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Kenyan Muslim Women in Media and Politics: Fighting for Legitimacy

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Introduction - Kenyan Muslim women perceive of themselves as a marginalized lot in terms of participation in the public sphere. Each day to them is a struggle to be included in the decision making levels of the government. They are fighting for visibility and recognition especially in the political and governing processes. Kenyan Muslims women are adamant in negotiating for their political space. This struggle is even more intricate due to religion and their being a minority group. Consensus building has not fully succeeded in empowering women to be full partners in all decision making processes. In most Muslim Non-Governmental organizations, women are minimally involved in the organizational structures and are only useful in family matters. The public sphere is reserved for men.

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Kenyan Muslim Women in Media and Politics: Fighting for Legitimacy

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I. INTRODUCTION

Kenyan Muslim women perceive of themselves as a marginalized lot in terms of participation in the public sphere. Each day to them is a struggle to be included in the decision making levels of the government. They are fighting for visibility and recognition especially in the political and governing processes. Kenyan Muslims women are adamant in negotiating for their political space. This struggle is even more intricate due to religion and their being a minority group. Consensus building has not fully succeeded in empowering women to be full partners in all decision making processes. In most Muslim Non-Governmental organizations, women are minimally involved in the organizational structures and are only useful in family matters. The public sphere is reserved for men.

This chapter attempts to narrate Kenyan Muslim women's efforts to legitimize their inclusion in the public sphere. It explores how Kenyan Muslim women have advanced to their social cultural challenges in their effort to make an entrance into the public sphere. Two areas have been specifically chosen to represent the public sphere, namely the media and politics. The development of information technologies has opened the doors of democratization process. This has in turn created an outlet for the emergence of not only pluralistic voices within various national constituencies, but also ideologically divergent affirmations within the Muslim polities. This development in old and new information and communication technologies (ICTs) – radio, audio cassettes, television and satellite, internet and magazines- plays a key role in shaping the socio-political discursive practices within Muslim societies (Eickelmann and Anderson 1999, Salvatore 1999, Schulz 2005). This interplay between democratization and the media phenomenon is especially significant as educated Muslim women become active agents as media producers, hosts and consumers (Nourai-Simone 2005, Mernissi 2005, Skalli 2006).

The involvement of Kenyan Muslim women in politics is chosen because it is in this that they can become movers and shakers of the country. How have these women legitimized their participation in politics?

This paper examines the fight for legitimacy of Kenyan Muslim women in media and politics. How are these women able to marry their religious ethical ideals and social change challenges facing them? This chapter explicates the interplay of gender and religion in the Muslim women's attempts to embrace technological progress.

II. BACKGROUND

There are a growing number of Kenyan Muslim women who are challenging prevailing and deeply entrenched orthodoxies. The orthodoxies have defined relations not only between men and women within the Muslim communities, but also between Muslim women and non-Muslims in general. In the Kenyan context, the Muslim women's awakening is shaped by Islamic spirituality as well as by a secular reasoning especially with reference to their relation with the media. They further believe that the *Shari'a* serves women better if applied justly and that Western thinking should be well scrutinized before being embraced. The Kenyan Muslim women continue to support the entrenchment of the *Kadhis* court in the constitution as part of their identity with Islam but within a reformed framework sensitive to women's rights.

The Muslim women's quest for gender inclusion in the decision-making processes is due to global emergence of identity politics. Every citizen is concerned about being included and that the public offices should represent diversity of all constituents (Hobson & Lister, 2008). Implicit in this discourse of inclusion is a new construction of justice that contends that non-recognition not only inflicts harm on groups and individuals; further it is due to this lack of recognition that implies exclusion and marginalization from full participation in the community. Hence the struggles for recognition are struggles for participation. Religion is one of these tools used to provide feelings of inclusion, belonging and citizenship. In this struggle, gender suffers setbacks when interests of women, specifically are excluded to privilege cultural, regional and national divisions. Rhoda Reddock opines that ethnic or religious communities as homogenous results in power being located in the hands of male and upper class (Hall, 2000). In the Kenyan situation, whereas Muslims in general perceive themselves as marginalized, the Muslim women are further alienated by favoring men

first whenever a chance appears especially in the political sphere.

Kenyan Muslims and indeed a great majority of East African countries subscribe largely to the *Shafi'i* school of jurisprudence controlled mainly by male *Ulamas*. These *Ulamas* did very little to promote women's Islamic scholarship beyond Qur'anic reading even among families with scholarly tradition (Bakari & Yahya, 1995). As a result, Kenyan Muslim women did not develop sufficient competency to articulate Islamic knowledge through the Arabic language. Kenya Muslim women remained excluded from advanced Islamic literacy practices. It is only recently that we had had women acquiring advanced Islamic education.¹ This also hampered their efforts to know and understand the rights accorded to them in Islam (Faki, 2001). The entrance of Western education was treated with a lot of suspicion and many Muslim women had little or no access to. During the colonial period Muslim women in Kenya were denied access to European education as a result of patriarchal bargaining between Muslim leaders and European colonial authorities. Of course, the denial of European language based education to women throughout the colonial period was not absolute. Some women in Kenya did acquire literacy in the language of their colonizers, but mass education of women in the ex-colonial languages did not take place until the post independence era.

