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Dynamics of Female Agency and Configuration of Space in Rural Kenya: Interrogating Spatial Dynamics in Western Kenya

By Linnet Hamasi Henry, PhD

Abstract

There are many gendered spaces in rural areas that have been denied agency and also get lost in urban areas. In rural areas women hang out in age groups, relational set ups, interests and similarities. This paper will examine the special nature of gendering spaces in which women occupy and how they use them to discourse on development issues. These spaces include the kitchen, the space between the kitchen and the main house, the tree behind the house, the banana plantation, the well or water point, communal work (obuuba), the market place, the river, the farm, economical activities such as weddings, funerals among others. Using feminist and Gender theories I will argue that studies have tended to focus on public spaces and ignore very important spaces inhabited and occupied by women in rural areas. The same studies have focused on men, elite women and urban women while ignoring marginalized uneducated women from rural areas. My contention is that through this marginalization the rural women are denied agency and voice in articulation on development discourses. The paper will use primary and secondary data to attempt to re-enact, recover, reintroduce and recentre the knowledge produced by rural women in their spaces and show how this knowledge contribute to development. The paper will provide the rationale on why these voices need to be brought into mainstream development discourses in order to achieve holistic development. The focus will be on authors such as Teresa Band who used gender penetration to show how women worked so hard and yet were ignored in many writings. The paper presents arguments to show that these spaces are not idle spaces because there are boundaries that control them and also veto power is exercised in most of them because of the knowledge produced.

Keywords: Indigenous Knowledge, Female Agency, Space in Rural Kenya, Spatial Dynamics, Women

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Introduction

On discrimination of the women's knowledge and marginalization of the private spaces that they seem to occupy, Nyangweso (2009) in *Studies in Economic History of Kenya* gives an analysis of the segregation of women in labor force. According to her the segregation resulted in the subordination of women and their work to lower levels of employment hierarchy which made women to be obligated with greater share of household responsibility that is undervalued. During the Victorian period the influence of the Evolutionary Theory alongside the Liberal Political Theory led to the separation of spheres for men and women as the woman's position and role was defined by her biological nature. Nyangweso explains that the division of the world between the private and the public was emphasized and the women were required to remain in the private because of their function in nature as child bearers and providers of care. The private space however has been very important to development since women learn and teach children the many different activities which they have learnt through observation and experimentation.

This paper argues that the exclusion of women from public life as argued by (Nassambu and Onkware, 2010) has affected their economic participation and patriarchy in most communities is the source of demeaning and denying women's individuality, agency and voice. The paper argues against such theories such as Human Capital Theory and Comparable Worth Theory which continue to justify the sexual division of labor and marginalization of women and the private spaces which they occupy. Although this has made women to be greatly sidelined from the decision-making table on issues to do with development, (Klot, 2009) notes that they have always negotiated through their experiences of day to day life and managed to maintain the stability and development of the communities.

In many African societies, women have been pushed into the private spaces such as the kitchen and the rivers. These spaces are not considered important and that is why the knowledge that is produced in these spaces is also ignored. Since roles are gender specific in African communities, it is important to consider the roles played in these so called private and or marginal spaces as equally important to societal development. Farty (1986) says that women operate through great networks which act as a source of information and intermarriages which have helped them to play the role of intermediaries, mediators in peace and security issues and also serve as preemptors of violence among other development issues. Farty continues to demonstrate that women and indigenous people in general are important references not only in peace building but also in general development of communities.

Women have shown a lot of commitment in agriculture through prediction of the weather, tilling of the land, weeding, planting and harvesting (Khachina, 2010). Through their networks, they carry out harvesting and plan on preservation of the food crop. Most of these activities have been scantily documented with men being privileged for embracing the modern methods of farming which are proving unsustainable on issues of food security in Kenya for

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example. The stories of rural women according to (Swai, 2007) are important because they show how women make meaning of who they are and what is expected of them in the modern society. The story of these rural women is found in their daily lives through the different spaces which they occupy. Swai also contents that rural women should be involved in development discourses despite their lack of formal education. On this she says;

Women in the rural areas are not disempowered because of lack of education. Education has dislocated women to an extent that the women who have not gone to school actually feel they are ignorant or they know nothing. Women have a way of negotiating for space and power using their knowledge which has come from long years of experience and observation (Swai, 2007, pg 9)

