

# **Women's Organizations and Collective Action in Kenya: Opportunities and Challenges - The Case of the Maendeleo ya Wanawake Organization**

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## **Abstract**

This paper presents an analysis of women's organizations in Kenya and looks into their opportunities and challenges, using the Maendeleo ya Wanawake Organization (MYWO) as a case study. It analyses the development of women's organizations in Kenya and how they have impacted on the wider women's political empowerment. It also traces MYWO's historical origins and development, its metamorphosis and the impact it has had on women's struggles for equality and participation in all areas of national development. Maendeleo's role in galvanizing women around different agendas in the areas of political empowerment has also been examined and an analysis of the challenges and opportunities that it has faced as a women's rights organization has been done. The paper is divided into four sections. Section 1 focuses on the development of women's organizations in Kenya and their impact on women's political empowerment. Section 2 is on MYWO's struggles to carve its niche and sustain the momentum in the context of the social political dynamics in Kenya, giving a brief history of MYWO and its metamorphosis from its inception during the colonial period to the post-independence developments up to and including the struggle for a democratic and women friendly environment through the Constitution review process. Section 3 explores MYWO's role in galvanizing women's agenda for political participation in the Second Liberation and clamour for a new Constitution. Section 4 looks at MYWO as a model for women's leadership.

The Case study method was used as well as library search. A review of published literature, including books, journal articles, reports, the Hansard, Court documents and the Organizations' reports and documents as well as other in-house and historical documents were also perused. The (African) Feminist Political Theory was used to analyse the Organization and its vision, environment, challenges and opportunities.

The paper finds that for the most part of its existence, MYWO has not been an independent organization as it was conceived by government staff as a strategy for women's support by the government and as an espionage mechanism through which the colonial government could gather information on the Mau Mau movement (Chitere, 1988). Most of the funding and technical support has come from the government, putting the Organization directly under its patronage. To its credit, MYWO does indeed have a national network which has served as a conduit for women's agenda in important undertakings such as the Constitution making process. The research finds that MYWO has initiated minimal programmes on its own. It has mostly been used by others, including by KANU, to carry out their agenda and mobilize women for political ends. Indeed, MYWO has had a daunting task trying to shed its relationship with successive governments - something that has greatly worked against it.

**Key Words:** *Maendeleo ya Wanawake Organization, women's organizations, constitution.*

## **1.0 Introduction**

Women have struggled for equal treatment with men during pre-colonial and post-colonial Africa. Their place in the traditional society was always defined by an unequal relationship between women and men in both private and public spaces.

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Jane L. Parpart states that women's active participation in the liberation struggle went unrecognized or was played down, especially after the struggle ended. She notes that "*in pre-colonial Africa, women experienced a wide range of relations to the state. In some societies, patriarchal authorities severely limited women's political and economic power. Women were protected as long as they paid obeisance to patriarchal power*". (1986: 2). This was despite the fact that women had played significant roles in the struggles for their respective country's independence.

After independence the African states in some way therefore, reinforced the colonialists' inferior view of women and, just like them, sought to return women to their perceived 'rightful place'. In Kenya, for example, women played a significant role in the liberation struggle, providing critical support not only as scouts, intelligence providers and care givers but also as combatants in the Mau Mau movement. Women such as Field Marshall Muthoni bear testimony to this fact. But as noted above women, among them the Field Marshall, were quickly pushed out of the scene as the British flag went down and the flag of Kenya did its first dance in the wind proclaiming Independence Day. This scenario is not unique to Kenya. In most of Africa's liberation struggles, women played crucial roles in active resistance and in support roles. They joined the trade union movements across the continent. In South Africa women unified to resist the pass law through organized protests that lasted for days. In Cameroon, women resisted colonial rule and sanctioned male dominance through name shaming rituals of those who disrespected them. But these gains were progressively eroded as the new African states came into being. The gains made during the liberation struggles were quickly being clawed back, shrinking women's space and public roles in nation building.

In response, women's movements and organizations have since then worked consistently to ensure that their contribution to the evolution and development of the emerging states is not only recognized, but also rewarded. The struggle has however, not been easy. Despite their superior numbers (more than half of the population) and strong organization around social, economic and political issues, women continue to walk a very narrow and rugged path. It has been and continues to be a war, fought by persistent women warriors.

Patriarchy and the attendant male domination of power continue to militate against women's progress. Women's organizations have consistently put in place programmes and other initiatives to mitigate this dominance, challenges notwithstanding. They have organized themselves in Civil Society Organizations, women groups, professional organizations and co-operatives, among others, to push the women's agenda from different fronts with the singular aim of claiming their space at the high table. Women scholars have provided the much needed backing in terms of research and knowledge on equality and dignity of the sexes by bringing to the fore feminist arguments and positions as a way of knowledge building and awareness creation. Such scholars include Amina Mama, Wanjiku Mukabi Kabira, Aili Tripp, Maria Nzomo, and women writers such as Ama Ata Aidoo and Chimamanda Ngozi, among others.