III. MUSLIM WOMEN IN MEDIA AND POLITICS

There is an observation that the political liberalization and the greater freedom of association paved way for the new forms of associational life to flourish in Africa. This is notable for this work as it highlights the formation of new Islamic associations for women, becoming vehicles for expressing religiosity and sociality. Muslim women in Kenya are engaged in a number of associations which are both of religious and secular nature. These associations are characteristic of many similar associations in Africa which tend to fill the vacuum left by public authorities especially in health and education. The engagement of many Muslim women in public sphere is to cater for their social welfare. One informant observed that the local Imams talk about politics in the mosques but rarely give attention to the question of drug addiction among Muslim youth. Some Muslim women have been featured in the local news to highlight and sensitize the public about drug addiction.

¹ There are three Islamic Girls training Institutes, popularly known as *Mahad* in Mombasa, Nairobi and Kisumu. Student graduating from these schools are able to display knowledge of Qur'anic doctrine and Islamic jurisprudence in the Arabic language as it is the main medium of instruction.

Many Muslim youth use hard drugs such as cocaine and brown sugar. There is also the chewing of *khat* among both the youth and adults. Chewing of *khat* is a favourite leisure activity among some Muslim families. Hard drugs are in circulation especially in major Kenya coastal towns, with Mombasa city being Kenya's number one drug center.² Even some Muslim women use these drugs.

Muslims women have formed associations to work with the rehabilitation centers to assist in the war against drugs. Examples include Muslim Women Action Group (MWAG) is an example of these groups. It normally provides sensitization seminars and also organize sessions to reach out to the Muslim youth about the dangers of drug and substance abuse. Other alternative leisure activities are provided to the youth, especially the ones that are jobless, such as aiding them to initiate small business ventures. Many Muslim youth are engaged in drugs due to the high rate of unemployment.³ The seminars are to empower the youth with knowledge and ways of soliciting for funds. The Muslim women who have been successful in initiating viable and lucrative youth activities, have bought their way into the public offices. These actions of assisting in the welfare of the youth have legitimized their presence and engagement in the public sphere leadership. This shows that with limited resources, Muslim women have to work extra hard to gain public legitimacy.

The question of drug and substance abuse especially in Muslim dominated areas has not received a lot of attention from the government according to some Kenyan Muslims. This is seen as marginalization of the Muslims, a cry popular for antigovernment Muslim groups. It is considered as a cry by some Muslims that them being a minority in a Christian dominated government, their welfare is not catered. The impression of the writer on the issue of marginalization in Kenya as a concept, is that it is tied to the whole question of identity in Kenya. It is all tied up to the sharing of the national leadership and of the resources in the country. Hence, Muslims are not the only group seeking to share in the national resources. Ethnicity is a persistent potent factor in the Kenyan quest for political power. Religion constitutes a platform of political mobilization in a country like Kenya. Muslims are a significant minority who are harnessing religion as a marker of identity. This is backed up by historical and postcolonial policies which have led to disputes over development, national political leadership and access to resources.

² Nation television Station, News, 11am, 25/05/2009

³ According to DDP, 1989, *District Development Plan*, MOMBASA, the unemployment rate in former Mombasa district was 65%. The figure may be higher in the recent times.

However, the perception of marginalization by Kenyan Muslims should not be concluded as perpetrated by the Christian majority. The Muslims had a privileged position in the colonial Kenya in as far as education was concerned (Mwinyihaji, 2001). The Muslim men had access to secular education with a very limited number of girls in the pre-independence Kenya. However, due to secular education being associated with Christianity, many Muslims never perceived the importance of secular education in the post independence Kenya. Hence, Muslims are partly responsible for their state of being marginalized. This alienation continued in the recent years, the 1990s with a number of Muslims youth seeking reforms within Islam. Some of these groups are advocating for "Shari'a". To them, "*Khilafah is the answer*" and hence any form of association with non-Muslims is *kufir* (disbelief). Such attempts put many Kenyan Muslims in a dilemma concerning their identity.

