

GENDER ISSUES

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ABSTRACT

Comparison of gender performance in Kenya's coastal region reveals high social, economic and political disparities. The disparities have been attributed to historical background as well as cultural and religious factors. After a review of the Kenyan context, the situation in Coast Province is discussed in more detail, particularly the importance of Arabic-Islamic values. This is followed by an examination of gender and development in the areas of social, economic and political life. The status of women in Coast Province is generally low. Existing constraints to women's performance that deserve concern are illiteracy, low levels of education, lack of meaningful economic activities, and historical and cultural beliefs and practices. The most difficult areas to address concern existing cultural practices and the types of economic activities women are involved in.

INTRODUCTION

Most governments assert equal treatment of all citizens regardless of race, sex, ethnic orientation or locality. The reality is that society has made female gender believe that their multiple but low status role in society is ordained; yet the roles are socially rather than biologically determined. The female gender subordination is reflected in low levels of participation in both mainstream economic and political spheres of development. Women are engaged in the social sphere, mainly with subsistence activities, with occasional attempts to enter the economic and political spheres of life (Stitcher & Parpart 1988; Boserup 1970).

The economic activities of women, although viewed as peripheral, have been crucial in reproducing labour. Women have always taken a heavier load of welfare responsibilities in the capitalist system of production. In the past, migration of men into the urban areas reduced women to subsistence farmers. Within the rural setting, apart from reproduction of male labourers, they care for the old, the sick and the young. Girls and women spend more time than boys and men collecting fuelwood and water and doing household

chores (World Bank 1989). The marginal perception of the female gender has also influenced the type of education and training provided for girls and boys (Blossfeld 1987; Sebstad 1992; Anker & Hein 1986; Mirowsky 1987).

For decades, the Feminist and later Women in Development (WID) approaches argued against the development focus on men, especially in the west. Meanwhile, in Africa, women were busy in the farms, engaging in petty trade and generally ensuring the upkeep of families and reproduction of labour. These efforts were hardly recorded in statistics nor directly supported by government policies and programmes. By 1985 when the Women's Decade was held in Nairobi a key study on 'Gender Roles in Development' was published which provided a third generation perspective conceived within the historical context of women's disadvantaged position (Overbolt *et al.* 1985).

Kinyanjui (1995) pointed out that in Kenya the two approaches used in studying gender have not managed to address the concerns of women. They have exposed their problems and level of marginalization but have not managed to address the concerns of women. The WID has basically been concerned with highlighting the activities women are involved in and the difficulties they face. The WID approach has been viewed to add to women's workload, exploiting them with hardly any reasonable gains. The small-scale enterprises through women's groups which the Kenya government has been encouraging as vehicles for women's development have been based on the WID approach. They have been noted to downplay women's role as mere welfare projects rather than entrepreneurs with important business ventures (McCormick & Mitullah 1995). On the other hand, feminism calls for equal gender treatment in all areas of life and challenges ideologies which legitimise and sustain the subordination of females.

A comparison of the female and male gender performance within Coast Province reveals high social, economic and political disparities. The disparities have been attributed to a number of factors including historical background, culture, Islamic religion and low level of literacy. After a review of the Kenyan context, this review discusses gender and development in Coast Province with specific reference to Taita Taveta, Kilifi, Kwale, and Mombasa Districts. A general overview is followed by an examination of gender and development in the areas of social, economic and political life.

THE KENYAN CONTEXT

The UN conference in 1985 in Nairobi was both a blessing and a problem. It witnessed a number of government supported and non-supported organisations springing up as advocates of women. But the organisations were not mainstreamed into the focal points of development. They were bunched in secluded women organisations which concentrated more on welfare activities as opposed to activities geared for upward mobility. Examples are the Kenya Women's Bureau established in 1975 as part of the Ministry for Culture and Social Services, and the only national umbrella organisation for women, *Maendeleo Ya Wanawake* which has been a playground for politicians (McCormick & Mitullah 1995).