## 1.1 Objectives

This paper looks at the development of women's organizations in Kenya and their impact on women's political empowerment. It traces the historical origins and development of the Maendeleo ya Wanawake Organization, focusing on its metamorphosis and the impact it has had on women's struggles in the country. It looks at the role of MYWO in galvanizing the women's agenda and political empowerment in Kenya as well as explore the challenges and opportunities MYWO has faced as a women's rights organization. In conclusion, the paper looks at the role-modelling and alternative leadership of the Organization, its challenges, achievements and possible future direction. To achieve the above objectives, the paper is divided into four sections:

Section 1 focuses on the development of women's organizations in Kenya and their impact on women's political empowerment. It puts into context women's organizations in Africa in general and Kenya in particular. On the Kenyan scene, a brief overview of their scope, membership, areas of engagement, structures and governance of Kenya will be discussed as well as their impact on women's political empowerment.

Section 2 focuses on MYWO's struggles in the context of the social political dynamics in Kenya, giving a brief history of MYWO and its metamorphosis from a colonial outfit, through independence, to being the nationwide grassroots organization it is today. The section will also

highlight the struggles women's organizations experience in the face of entrenched patriarchal and dominant political party systems.

Section 3 explores MYWO's role in galvanizing women's agenda on political participation and representation in leadership positions - its nationwide structure and capacity to mobilize women for political participation at both local and national levels. It looks at MYWO's contribution in moulding women for political participation and leadership at all levels.

Section 4 looks at MYWO as a model for women's leadership and discusses its successes, challenges and opportunities that could inspire other women's organizations in Kenya and beyond.

## 1.2 Theoretical Framework

In this paper a mix of the Feminist Political Theory and the African Feminist Theory is used. This assists in analysing and understanding MYWO politically and shed light on other factors which may have either worked for or against its development. The paper looks through this lens at aspects of the Organization such as its vision, working environment and the challenges and opportunities it may have encountered. The mix assists in examining the place of women in the society within which MYWO came into being, including colonialism, traditions, poverty and sexuality to help in understanding the environment within which MYWO operated and metamorphosed. These theories also assist in analysing the political structures of the state and its role in either the reproduction of gender inequality or its potential for redressing such gender inequality.

## 2.0 Development of Women's Organizations in Africa and their Impact on Women's Political Empowerment

In contextualizing women's place in society and their efforts to claim their place, Aili Tripp et al, in *African Women's Movements: Changing Political Landscapes* discusses the story of women and their struggles to organize on an equal footing in the development of the new and emerging nation states in Africa. They bring to the fore the power of women's collective action and what they have and could achieve if only their unity could resist and out manoeuvre the rigid patriarchal ideology with the attendant challenges it presents. In a nutshell, the book "offers an explanation of the most significant developments in Africa since the 1990s, namely the emerging visibility of women as political actors and the adoption of a new generation of policies advancing women's rights." (xi)

In her book *A Time for Harvest* (2012) Kabira discusses women's struggle to "dance from the centre" and the attendant challenges as women sought to have their voice heard during the constitution making process through the 1990s to their gains in the 2010 Constitution and the challenges of its implementation. She argues that it is time for Kenya's women to harvest, having succeeded in bringing their issues of concern into the Constitution as reflected in the Bill of Rights and other chapters of the Constitution. Jane L. Parpart in *Women and the State in Africa* says that women have had a different kind of relationship with the state as compared to men throughout history. She argues that while women in certain classes and ethnic backgrounds enjoy access to the state, women in general have been under represented in African state affairs. She contends that women's active participation in liberation struggles went unrecognized or was played down, especially after the struggle. She notes that before colonialism in Africa, a few societies gave women some power, although this tended to be informal rather than authoritative. But during the colonial period, western gender stereotypes combined with patriarchal traditions to reduce female power and autonomy. This is true of many African states as de-colonization has been basically a transfer of power from one group of men to another (Parpart, 1986). She notes that there were few success stories that acknowledge the degree to which women successfully challenged both African and colonial authority. She gives the example of how a Ga woman dominated the expanding Ghanaian trading system during the colonial period (Parpart, 1986).

Marginalized and oppressed groups tend to generally flock together in a bid to give and get support from each other. In this way, numbers and trusted relationships for collective action have given women a platform on which to share experiences and support each other in times of need. They have learned over time that their voices are better off in multiples, not in the singular, if they are to be heard. Organizing around their issues has, therefore, been almost a natural reaction.

Women's organizations are groups of women who have been brought together by common issues and a deliberate common need to address them. They organize around social, economic and legal issues. In the rural areas especially, they congregate around issues such as self-help, farming, religion, markets, politics and leadership. More often than not, the groups have formal or informal structures, leadership regulations and basic rules on how to conduct their business.