In support of this argument, Amutabi and Luta Mukhebi (2001), talks of women as key natural resource managers. In their article, they discuss the activities of women in mining have not been thoroughly researched and documented in Kenya. Their contribution is often blanketed together with that of men and therefore overlooked. Even where statistics are available, the focus is often on direct role and not supports roles that women play in the production process, services in homes of miners, in supply of commodities and other auxiliary services such as marketing, to the mining industry in Kenya. The article illuminates female contributions that have been ignored, and gives voice to women miners. It seeks to recuperate women actions as miners, investors and key players in mining activities, focusing on gold panning and other small-scale mining activities at Mukibira in Western Kenya. This paper is in agreement with Amutabi and Luta Mukhebi that indeed the contribution of women in most development activities has not been documented or reported as it is always marginalized.

With these few examples, this paper seeks to demonstrate the need to make public the women's contribution in the private spaces in order to achieve sustainable development. There is a great diversity in the politics and activities that women perform and the strategies that they use in performing but the work of scholars and development personnel continuously draws on urban educated and elite women showing how lack of education justifies marginalization of rural women. This paper will explore a range of activities and strategies that women employ to learn and educate each other which I suggest should be acknowledged and incorporated in development discourses.

The Social Political Standing of Women in Western Kenya

The Abaluhya of Western Kenya societies are patriarchal and very male- centered in their rules and laws. Almost everything in this community is gendered such as trees, animals, foods and no wonder spaces are also gendered. There are male and female trees. Women are not allowed to plant such trees as cypress, Eucalyptus, *olusolia* among others considered as male trees. They are not also supposed to plant shrubs that are used for fencing such as *ebikhoni*. These are permanent trees that may make them assume permanence in the homes when they are supposed to be as temporal as possible (*ababiri/abakoko*). They can instead plant fruits such as paw paws, guavas and trees such as *echisasabi* because they are seasonal and thus temporal. Cows, sheep and goats

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belong to men while local chicken belong to women, rabbits and doves could be reared by young boys.

Food is also gendered among the Abaluhya and seen as a source of power (Amutabi, 1993). As a result, there are male and female foods. There are certain parts of a slaughtered animal that women are not allowed to eat for instance the tongue and the tail of a cow, sheep or goat. Interestingly, a live chicken belongs to a woman but once it is slaughtered the parts are gendered. The women are allowed to eat the neck, head and intestines but not such parts as the lower parts of the chicken near the abdomen (*likonelo and Isundi*), the thighs and the chicken gizzard (*imondo*). Any women who do not serve her husband with the chicken gizzard may be sent back to her parents because it is a taboo for a woman to eat the gizzard or serve it to a different man other than her husband. The head of the fish also belongs to a man and there is no excuse for a woman to partake of the same. Rabbit meat is also a taboo for women since it is believed that she may run away from her home or show signs of instability. Liver (*ingurumani*) the choicest part of any animal was reserved for the patriarch or the oldest male in the family. Amutabi (2009) indicates that generally men have a high social order and this determines their access to things like food, sex, land and water. All this gendering allows us an understanding of why spaces are also gendered among the Abaluhya of Western Kenya.

Although the laws and rules privilege men, women also play important roles in this community. Some women are known to be diviners, herbalists, healers, chiefs and mothers which give them a high standing compared to some of the men. Among the Abaluhya, a woman assumes a similar level of that of her husband in the clan hierarchy and can rise above him if she has extra gifts such as knowledge of medicine or midwifery (Were, 1967). In certain Luhya communities we have polygamous homes in which children of the second or third wives bear the lineage names of their mothers. Inheritance of land in such families is given to a household of the wife in a polygamous marriage but not to the children. The children then took the inheritance through her. As can be seen, although men and women occupy different spaces in this community, they all play an important role in decision making and development of the all-round community.

Gendered Spaces in Rural Western Kenya: What do we mean?