The political reforms of 1992 led to a new brand of women organisations and pressure calling for integration of women into the economic and political spheres of development. These organisations included the National Committee on Status of Women, the Women's Voter League, Mothers in Action, the Federation of National Women Lawyers and the National Committee for the Advancement of Women. Most of these organisations were pressing for democracy and effective participation of women in all spheres of development.

By the time Kenya had its first population census in 1948, nationally only 8% of women were in paid employment. By 1954 the numbers increased to 12%, getting to only 14% by 1970. Since 1970, women have been venturing into different professions such as teaching, nursing and secretarial posts. When employed, the female gender compared to the male gender has largely been relegated to the lower levels of management.

Education has been pointed out as the key obstacle to gender development because it determines the entry point into the job market. Women in Kenya have been recorded to have a higher level of illiteracy (34%) than men (19%) resulting in a double disadvantage (Kenya 1996c). They are under-represented in education institutions and more so in science and technology areas (Eshiwani 1984). In 1996, the Economic Reform Policy Paper noted that while there is no indication of major discrimination against females in access to basic education and health services, the completion rate for primary school education is lower for females and, in times of difficulty, female students are more likely to drop out of primary school. It further noted that girls from poor families typically do not attend secondary schools; whereas female-headed households with no male support experience higher rates of poverty, inferring that they are not able to take girls to school (Kenya 1996a).

A resource which has historically remained outside the control of women is land and this has tended to constrain their upward mobility. Inheritance practices in most African communities favour the male gender who acquire land mostly through inheritance and to a lesser extent through purchase. Women's rights to land have been through conjugal rights, otherwise they are limited to user rights. By and large, a woman without a reasonable level of education and who is not married will hardly have access to land or other immovable assets.

Table 1 Population by district and gender, 1989

	Males	Females	Total
Kilifi	282,382	309,521	591,903
Kwale	185,945	197,108	383,053
Lamu	29,428	27,355	56,783
Mombasa	256,674	205,079	461,753
Taita Taveta	101,853	105,420	207,273
Tana River	64,820	63,606	128,426
Coast Province	921,102	908,089	1,829,191

Source: Kenya 1994

GENDER RELATIONS IN COASTAL KENYA

The population of females in Coast Province is almost equal to that of males (Table 1). However, there are enormous gender disparities in terms of social, economic and political standing. There has been a tendency to explain the disparities, especially those relating to the disadvantaged position of women, in terms of Islamic-Arabic culture. However, the association of a poor development record at the Coast with these cultural factors has been controversial since a large percentage of the population within the province are not necessarily Islamic or Arabic. Nevertheless, it plays an important role in the region.

Mazrui argued that Islam is not the cause for underdevelopment or lack of education for women (Sawere 1992). He noted that nothing in Islamic culture retards development or education in any given population. To him, Islam gives education high priority and the lack of development might be explained by historical and cultural traditions but not Islam or Arabic culture in itself. He further pointed out that Islam has undergone a revolution: within a single generation Islam effectively stopped female infanticide, expanded property-owning rights for women and restricted polygamy to four wives.

Despite Mazrui's argument, there are aspects of Islamic and Arabic culture which remain controversial. This includes limitation of basic education to Arabic literacy, and religious and moral education. In some cases girls are kept in secluded institutions in order to curtail personal and social autonomy. The Islamic law also ratifies inheritance on fixed shares where females get less than males. Women only inherit half the male's share, making men control two-third and women one-third of the wealth. At the same time, the female gender is not allowed to manage property and has to entrust wealth to a male overseer.