In pre-independence times, women organized around diverse issues. A case in point is the women of Guinea who, during the struggle for independence invoked the spirit of the guardian of women and children to protest colonial rule. In Zambia, the Women's Brigade of the Pro-independence Party, the United National Independent Party (UNIP) mobilized women to expose their breasts to various colonial officers as a way of protesting their stay in their country. A woman known as Julia Mulenga (Mama UNIP) mounted a protest against the colonial leaders (Geisler, 1987). In Cameroon the Kom women, inspired by their earlier tradition of Anlu and Frombuen, got together in the 1950s to ridicule and shame male authorities in a three-year rebellion where seven thousand women protested against raising taxes and laws regulating farming techniques (Diduk, 1989). After independence the groups joined in the political fray and some of them were appointed to strategic positions in the independent government. Women from Central Kenya organized themselves within the Mau Mau Liberation Movement, fought alongside men and supported the struggle by running errands, gathering information and feeding those in the forest. In fact, some were put under house arrest and detained (Peterson, 2001). Women in Tanganyika (Tanzania after merging with Zanzibar) participated actively in the nationalist movement through the Tanzania African National Union (TANU) and have been acknowledged as having been the backbone of the party. Women, therefore, organized around the liberation struggle in their own right and were an integral part of the organized groups that led many African countries to independence.

In Kenya women were organized since before independence in groups focused on self-help, merry-go-rounds, and general welfare. These included many community-based and run groups and clubs such as those that preceded Maendeleo ya Wanawake. They included the Mabati women groups and the Nyakinyua groups in Central Kenya. In Machakos, for example, Lady Baring the wife of the then Governor of Kenya, is recorded as having visited groups in Machakos, Kitui, and other places which later became members of Maendeleo ya Wanawake. These groups were run by local women and had no government support.

From the 1980s through the late 1990s, women's organizations blossomed in the country. The majority of them were Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) registered under the NGO Act and focusing on among others, gender issues and leadership, gender based violence, politics and leadership, the environment as well as communication. The Federation of Women Lawyers (Kenya Chapter) was formed after the Nairobi Women's Conference in 1985 and opened the door for more to get established. Its main focus was women's legal rights' education as well as taking up public interest litigation. The Association of Media Women of Kenya (AMWIK) focused on media and communication, the League of Kenya Women Voters (LKWV) focused on facilitating women for political leadership, representation and voter education. It later embraced women's economic empowerment and started a women's SACCO. The National Council on the Status of Women (NCSW) rallied women around democratization and political representation and facilitated capacity building for women candidates and monitoring of their performance and treatment by their parties. The African Communication and Development Network (FEMNET) had presence in many African countries and focused on communication, training and gender mainstreaming in various organizations and sectors. The Greenbelt Movement focused on the environment, leadership, anti-corruption issues and grassroots mobilization around selected issues. The Association of African Women in Research and Development (AAWORD) was the intellectual and academic resource for NGOs and supported the development of feminist research and analysis to guide national policy and determine the women's position on various issues (Nzomo Maria). The Education Centre for Women and Democracy (ECWD) concentrated on the training of women parliamentary candidates as it was formed by women who had failed to be elected in the Parliamentary elections in 1992. The main focus of the Coalition on Violence against Women (COVAW) was advocacy around gender based violence in all spaces, including during the electoral process. These organizations engaged with the issues with passion and consistency.

There are, however, some incidents that reflected poorly on the unity of purpose among women's organizations. Conflict concerning bread and butter issues and political patronage sometimes took the better of the movement and women acted against themselves. A case in point is the Wambui Otieno legal tussle with her husband's (S.M. Otieno, a prominent lawyer) clan over his burial place in 1987. The clan wanted him buried in his ancestral home while Mrs Otieno wanted him buried at their Upper Matasia home in keeping with his wishes. But the clan would hear none of this. Women organizations initially supported her but gradually withdrew as the *"competing goal and recognition of the necessity of maintaining the favour of political constituencies ultimately undermined their efforts"* (Udvardy: 1757). Another case in point is that of Wangari Maathai, leader of the Greenbelt Movement who protested the construction of a multi-storey structure at Uhuru Park, a public utility, that had illegally been hived off by the government. Women groups in the Greenbelt movement did not support her - indeed some member groups left the movement, leaving her exposed and with mostly international support (Udvardy, 1998).

The organizations however, stamped their authority and presence during the constitution making process. They were at the fore front in agitating not only for the review of the constitution, but also for women to be placed right in the middle of the entire process. They organized with great success for women to give their views through organizations with grassroots structures such as Maendeleo ya Wanawake. Women organizations played different roles. According to Kabira (2012), they participated in the negotiations and were negotiators themselves, they set the agenda, engaged in dialogue at all levels, presented views and carried out research. She continues to say that women organizations were the main drivers when it came to negotiating for women's participation in the review process and that they organized themselves to collectively or individually present their views at both national and constituency levels through their grassroots networks.