The Kitchen Space

In western Kenya, the kitchen is a space for women. Elderly men are not allowed in the kitchen uninvited. Just like among many other African communities, the landscape and appearance of most homes in western Kenya are changing because the little huts built from grass and mud have started disappearing rapidly and are being replaced by modern semi-permanent and permanent houses made from bricks, stones and roofs of corrugated iron sheets or mud walls and roofs of corrugated iron sheets (Were, 1967). Many areas are getting access to piped or borehole water and electricity. There is increased attention to healthcare and education and many are seeking employment in urban areas. The change has not however affected the meaning of the kitchen and what goes with it. Most homes have the kitchen separate from the main house. The kitchen is behind the main house with a special focus on the area between the kitchen and the main house

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serving as a storage place or a highway but in most cases it is used as a buffer zone between the kitchen and the main house. Any stranger accessing the kitchen has to alert the in house while in this space.

In most kitchens there is a cooking place with three stones serving as the stove, there are water pots or/ and utensils. There are also storage facilities such as cupboards and traditional pots that are used to store such things are grains. In some Kitchens I observed chicken roosting in sophisticated cushions made from banana leaves. Above the fire place was a structure for storing fire wood for future and emergency use only. Most of the women I talked to at home were comfortable doing it in the kitchen. In this space they invited their friends and discussed all societal issues form problems of the community to individual sexual issues. Men and women who were not responsible were discussed and a decision made on how to confront them as one of the women said;

...the kitchen is a place for a woman. I dislike men who push their nose in this space. We determine the family health through this space. What to cook, how to cook and how to serve is our role. This is very good because lazy family members do not get much. Sometimes we can hide food here and say that there is no food for the family. This is the only way to send some of our lazy husbands running looking for food. You can imagine if I was sharing this space with him... Just to mention to you in confidence that we have eliminated some of the disturbing community members through this space. Do not underestimate women. If you are an irresponsible member of the community and you are not showing signs of changing we deal with you.... (Respondent A, 2017)

The kitchen serves as storage for seeds such as beans and maize. These are well selected seeds that are used for planting in the next season. The marginalization of the use of this space has seen the introduction of hybrid seeds that do not reproduce. Many farmers cannot afford them and thus a lot of dependency on imported food from other areas in Kenya. Structure above the fire place (*inungo*) are the most strategic for storing food crops. The place is important because of long term smoke which acts as a preservative from insects and rodents such as rats. One of the respondents said;

After harvesting I make sure that the beans have dried well for a period of not less than 10 days after shelling. I then mix them with special ash which allows the beans to be safe from pests and insects. In this manner the beans can stay for more than three years without being infected. I like storing my beans in a special pot above the fire place. You know the seed crop must continue drying and should not be allowed to come in contact with moisture at any time (Respondent B, 2017).

What the above quote means is that as food custodians, women from Western Kenya, are the planners and managers of the entire food security sector (Hamasi, 2016). Women have to plan and anticipate the volume of food that the family uses in a year and plan ahead. Storage of food is predicated on structured rules and norms shared in the community.

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The most interesting observation of the kitchen that I made is the multitasking that takes place in this space. Women visitors converge in this space not only for story telling but also working. They shell beans, thresh maize, cook food, advice children using folklore and discuss all the current developments in the community. New brides are tutored on issues of marriage, marital relations, housekeeping, mothering and childcare. Good and bad weddings are discussed and caused of deaths interrogated. With globalization, women have their phones and some have small radios in the kitchen which allows them to follow local, national and international news. This is unlike before where radios belonged to the sitting room which is a man's space. From the foregoing discussion one can see that the kitchen space is not as marginal as one would like to imagine. The space is responsible for knowledge creation that is responsible for the development of the community in general.

The Market Space

Markets have been known to be women's spaces. In northern Kenya, markets are more than buyer seller arrangement. They include haggling and intelligence collection on pending attacks and counter attacks. Through markets there is movement of information, goods and services. New foods, fads and fashions are assimilated into the community through markets (Hamasi, 2016b). Fibian Lukalo in her article *Feeding the cities: Gambogi Women with Horticultural Crops in Eldoret Municipal market* talks about how women from Gambogi in Western Kenya are responsible for the horticultural crops consumed by Eldoret residents (Lukalo, 2007).