The reasons given for men's larger share is that they are responsible for the family and in cases of divorce take care of their sisters (WLEA 1995). This, in addition to restrictions on women as regards public appearances and transacting business, has kept the Muslim female gender outside the main economic activities and partly out of the mainstream education system. The one-third wealth inheritance has been viewed by some analysts as progressive compared to the non-Islamic societies where, until the Kenya Succession Act of 1981, there was no automatic inheritance for the female gender. The only channel of acquiring wealth remained through meaningful economic activities which is largely influenced by educational level.

Education is a key ingredient of development and it is generally low in Coast Province. Education enables people's understanding of their rights, facilitates their fight against oppression and enhances realisation of development goals. But in Coast Province, illiteracy levels are high among both women and men with literacy of women being much lower (Table 2). Kilifi, Tana River and Kwale Districts have the highest literacy disparities between men and women. Although Taita Taveta District compares favourably with the other districts in Coast Province (except Mombasa), the drop-out rate by girls in primary schools is very high, notably 81% compared to the national rate of 58.4% (Kenya 1993b). In Kilifi District, only one-third of all secondary school students were girls (Kenya 1993a). However, adult education seems to be dominated by the female gender: between 1979 and 1993, out of 25,623 adult learners, three quarters were women (Kenya

1993b). This indicates a desire on the part of women to learn and reject patriarchal attitudes and values.

The poor education record in Coast Province has been attributed to colonialism and the minimal value placed on education. The colonial government perpetuated regional inequalities with Kwale, Kilifi and Tana River lagging behind other districts. In some districts, such as Taita Taveta, girls had an inferior curriculum. Many girls were also neglected until after independence when only a few girls from affluent families attended school. The colonial trend has persisted and districts such as Kwale still have the highest proportion of those who have never been to school (Kenya 1996c).

Table 2

Literacy rates by district, sex and rural-urban residence, 1989 (% literate aged 10 years and over)

	Total			Rural			Urban		
	Male	Fem.	Tot.	Male	Fem.	Tot.	Male	Fem.	Tot.
Kilifi	69	35	51	66	52*	60*	85	65	76
Kwale	66	38	52	66	38	51	91	74	84
Lamu	76	56	67	74	56	65	81	71	76
Mombasa	88	75	83	-	-	-	88	75	83
Taita Taveta	84	72	78	83	71	76	91	82	87
Tana River	62	37	49	58	34	46	79	52	66

* The figures in this table are quoted from source. There is likelihood of errors in the rates given in source for rural females and rural total in Kilifi. Correct figures are likely to be nearer to figures for Kwale (editors).

Source: Kenya 1996c: 12.

In Tana River District, girls are largely regarded as visitors in the family destined to become part of another family. This contributes to most families reluctantly spending money on them and in some cases marrying them off to get money to educate the boys. Finally, some men have been reluctant to educate girls due to fear of losing their control over women (WNC 1995).

GENDER AND SOCIAL LIFE

Social responsibilities have been very clear among the rural population of Coast Province. Traditionally, women concentrated on household chores and farm work, excluding the clearing of virgin land and the herding of livestock. A study conducted in Paziani in Kilifi and Warugha in Taita Taveta confirms this. Mwachofi (1991) notes that women were responsible for all domestic chores including shelling, pounding and grinding grain, fetching fruits and vegetables from the wild, cooking, serving food and washing dishes and utensils. On the other hand, men's task revolved around livestock and all other tasks requiring long duration away from the home such as military service.

The above trend, which can be viewed as a balanced division of labour did change with the penetration of the capitalist mode of production. The latter has resulted in profound changes in the roles and tasks allocated to males and females. These are largely unequal and women's tasks have increased as men's jobs reduce.

Apart from the usual household chores, women are involved in a number of activities

through group work or women's groups. Activities include agriculture (crop and animal husbandry), farm labour and small-scale enterprises such as posho milling and goat, bee, poultry, and cattle keeping. Self-help educational, cultural and recreational activities and projects such as construction for welfare purposes and health centres are also undertaken (Kenya 1993a).