The net effect was that the issues they agitated for were included in the constitution. They included affirmative action, outlawing harmful traditional practices, social and economic rights and many other issues which are reflected in the Bill of Rights and the rest of the Constitution. Women's rights to participate in politics and to be able to have a presence through affirmative action were a major achievement with a far reaching impact. A critical mass of women in Parliament, the Judiciary and the Executive meant that their platform would expand and that their issues would be articulated and heard from the highest levels of decision making. Many doors would be opened for women and they would finally walk out of the private locus and claim their space in the hitherto male-dominated public and national governance platforms. The collective action by women of focusing on an issue and uniting around it ensured that the 2010 Constitution reflected and included their concerns without boundaries.

The flourishing of these organizations opened the space for more freedoms. They also ensured that there were now more eyes observing what was going on in the society and the country started seeing an increased reporting of rape issues as women and the communities became aware of their rights. More women were now demanding for more space in the political arena and getting trained to position themselves for elections. There was also advocacy around gender based violence and agitation for gender desks to be established in police stations and lobbying for gender-aware budgeting to ensure women got a proportionate slice of the national budget. More specifically, FIDA (K) became famous and dreaded by especially men folk for playing 'big sister' to battered women.

Women organizations also engaged in agenda setting using informal strategies. Some of these included mothers of political prisoners stripping their clothes at Uhuru Park in the city of Nairobi in 1992 to protest the continued incarceration of their sons in prison. They achieved their objective as their sons were soon released. Another of these strategies was the sex boycott for a week announced by a coalition of 10 NGOs calling themselves the "G10" to demand good governance and accountability. They demanded that the President and Prime Minister sign Performance Contracts to ensure that they gave citizens quality services. This unity in purpose from this coalition opened a window through which women acted radically, using unconventional modes of demanding accountability and staking their claim to justice and good governance.

On the political and leadership front the largest number of women in the history of Kenya, made it to Parliament in the 2013 General Elections. There are now 86 women legislators, including those nominated in the Senate and in the National Assembly. Out of these, 47 were elected through women only seats in the counties. There are also increased numbers of women in the Judiciary, and in

the Cabinet. At the local level, the not more than 2/3rds requirements fell just a little short of the target.

Currently women organizations are not as united as they were during the constitution making period. The implementation of the two thirds principle has hit a snag and there has been little action in terms of demanding and lobbying for the Attorney General (AG) to ensure that a mechanism for its implementation is worked out. The National Women's Steering Committee, a Coalition of NGOs lobbying for the quick implementation of the gender principle has been carrying out the Green Amendment Campaign to raise awareness and drum up support for its implementation. The efforts by a small group of NGOs, led by CREAM, which took the AG to Court to enforce the implementation of the 1/3<sup>rd</sup> rule has come to a dead end. The lobby for the gender principle is in court and the Gender Commission and a few NGOs are now being mobilized by the Ministry of Public Service, Youth and Gender Affairs whereas it has usually been the NGOs and other women's organizations that lobby and mobilize, not the Ministry.

Women's organizations have not flourished without challenges. Many of the NGOs have experienced poor governance, lack of professionalism in their management, lack of accountability and transparency in their operations due to poor skills and lack of training and the capacity to run an organization. Those who started running them were the visionaries, who in most cases had no prior training or skills in organizational development or management. This presented a huge challenge as donors demanded accountability and clear reporting on activities. With time, however, donors started training staff on management and hoped there would be some improvement. This area has remained a thorn in the flesh of donors to date.

But for many years women have worked together, collectively and steadily bargaining for their space in political leadership. *"They have walked up the mountain top and looked at the beauty of strategic and collective bargaining. They have moved to get what societies have denied them for centuries, a place to sit at the negotiation table and determine their own destiny and that of their people"*. (Kabira, W. M. and Kimani, E.N. 2012. p. 848)

### **3.0 MYWO's Struggles in the Context of Social Political Dynamics in Kenya**

The colonial government established weaving and spinning centres in Kericho, Kisumu and other parts of the country in the 1940s and set out to impart these skills to girls and women. From these centres other groupings, clubs or leagues, as they were called, emerged. They were run on voluntary basis by white women who set them up on the principles of self-help and self-reliance, based on similar institutions in England. They were to be found in Nyanza, where European women actively managed them and in Machakos where African women were running them without help from the Europeans. By the 1950s, they were commonly referred to as "Maendeleo (progress) clubs". According to Chitere their aims were to among others as quoted by Wipper, to help in improving the standard of living of African women by providing a forum for social interaction and exchange of ideas among them; to be a channel through which new ideas in agriculture and health, among others could be introduced to communities; to provide practical and informal education and to be a means of producing better housewives and mothers and thereby building a stable society (Wipper, 1975)

By 1950, the government realized that though the women were willing to run the clubs, they did not have the capacity to manage them. The government, as Chitere notes, was forced to intervene so that it could guide and control the women's movement.

