine Nelima (75) at Nambale –
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| Joseph Muleka (66) at Khung’ungu –
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