Islamic-Arabic traditions and customs necessarily play an important part. A man is expected to provide for the wife and family upkeep, whereas a woman has the duties of adoring, obeying, serving, massaging and shaving the husband (Strobel 1979). Faithfulness and premarital chastity of young girls were carefully watched and virginity was displayed on the wedding night. Males escaped such trials despite the demand by Islamic ideology for male chastity.

It has been noted that women who belong to the Islamic and Arabic culture seem to be worse off than their counterparts in other parts of Coast Province and indeed the rest of the country. This is mainly because of the gender segregation. The dominant Islamic-Arabic values generally restrict the behaviour of women, especially that of upper-class women.

As a result, male dominance is prevalent both in the public and the private domain. Division of labour and laws governing life were based on sexual asymmetry. The upper-class men monopolised public positions of power far more effectively than they controlled private, personal behaviour (Strobel 1979). Women were excluded from public life and could not undertake any transactions. Ordinary women were barred from interacting with men who were not relatives. Upper-class women required male mediators with the outside world. This exclusion was and still is maintained by ensuring that women wear veils.

Islamic culture has slight variations across the globe. In East Africa, the verses in the Koran which emphasise the weakness of women rather than those which proclaim women's spiritual equality are stressed. This is exemplified, for instance, by the conviction that women must be protected and their legal rights maintained by a man mediating between a woman and the outside world and that women must wear a veil as a sign of respect.

There are also contrary views at the Coast, however. The Digo women who are mostly Muslim, do not face the restrictions of Muslim women elsewhere. Some Muslim Digo women do not even wear a veil. Generally, the Digo women wear loose veils and engage in all kinds of economic activities. However, they do not eat together with men, but this is not different from other Mijikenda practices (Maas 1991).

Whereas both Arabic culture and Islamic religion seem to subordinate women, Muslim law also defines certain women's rights relating to marriage, divorce and property. In marriage, a woman has guardians, e.g. the father, a brother or any other male relative, whose duty it is to ensure that a woman is found a good match. If there is no guardian, the *kadhi* becomes the guardian. However, this practice is dying off especially among educated women. In a study on inheritance laws and practices conducted in Mombasa District, 55% of women had arranged marriages whereas 44% had followed their own choice (WLEA 1995).

The practice of matching encouraged early marriages, with young girls not having the possibility to reject or choose a suitor. However, adult women did have some autonomy of choice. Notwithstanding this, the guardian could object if a woman was marrying below her family status. This was viewed as a disgrace to the family and could also contribute to future divorce (since inability of a husband to provide for the wife is an adequate reason for divorce).

Men in Islamic societies are allowed to marry four wives as long as they are able to take care of them. It has been pointed out that this practice underlines the existing inequality: a man is deemed capable of looking after many wives while polyandry is not a practice discernible or even acceptable (Kameri-Mbote 1995).

Under Islamic law, a contract of marriage can be concluded by a guardian on behalf of a girl who is below the age of puberty (age 11 or 9). At the same time, divorce within the Islamic community is the prerogative of the male gender. A man can unilaterally terminate marriage by simply saying *talaka* (I divorce thee) three times. A woman cannot do the same and once divorced, loses her right of maintenance after three months have expired. This was a waiting period to ascertain the man's responsibility if the woman is pregnant.

GENDER AND ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES

Within the Islamic culture, a woman is economically dependent on the husband, father or brother. The husband is the provider and the wife the nurturer (Chandler 1979). The expectation is that a man has to be economically independent and that he is able to provide for the wife and the rest of the members of the family. This is not very different from the non-Islamic cultures within the Coast. The only difference is that the Koran specifically spells out women's rights and how they should be treated.

Economic activities within the coastal areas of Kenya have historically had a gender bias, as already mentioned, with women participating in activities in and around the home, whereas men engage in activities within the wider society. Traditionally, men mostly did the clearing of land and harvesting and cash crop farming while women concentrated on subsistence farming, including planting and weeding (Champion 1967; Gillette 1980).