Membership grew rapidly beginning with just 15 clubs in 1950 and progressively growing to 1,035 clubs in 1958, peaking at 46,000 members. Some of the reasons that led to the rapid growth of these clubs were, among others, the creation of a women's section within the Community Development Organization and the appointment of Nancy Shepherd as its head in 1953. She rose to the rank of Assistant Commissioner two years later and her section controlled women's work throughout the country. Home craft officers, who later became known as community development officers (CDOs) were appointed. Women CDOs were appointed and posted in the mid 1950ies. Women leaders who had been trained at Jeanes School were encouraged to form clubs in their areas and impart to other women the knowledge they had gained in their studies. They formed clubs in Kilifi, Taita Taveta, Embu and Garissa, where no Europeans were willing to work on voluntary basis. Some of these women leaders were employed by the Africa District Councils and in Central Province

many were employed and paid using emergency funds provided by the Central government. With time it became increasingly clear that the work of managing women's work, especially the mushrooming "Maendeleo Clubs" demanded a new strategy.

The Maendeleo ya Wanawake Organization (MYWO) was conceived by senior staff of the Social Welfare Organization who asked Jeanes School, (a training institution for women trainees) to suggest a name for the proposed organization. The name Maendeleo ya Wanawake was suggested and consequently confirmed at a conference of officials involved in women's work in the country held at Jeanes Schools in 1951. A constitution was prepared and approved by a conference held in 1952 and Maendeleo as the Organization is today known was born. Its objectives were to:

- ❖ Be the voice of women in raising their concerns and aspirations;
- ❖ Influence public policy on matters of concern to women;
- ❖ Promote hygiene and domestic related activities
- ❖ Promote the advancement of African women;
- ❖ Raise their living standards through self-help (Wipper: 99).

The Organization's founding constitution also stated that it was formed to: ...develop and improve conditions for Africans through social intercourse by bringing women together, encouraging good neighbourliness and cooperation and education which could be largely informal in scope. To carry out these objectives the initial stages of the organization were marked with activities such as child welfare classes, dancing and making of traditional handicrafts. (ISTR Fifth International Conference Cape Town, South Africa / July 7-10, 2002)

The Constitution provided for a national co-ordinating Council, committees and District Councils. A few women from the Jeanes School became the first members of the Governing Council. The pioneer Executive Committee comprised white women with the wife of the then Governor, Lady Baring as the first President and Nancy Shepherd as its founding Chairman (National Archives, Maendeleo ya Wanawake file, Deposit 9/43. 1954). A Governing Council meeting was called and attended by 27 officials, including home craft Officers from the district, the Commissioner for Community Development and Representatives of Non-Governmental Organizations, the army, and police involved in welfare work. It was chaired by the Head of Women's Work, Nancy Shepherd and was referred to as the Governing Council of Maendeleo Ya Wanawake. At that time the only African on the Executive Committee was a Ugandan woman, Ms Kagwa whose assignment was to provide ideas about similar organizations in her country. Chitere notes that despite the fact that MYWO had a constitution and was registered, it did not have staff or other resources to run its affairs and was, therefore, not independent. It was an integral part of the Department of Community Development.

Soon after MYWO came into being all clubs that had existed before as Maendeleo clubs were organized according to the MYWO constitution. The members were asked to choose a committee and ensure that subscription fees were paid annually. They were also instructed to open Savings accounts with the Post Office and register with the Headquarters of the Department of Community Development. They were instructed to spend part of the subscriptions for club use with small portions being passed on to MYWO districts and national headquarters for meetings and administration costs.

Maendeleo Ya Wanawake ran a monthly Kiswahili newspaper which was prepared by the Women's section of Jeanes School with the help of the African Information Service. It was started in 1952 with a circulation of 2,000 and grew up to 10,000 by 1955 (Chitere, 1988). This paper was later produced in other local languages. It was a communication tool whose objective was to inform members of the progress of their clubs and other matters of concern to the women.

Some of the activities that MYWO engaged in at this time were annual national and local shows, singing, drama, netball and conferences which were held annually to discuss women's progress at national and district levels and refresher courses for club leaders. All these were carried out by the District Community Department on behalf of MYWO.

As noted above, MYWO did not have resources of its own and relied on the government in all ways. However, in 1957 it received its first non-government funding from UNICEF in the form of equipment for training, vehicles and bicycles for staff transportation. Soon after, the International Co-operative Administration (ICA) donated some funds to be used for staff employment. It is noteworthy that some clubs had put up their own meeting facilities to avoid meeting in social halls and other public places. However, lack of funds started having its impact on the membership which started to decline. But Chitere records that in Central Province membership declined due to the



...rehabilitation work that was going on through the clubs as a result of the heightened Mau Mau Liberation Movement's struggles. More CDOs had been posted there to reclaim and rehabilitate women who were participating in Mau Mau activities to divert their attention from the "exigencies of the Mau Mau uprising and to concentrate on home and community improvement activities (p. 59).