Movement as described by Ndambuki (2007) allows women to be mobile, to maneuver for space just to carry out market activities. To ensure this movement women occupy strategic places in the market to negotiate and sell their products. In western Kenya women occupy strategic positions in the market spaces. They have played a major role in ensuring sufficiency of food and other products in the county. This is due to the supply network chains that are owned by these women throughout the county and other counties in the country. One woman said;

I sell bananas and I get them from different places in our county and when they are not in season, I get them from as far as Kisii and even Meru. You know when you are a market women Kenya and even the world becomes just a small space. However when the bananas tend to be scares then I sell grains such us millet and sorghum. I also sell rice and maize. Ones you know the market you cannot lack what to do....(Respondent D, 2017)

Through the sale of goods such as pots, guards and decorations, women establish long lasting relationships which have ensured coexistence in Western Kenya. The cross border markets are shared with Luos and Nandis and this has allowed women from western Kenya to speak three languages without any struggle (Luhya, Luo and Kalenjin).The paper is supported by Musisi Nakanyike who writes on the Kampala- Kibuga market and says this market ensured interaction between representatives of widely different ethnicities, races, religions and cultures and probably or the first time unsupervised gender relations (Musisi, 2001). According to Musisi, women were

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therefore mediators in this racial and cultural encounter at the market place and they continued to do so after Uganda became independent in 1962.

Musisi (2001) says there is need to recognize the role of women in development in such areas as market trade. This paper argues that women are able to read trends of demand and supply and dialogue on threats to the family and the community. They are best prepared to issue early warning to their communities on scarcity of products such as maize flour and others. Market place is about prices and bargaining, negotiating and haggling and as a result women make friendship within and without the market space. They develop soft skill than the men who are not patient enough to tap into the different attitudes of different people from different backgrounds. One of the interviewees had this to say;

I speak, Kinyore, Kijaluo and Kinandi. This is because I go to Ekwanda market on Wednesdays where we border Luos, I go to Lwanda market which has everybody on Thursdays and Gambogi Market where we border Nandis on Saturday. The three markets have made me to understand these three communities very well. I am able to interact with them and also borrow a lot from their tastes. The Luos bring us fish and they are also good pot makers. Personally I sell to them ropes that I make from sisal fiber. The Nandis bring us all types of vegetables. You know they have very good climate because they have not destroyed most of their forests.....(Respondent E, 2017)

From this quote you realize that the market place is a space in which new ideas and new products are almost launched through itinerary advertisers. Women access this strategic information on time. The Market place is an important place for skills acquisition and knowledge because women deal with people from diverse cultures and this allows them to have a strong contextual approach to threats, anxieties and tensions. Markets such as Luanda are central in determining supply and demand in western Kenya.

Wells, Rivers and Water Points as Spaces

Water is an important resource in Western Kenya. This is why very many rituals are associated with water. Denying someone drinking water is a taboo in this region thus the centrality of this resource. In his study Maurice Amutabi suggests that water is a powerful space and site for power where authority and influence are exercised. Water resources provide an important gender meeting point at which power dynamics play out often at the expense of women (Amutabi, 1995). Amutabi argues that women have used water to navigate into powerful places thereby asserting authority and influence. This paper agrees that the importance of water in society cannot be gainsaid and women's control of this important resource among the Luhya of Western Kenya is an important undertaking which they do not take for granted. Women use water in Western Kenya to situate and locate themselves at important and strategic locations that allow them to control its use especially in domestic spaces. One of the respondents said;

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...I fetch my water for drinking from Ebusembe very early in the morning at about five. You know we do not have many wells and so if I delay I will meet very many people and this will waste my time. However when I want to talk to my friends and especially younger women and girls I go to the water point in the evening or during the day. The young women like washing their clothes in the water point as they share stories. During this time girls and young women are couched on various issues including sharing...I tell you things like soap and washing basins are shared to and extend that you may not know the real owner...(Respondent X, 2017).

The adage that “water is life” finds meaning and fulfillment in the Luhya society meaning that women control life. Gender scholars such as Jacinta Ndambuki (2009) and Fibian Lukalo (2009) agree that control of strategic resources has often been male dominated but this paper showcases that whereas women may be seen to be marginalized, the reality on the ground is different because women have agency and voice in the utilization of water in ways that allow them to occupy positions of influence and authority as far as water is concerned. Water allows them to have condign (invisible) power that is not physical or felt but is beneath the surface. One of the respondents said;

In the water points, we discuss arrogant women and men, irresponsible family members are also discussed and plans on cautioning them put in place. ... We also talk about health issue such as family planning and emerging diseases such as HIV and AIDS. Children’s health is a key subject in these spaces. It is in this space that I got introduced to medicinal herbs... Likewise we have women who are professionals and /or have experience with modern medicine and they share this information with the others.....(Respondent W,2017).