Agriculture, production of crafts, handicrafts and midwifery have been respected activities for women and these skills have been handed down through generations. Embroidery of white caps worn as a mark of being Muslim or Swahili and plaited mats as a decor for prayers since long has been a thriving economic activity for women. In this kind of production, whatever a woman earned was her own and this was respected. In a study done in Kwale and Kilifi, women were found to be not only engaged in traditional activities such as sale of foods, production of palm-tree roofing, tailoring and handicrafts but also to be in businesses such as bakeries, water kiosks, shops and financial credit institutions (Maas 1991).

Most women who have no education and are on their own cannot obtain capital goods, however, and are unable to transcend marginal activities of crafts, handicrafts and other

petty commodity production. The division of labour has been changing and most men, irrespective of culture do look for off-farm employment or business as a priority. Women as well are getting into cash crop farming and business in the area of goods and services. The latter include largely retail trading, i.e. selling foods either from the house or from roadside and street pavements. Single women provide meals and other domestic services for pay. Still, the persistent division of labour coupled with the lack of educational opportunities continue to relegate women to lower economic positions.

The gender distribution of wage and non-wage employment within Coast Province shows wide disparities between men and women. Most females have not ventured into the formal employment market (Table 3). The Kenyan Employment Act does not have a gender bias; nevertheless, employment as such is not a right and women face discrimination by virtue of their sex (Kameri-Mbote 1995).

Table 3 Wage and non-wage employment rates by sex and rural-urban residence, 1989

	Total		Rural		Urban	
	Wage earners	Non-wage earners	Wage earners	Non-wage earners	Wage earners	Non-wage earners
Male	48.58	42.00	29.92	63.70	77.47	8.38
Female	17.38	71.65	8.24	85.87	48.61	23.06
Total	34.76	55.12	19.02	74.85	68.39	13.00

Source: Kenya 1996d: 32

After the abolition of slave trade, wage labour replaced slaves and some men of low status joined women as domestic workers. Some women quit domestic work and ventured into small-scale enterprises but domestic work, especially child care, still remained largely women's responsibility. In cases where families could not afford to hire servants to replace slaves, women members of the family and other female daughters and relatives took up responsibilities, previously undertaken by slaves.

On a comparative note, women are continuously taking up responsibilities which were previously those of men. For example, among the Giriama, women used to participate in 16 out of 30 tasks; seven tasks together with men and nine tasks on their own. Currently, women from the same area participate in 28 tasks, 11 with men and 17 alone. On the other hand, men's tasks have reduced by 38%, with sole men's jobs declining by 100%, while no single women's task has become either a men's or a shared task (Mwachofi 1991). The same trend was found in Taita Taveta, although the women's workload is less demanding here.

An increasing number of women are household heads, partly due to the high incidence of divorces and to out-migration of males. This means that women have to fend for their families with hardly any support. Taita Taveta has the highest percentage of female-headed households (38.3%), followed by Tana River (22.9%), Kwale (21.4%), Lamu (21.2%) and Kilifi with 14.4% (Kenya 1996b).

GENDER AND POLITICS

The political arena is one area of life that largely remains foreign to women. As for participation in the political process the Kenyan law is gender-neutral but actual practice is different. Although women form over 50% of the population, less than 3% actively participate in politics and decision-making. It has been argued that women have been socialised to believe that the political arena is for men only. This makes their participation in political and elective offices low (Kameri-Mbote 1995). However, the real obstacle to women's participation lies in the many other roles that they play, their lack of economic resources and the nature of politics.

Historically women from the Coast have largely been absent in politics, despite the role played by the Giriama prophetess Mekatalili in the struggle for independence. Women could not hold the Islamic office of judge or leader of prayers nor attend public functions. Additionally, they could not control property and economic affairs. This essentially disempowers women, making politics the most exclusive area.