The decline in membership in this area was also attributed to the claim that some members were passing information about the Mau Mau activities to the colonialists through the Clubs (Kenya National Archives, Maendeleo Ya Wanawake File, Deposit 5/224). While the colonial government were happy to collect information on the Mau Mau through some Maendeleo members, on the other hand, it received negative reactions from the people, who saw the club as an institution to spy on the movement thus the Clubs' work and image were discredited.

In the 1960s, women's self-help groups emerged in Central, Kitui and Machakos areas. They raised money in merry-go-rounds and bought for each other utensils or supported members with school fees for their children. Moreover, they helped each other in their farm work and later bought for each other *mabati* (iron sheets) to roof their houses (Monsted, 1979). These groups soon overshadowed the MYWO groups. It may be noted that Nancy Shepherd, the founding Chairman of MYWO had retired in 1958, leaving MYWO shaky and the colonial government confused over their support for women's work. Maendeleo went through a transition in 1960 when leadership was passed on to the first African President, Mrs Phoebe Asiyo who led it for just one year.

After independence, MYWO continued to be supported by the government but not as effectively as during the colonial rule. Jomo Kenyatta, just four months after coming to power, promised to work with MYWO, saying "*every encouragement will be given to Maendeleo Ya Wanawake and to voluntary bodies generally to ensure that our women participate fully and carry out the vital task which can be theirs*" (Wipper, 1975: 111). This declaration notwithstanding, Chitere notes that this time was however, marked by a lack of assistance to the women's movement by the new government and that it did not formulate a policy to support the movement. Monsted also notes that the government indeed cut financial support for the women's groups (Monsted, 1978). A weakened MYWO was starved of much needed resources to support itself at all levels. It also lacked programmes of its own and was therefore not able to support its clubs. The emerging desperation led to MYWO and other organizations seeking favours from political leaders in a bid to secure the much needed funds, leading to the politicization of the groups. Maendeleo's fortunes continued declining as other organizations came into being. The National Council of Women of Kenya (NCWK) was formed in 1964 to "*co-ordinate and strengthen the women's movement*", despite the fact that MYWO was formed to carry out this function.

By 1987 President Daniel arap Moi, Kenya's second President, was struggling to maintain the ruling Kenya African National Union's (KANU) hold and popularity. KANU gradually co-opted MYWO and made it an integral tool for women's mobilization and a machine for vote hunting at the grassroots level. "*By controlling MYWO's 20,000 member groups, KANU hoped to gain access to the grassroots organizations to boost its waning legitimacy and popular support.*" (Wipper, 1975: 46). At the helm of MYWO at that time was Mrs Jane Kiano who later left the organization, giving way to the election of Mrs. Zipporah Kittony, under whose leadership MYWO completely surrendered to KANU's patronage. Ironically, it was during this time that MYWO's visibility, fame, power and influence hit its highest note in terms of prosperity and influence peddling. MYWO leaders were co-opted in KANU structures across the country as well as appointed to important local positions in school boards and district based government structures. The organization now fully submerged into the government, wielded power and acquired assets courtesy of Moi's largesse and benevolence. Payback was total loyalty and allegiance, not only to the party, but also to the person of the president. Membership was abandoned as leadership pandered to state dictates while basking in the glory of self-enrichment and personal aggrandizement. National leadership ruled the organization with an iron fist and the objectives for which it was established were shelved as it submerged itself in party activities and campaigns. It became, for all intent and purpose, a KANU women's wing and "*patronage managed to keep them focused on personal gain rather than addressing real issues of the membership*" (Tripp et al.: 49) while state funding and benevolence compromised its leaders and betrayed the membership. The national leadership became gatekeepers of women's admission to



positions of power and politics, playing the game just like their male counterparts in the party did. Corruption spread and pervaded the organization in tandem with what was going on in the country. The net effect is that MYWO has never recovered from this era. Its image as a KANU appendage has proved difficult to erase even as it transformed itself into a Non-Governmental Organization.

Old habits die hard. The transition from being KANU Maendeleo Ya Wanawake to an NGO under the NGO Co-ordination Act, while easy to proclaim, proved difficult to effect. By the time Moi exited, the organization was still stuck with this image and was described by its detractors as behaving like “*a woman who had been rejected by her husband*”. The NGO fraternity handled it with gloved hands and the donor community observed from a distance while urging it to take its place of pride as the premier women’s organization and lead the way.

In essence MYWO lacked strategic direction and was stuck with its 1952 welfare objectives. After KANU, it lost direction and waited for donors or other women’s organizations to invite it to their agendas. It concentrated on narrowly defined development objectives, mostly income generating activities through traditionally safe projects such as handicrafts, weaving, MYWO Kimbo Kitchens and nutrition. The organization was operating within the constraints of a world ordered by patriarchy through colonialism and later male led independence leadership and this image proved difficult to shed. In an advertisement for the position of Executive Director, MYWO inserted a line stating that it was seeking a mature woman who was over 45 years, reflecting a lack of understanding of what marginalization of women was like. A candidate who attended the consequent interviews was actually asked whether she was married, a desired characteristic of a MYWO Executive Director.