Women have the responsibility of keeping the water points clean. Although they do not dig in the rivers and wells when they are infested with weeds, they make sure nobody throws dirt in the water. The water for drinking in western Kenya is very important and thus surrounded with taboos. For instance, it is wrong for anybody to defalcate or pee in the river or well. If this happens a ritual will be done and the person will be haunted if not caught.

The Farm and Environment Spaces

Women from rural Western Kenya have for years participated in environmental preservation and conservation in a well-balanced and careful use of the environment. They have knowledge about bad practices and have therefore for years engaged in developing sustainable livelihood patterns. Women understand the importance of preserving the environment and especially the forests for food, firewood, medicine and rain purposes (Amutabi, 2012). They have mechanisms and structures for environmental sustainability and that is why they engage in terracing and building gabions to preserve soil and reduce wastage.

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One of the ways to ensure sustainable ecosystem is through land management and preservation of soil (Mwayuli, 2012). There is intense terracing of farmlands and construction of gabions built of stones to prevent soil erosion. The terracing is supported by clearly selected tree species that are interplanted among crops to serve as shelter, wind breaker and later on to be used as firewood or for medicine. Looking at the farm one would realize that most indigenous tree such as *tsisolia* have been pruned and spared to act as wind breakers. Women from Western Kenya through years of experimentations and observation have come up with trees that are not dangerous to crops but are rich for fertilization such as leguminous plants for soil oxygenation and nitrogen fixing.

In addition, there are certain parts of the farm and compound that are left uncultivated. Areas around graves are sacred and instead of cultivating are preserved. This means that the trees and shrubs that grow on the grave are safe from cutting and act as wind breakers. On the many Luhya farms that I observed there are certain terrains that are left untouched. Some of these areas are chosen for lumping and burning the dangerous weeds such as *olumbuku* while some are left with the weed to decay naturally. Women also engage in crop rotation and know the best practices in crop rotation that maximizes on food production. Maize/ sorghum, beans, groundnuts rotated while the permanent crop is finger millet which is not rotated by other crops as they say it uses a lot of water thus causing the following crop to suffer from lack of water (Hamasi 2016b). The knowledge system promotes environmental preservation and conservation because careless handling of the environment can have catastrophic consequences.

Conclusion

Findings from this study are corroborated by Kiage (2011) whose findings in a study on *The role of Women-groups in the revegetation of degraded sites in Chepareria division, West Pokot district, Kenya* showed that the tradition of women-groups was common among the Pokot, but was most pronounced during farm activities such as cultivation and harvesting. It became clear that following increasing land degradation, women-groups have incorporated revegetation in their day-to-day activities. Re-vegetation programmes use, mainly indigenous (usually multipurpose) trees that have physiological advantage over exotic species to the effects of termites attack and stressful climatic conditions of the area. This study further showed that traditional knowledge on environmental conservation was richly embedded among the Luhya women around Kakamega forest. This knowledge was reflected in the existence of sacred trees and vegetation communities that were set aside for various cultural practices such as *Omurembe*.

From the above discussions, it is evident that although women's spaces are considered private and marginal, they have huge implications to development. Thus they are supposed to be revamped and promoted to allow them to participate in development discourses. Kitchens for instance can be enriched with electricity and energy saving jikos to allow more important conversations among women. Most markets in Western Kenya need renovation and rebuilding to ensure that women are housed and they have such facilities as tap water and toilets. There is a major problem when one sees depilated markets that are not gender sensitive at all and yet they support the economy of the communities. Women need to be supported in their farming activities in terms of being advised on proper farming methods in order to ensure food security. Rivers in

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Western Kenya need a lot of concerted effort to ensure that women access water for their domestic chores. Since water points are also social meeting points, the government should ensure that women do not travel very long distance to access this important commodity.

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