Islamic coastal women have no forum for exercising their human rights since legal decisions have largely been in the hands of male *kadhis*, whereas their economic transactions were undertaken on their behalf by male relatives. They have no forum for challenging the male dominance. It is noted that the only option for a woman is to be 'disobedient' at home or ignore fidelity and chastity. Women from the upper-classes tended to tow the line in comparison to women of the lower class, since they had a lot to lose by 'disobeying' patriarchy. On the other hand, women participated in the unorthodox or folk versions of Islam. It is also recorded that older women along the Coast prior to islamisation, wielded important authority in matters of kinship and communal ceremonies. To date, Muslim women have not overcome the closed culture that keeps them out of politics.

With the introduction of the multi-party era in Kenya a lot of mobilisation was focused on women. In 1992, the electorate did send six women to parliament but none of them came from the Coast. In local government elections, some women have managed to become councillors while a few others have been nominated. During the same elections, of the 140 elected members of the County Council, only two were women, notably in Kilifi and Taita Taveta (Table 4). Another 7, out of 199, had been nominated. The second multi-party elections of 1997 brought in the first female member of parliament from the Coast: Marere Wamwachai from Msambweni Constituency in Kwale District.

WIDENING OR BRIDGING THE GENDER GAP?

Kenya government documents generally emphasise full participation of local communities in planning and implementation of development (Kenya 1986). It is implied that both women and men should be effectively involved not only in implementation but also in decision-making and planning. It has been argued that the government should make deliberate attempts to integrate the female gender into mainstream development. This has not occurred in respect of policy and planning and some activists and analysts have suggested affirmative legislation; deliberately reserving a certain number of seats in

parliament, key institutions or in the various parties for women. This should not be viewed as tokenism but an appreciation of the inequity which needs to be corrected before women and men can compete on an equal basis (Kameri-Mbote 1995; Kibwana 1996).

Table 4 Elected and nominated councillors, 1992

	Elected	Nominated	Total	Men	Women
Mombasa Municipal	25	10	35	33	2
Kwale County	26	9	35	34	1
Kwale Urban	6	2	8	8	0
Lamu County	13	4	17	17	0
Tana River County	18	7	25	24	1
Taita Taveta County	12	4	16	14	2
Voi Municipal	8	2	10	9	1
Taita Taveta Urban	6	2	8	8	0
Kilifi County	0	10	10	9	1
Malindi Municipal	12	4	16	16	0
Kilifi Town	8	3	11	10	1
Mariakani Urban	6	2	8	8	0
Total	140	59	199	190	9

Source: Kenya 1993c; 1993d

The status of women in Coast Province is generally low and there is need to examine the factors which contribute to gender disparity. Of particular concern should be the constraints to women's performance, mainly illiteracy, low levels of education, lack of meaningful economic activities, historical and cultural beliefs and practices. Government programmes and NGOs have not had much impact in the Coast, yet. The most difficult areas to address concern cultural practices and the type of economic activities women are involved in. Once a parent marries off a nine year old girl, it becomes very difficult for any programme to reach such a child. There have been a few cases where the press did catch up with such parents and the issue was flashed out. This draws the attention of organisations working with children and in some cases children are rehabilitated. There has also been a programme which monitors girls every six months and follows up those absent from school. If such programmes and follow-ups are intensified, Coast Province may witness some improvement regarding levels of literacy and general socio-economic and political participation of women.

In addressing illiteracy and low educational levels, the issue of poverty has to be addressed. Income in districts such as Kwale and Kilifi are low. In the era of structural adjustment many parents have difficulty in meeting the basic needs of life and find it hard to feed their families. Under such conditions, it is expected that girls and young women suffer most. They will be given the least priority in education since culture ratifies their second-class position. At the same time, the lack of savings and the possibility of sale of immovable assets to make ends meet will not allow for any surplus which could be invested in or for women.

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REVIEW DETAILS

Source

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