#### **4.0 MYWO’s Role in Galvanizing Women’s Agenda on Political Participation and Representation in Leadership Positions**

The second liberation passed by MYWO’s front door without notice. The organization did not join in this as it was still beholden to the government. In fact, this further alienated it from other organizations whose very existence had been to agitate for multi-parties, a review of the constitution and a Moi exit, as he had ruled Kenya for more than twenty years. But MYWO had long been depoliticized by being focused on developmental-type activities and had not yet been over this. By missing out on this train, MYWO abdicated its role and place as an experienced organization that could have added impetus to the activities aimed at opening space not only for Kenya, but particularly, for the women. It however, caught up later as the clamour for constitution review gained momentum towards the final years of Moi rule.

The plurality of women’s organizations in the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s thrust MYWO further away onto the side-lines. While it enjoyed age advantage and a national to grassroots network, making it a formidable mobilization machine, the organization stagnated in a paralysis that saw it remain dormant – only waking up when elections approached. To its credit, many organizations acknowledged its power of mobilization and grassroots presence and used it as a conduit for their programmes implementation. Some of these included government family planning initiatives, immunization of children programmes, advocacy against Female Genital Mutilation/Cut, tree planting and women’s political empowerment. It reluctantly joined other NGOs in donor-conceived, designed and implemented programmes such as the Gender and Governance Programme (GGP), the lobby for the inclusion of women’s issues in the constitution and the consequent negotiations and participation in the process. Other women’s organizations used the MYWO’s network to mobilize women during the entire constitution making process. In fact, MYWO did present an elaborate memorandum on behalf of women to the Constitution of Kenya Review Commission (CKRC) on issues which included: “*Cultural diversity, ethnicity, religious and communal rights, children’s education, land and property ownership, succession and inheritance rights, on family, on citizenship, on public utilities and on environment and natural resources*” (Kabira:196-200). Knowing its background, this was a commendable effort. From this point onwards, MYWO engaged with the Constitution making process to the end and remained an integral part of the consequent civic education initiatives run through the Kenya National Integrated Civic Education Programme (K-NICE) at the Ministry of Constitutional Affairs, URAIA and other organizations. It also joined women’s organizations in preparing women to take up elective positions as well as joining in activities that sought to curb

violence during elections such as the UWIANO Platform and the Women's Situation Room activities mounted by UN Women just before the 2013 General Elections.

While Mrs Jane Kiano was the chairperson, MYWO experienced a sophisticated leadership that put MYWO at the centre of the power circles of the day. Mrs Kiano was the wife of a Minister in the independence Cabinet, Dr Gikonyo Kiano. She steered the organization using her close links with the government, the international community, the private sector and the emerging elite class to put MYWO on the Kenyan map. Her image pervaded the media as Chitere notes that she was the most photographed woman in the country after the First lady, Mama Ngina Kenyatta. Her strategy seems to have been to engage all those that could help MYWO in its efforts to become self-sufficient through the holding of fundraising and charitable activities, such as fashion shows, exhibitions, attending public relations activities and generally mingling with people that could support MYWO in any way. One of her criticisms she has received is that she spent a lot of her time travelling, courtesy of the many embassies that had been established after independence and which needed to show their support for the country through women's support. It was during her leadership that Maendeleo House was built. This has been one of the best things that could have happened to the organization as it ensured that even when the organization goes through difficult financial times, it still has a home and some funds to not only survive but also run the entire organization. Whether this is done is another issue altogether. One of the most challenging issues that the MYWO leadership faces has been its real or perceived incapacity to run the organization professionally.

As has been traced in this paper earlier, the organization was conceived and run within a government controlled environment and as an integral part of government strategy for women's inclusion in development. At no point in its history has MYWO been or seen to be independent of the government whether pre- or post-independence. Its work remained inside the government of the day through its ministries and departments from its inception and most of its life. Its activities were run by the government with seconded staff. In fact, MYWO, even after its registration as an NGO with a yet to be ratified constitution, has been unable to de-link itself from the government. Non-Governmental Organizations are by their very nature, non-governmental, meaning zero government interference. Every MYWO Chairman (for they maintain they are chairmen) who has come into leadership pledges to work with the government in their acceptance speeches. In fact, the current Chairman did, on her second day in office deliver the entire national and county leadership to State House for a courtesy call on the President. It is such show of sought appendage and patronage that has continued to give MYWO a government-dependent image.