The retort of many Muslim women support the argument that public sphere is a contested space; it is not just available for women to take freely especially the political field. They have to compete with the other contestants, men and non Muslim women. They have to use the same tools to advance their campaigns if they are to succeed in this contestation. The representation of Muslim women in political arena is increasing considerably since the opening up of the democratic space in the early 1990s. This is due to the re-introduction of multiparty politics in Kenya. Many Muslim women have vied although they have not been successful. They are slowly breaking the customary and religious boundaries to fully participate in the public sphere. The recent Kenyan elections of 2007 saw the entry of three Swahili Muslim women in the Mombasa Municipality. They owe their entry to the popularity of the party ticket, namely Orange Democratic Movement (ODM) as well as their earlier involvement in Women's Groups (Maimuna Salim, Shanzu, 20/03/08; Maimuna Omar Waziri, Junda, 19/03/08). They have initially worked with women's groups in various projects such as dealing with HIV/AIDS victims, youth programmes and starting funding initiatives for women.

From the above discussion, we can assert that Muslim women's active engagement with Non-governmental Organization serves as a tool for legitimizing their entrance and active participation in the public sphere. The women's groups deserve a special mention because they are genesis of Muslim women's breakthrough to the public sphere. All the politically active Muslim women were initially involved in women's activities in their localities. They also served as important campaigners with prominent political leaders in their constituencies. They provided potential voters to male politicians. Afye Rama a Parliamentary seat looser in the past 2007 general elections asserted: "If I could be able to mobilize supporters to all these past male politicians,

why can't I become a candidate myself (Afye Rama, Fort Jesus, 17/03/08). These sentiments were also echoed by most Muslim women who contested in the 2007 Kenya's general election. This is to say that Muslim women's groups serve important areas of these women's participation in the public sphere. While women form a majority of the population in Kenya (52%) and play an active role in the development of the society, Kenya remains a very patriarchal society, and the status of women remains relatively low with inequalities and inequities prevailing in many aspects of life. Women continue to be marginalized and discriminated against in almost all aspects of their lives, a situation which is reinforced by the existing laws and policies, as well as the socio-cultural factors. The situation is more grave per se for Muslim women.

The media industry has served a great role in legitimizing Muslim women's engagement in the public sphere. It has given them a voice to be heard by many, especially through radio. The privately owned radio stations such as Pwani FM, Baraka FM, Radio Salam, Radio Rahma and Iqra have provided opportunities to women contestants to air their manifestos. They were given a chance to explicate their action plans incase they won the elections. It is in these circumstances that questions arising on the legitimacy of Muslim women as public leaders were discussed. How are these Muslim women legitimizing their election into public offices? Most of the Muslim women who are already serving in the public offices as councilors alleged that they were elected because of their capability. In their opinion they were better candidates than the other contestants. They were elected on merit. Hence, their successes on the women and youth programmes legitimized their accession to the public offices as noted above.

The question of religion was brought up to the Muslim women contestants. They had a positive stance to religious sentiments. To them Islam as a religion is not a hindrance to Muslim women attaining political leadership. Most of them had not sought the opinion of the Council of Imams and Preachers of Kenya regarding the legality of a woman to be a leader. The drive to serve their community was far much greater than a religious ruling. Kenyan Muslim women are seeking and embracing modern ways of becoming Muslims. A Muslim woman can be anything she wants as long as her conscience is clear that she is not committing any sin. They expressed that they have the support of their male members of the family and community at large.

Another ethical issue touching on Muslim women's appearance on media is the notion of nudity, of the body and voice. It is viewed as despicable for a married woman to stand on a public platform and deliver a speech (Amina Zuberi, Fort Jesus, 25/03/2008). The Muslim men with strong religious inclination see it as very provocative for a fully decorated woman to sit on a public podium. Public appearance at

times is associated with making a public display of a woman's beauty. Today's some Muslim women leaders and newscasters appear in public without the traditional black veils. Some of the newscasters wear colorful clothing with matching accessories while some never veil their heads at all. Some Muslim women leaders also have a trend similar to broadcasters. This seems to support the sentiments expressed by religious theologians that appearance by women in public sphere is a source of *fitna* and as such women should only appear when absolutely necessary (Fatma Sufi, Munawarah 26/05/07). Kenyan Sunni Muslims subscribe to the Shafii *Madh-hab*. This is deemed to be very strict especially on the question of women veiling. The Muslim women politicians and news anchors have set the pace for a new kind of Hijab. This is a colorful kind of gown, fashionable and comfortable from the traditional black veil. However, this also shows the individual Muslim women initiatives to practice the kind of Islam that they are comfortable with.

In the past as noted by both older Muslim women and some scholars (Mirza & Strobel, 1976), there was seclusion of men and women in public gatherings like weddings and funerals. Especially in weddings, the women's quarters were shielded from the public. Today, in most Muslim weddings men and women tend to mix freely especially if there is a musician at the wedding. Where there are *Taarab* Music performance in town men and women mix and at times dance together. In these gatherings, there is no regard to seclusion or veiling. There seem to be laxity of observation of Islamic rules such as prohibition of music and free mixing of men and women. This trend shows that there are other factors other than Shari'a that legitimatizes women's entrance into the public sphere. Modernity has exposed the Muslim women to new kinds of lifestyles that are castigated by Islam.

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