History shows that women's struggles to become strong, autonomous and independent have been met with myriad challenges. A conspiracy seems to exist where a horde of factors present themselves to militate against the success of such efforts. Male dominance and superiority in leadership and their strong hold on power and leadership in both public and private domains strangle women's agency and their attempts to break free. The pervasive oppression of the African, male and female alike during colonialism, managed to erode their confidence in their abilities as human beings, leading to have a kind of envy of the oppressor. It is no wonder then that when the colonialist left, the black leader inherited the structures, systems, ideology and practices of dominance that he had fought so hard against and used them in a similar manner to oppress his people.

As indicated above, the MYWO national leadership has consistently displayed disconnect between themselves and the membership. Wipper states that there was *"unanimity of opinion, namely condemnation of the central leadership that ranged from disappointment to denunciation, from ridicule to resignation,"* when she asked some members about their views of the national leadership. This is an indication that while MYWO was a women's organization, ostensibly fighting and advocating for women's rights, there was a difference in class, world view and understanding of what the real issues were. Activities held at the national level such as competition in cookery using gas cookers, as Wipper notes, showed just what a divide there was in what the priorities were. This is true of many strategies to help some groups - that while the intentions for certain interventions are guided by some benevolence from the initiator, they may not always be consistent or reflective of the real and felt needs of the alleged beneficiary. The alleged homogeneity of women in their struggles for equality and equity, in the cited MYWO activities clearly shows a deep rift between the national leadership and the rural woman's needs.

Another big challenge that the MYWO faced was its governance as well as its structures, its mandate and how it conducts its elections which are held every five years. Every time MYWO is about to hold elections, the press is replete with stories of quarrels, disagreements and outright combat in the headquarters and other venues. Court battles and leadership squabbles are almost synonymous with the organization. Why would this be, considering that the main focus of MYWO is promoting peaceful co-existence and good governance?

## 5. 0 Conclusion

Although MYWO is a women's organization, I dare say that its very fabric, the stuff it is made of is a mongrel, it could be male or a mixture of male and female concoctions that deny it clear identity. In fact, the Organization suffers from an identity crisis as shown earlier on in this paper. In reality, is MYWO an NGO or a government department? Despite what it says in its Constitution, which is that it is non-partisan and a catalyst of change for women and the nation, its actions betray it, especially in the entire organization electoral process. To begin with, MYWO has claimed over time that it has four million members. Its Constitution states that members are only those who have paid up their subscription fees (MYWO Constitution). The last time elections were held, MYWO had only 120,000 paid up members going by the voter register and the purchase of membership cards which also act as its voter's cards (MYWO Elections Report, 2014). In addition to this, MYWO membership cards were bought in some areas by male politicians whose objective was to influence its leadership at the grassroots level. The report states that some of the cards that were used did not have originating seals, rendering the election faulty.

Male influence in MYWO elections has been so pervasive that it is difficult to say that the Organization has ever had an election conducted solely by its membership. The outcomes of each election, since independence have returned politicians' wives, relatives and acquaintances among its leadership at various levels, leading to what Amina Mama calls "*Femocracy*". The current leadership in MYWO, for example, is a product of a coercion game that saw the immediate former chairman shooed out of office to make way for the current one through, a woman parliamentarian's intervention. The former chairman, to prove that the result was a government desired one, got an appointment as ambassador to compensate her departure from MYWO. The consequence of this imposition is that today, MYWO continues with its wrangling, performance slumber, untenable governance and rudderless sail. Media reports indicated that a taskforce was constituted in mid-2016 to investigate claims of impunity, corruption and financial impropriety by some national leaders.

Corporate governance has been a big challenge as elected leadership is confused between their role and that of the Secretariat. Chairmen sit in the office in disregard of the Constitution which does not have an executive Chairman. Maendeleo House remains the only source of MYWO funds, but which benefit only the national leaders. There is a lack of a clear structure or system on how to channel the funds to the Chapters and the grassroots.

While MYWO continues to be lauded as a giant women's organization, the truth is that it has not done an evaluation in a long time and it definitely does not have a membership as huge as it claims - for if it had this membership and each member paid the KES100 set as membership fee for a year, it would clearly not need donor funding at all. In fact, it would be in a position to fund its entire membership and assist others. Four million members would yield in the minimum of Shs 400 million per year, if its membership paid up. This would make it the richest women's organization in the country, and would have no need for hopping from one donor's office to another asking for meagre resources.

Has MYWO been an alternative leadership model for women or indeed, the nation? Its presence from the grassroots to national levels gives it a wide network that has assisted women in pushing their agenda forward. Its role in mobilizing for women's collective action has ensured that the women's movement commands a strategic presence on the platform of national politics. The majority of independent Kenya women leaders have their roots in MYWO, among them Members of Parliament (past and present).

This paper recommends that more research be done to answer the above question as this needs more time to research. This paper has not had an opportunity to carry out deep and lengthy research to establish this with certainty. What can be said for now is that MYWO has had the

opportunity to lead from the front but can count many lost opportunities. It is however, never too late to recoup and take its place of pride.

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