Women's and Feminist Activism in Eastern Africa

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In the last five decades, Eastern Africa has experienced the fastest and highest rate of change in women's political representation worldwide. In the 1960s, less than 1 percent of all legislators were women, yet by January 1, 2015, Rwanda, Tanzania, Uganda, and Burundi were among the top 35 countries globally in terms of women's representation in national legislatures (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2015). Additionally, in 2010, Kenya adopted a new constitution that created a special post to represent women's issues in the National Assembly. The result was 47 women representatives in each county after the 2013 elections – a total of 19.7 percent in Kenya compared to 63.8 percent in Rwanda, 36 percent in Tanzania, 35 percent in Uganda, and 30.5 percent in Burundi (representation of women in parliament, all in the lower or single house). Rwanda notably became the first country in the world to have more women than men in its parliament in 2008, which is a status it currently maintains.

In most cases, these changes in women's representation in parliament are attributable to the introduction of gender quotas in sub-Saharan African politics. However, women's movements have supported the construction and subsequent implementation of such policies.

This entry is an overview of women's movements in Eastern Africa from precolonial times to the present. A word of caution: in this entry it is impossible to do justice to the specifics of the women's movements in each Eastern African state. The ways in which different factors have combined to shape women's movements in Rwanda, Burundi, Uganda, Tanzania, and Kenya are distinct and tied to local histories and knowledge.

Women in Eastern Africa were politically active prior to colonialism and often held positions of political authority. According to some accounts, precolonial women leaders were as common as male rulers, and women had central roles in religious rituals and belief ceremonies (Saidi 2010). Women were also involved in local organizations that addressed women's issues, such as the *ndundu* (council) in the Kenyan Mitero village. The *ndundu* was comprised of Kikuyu women, organized by age, and while its central function was cooperative cultivation, it also provided women with a base by which to address their juridical, social, and agricultural concerns (Stamp 1986). Additionally, there is evidence that prior to colonialism, matrilineal societies existed among the Mbugwe of north-central Tanzania and the Mijikenda in coastal Kenya (Saidi 2010, 14). Here, many of the central elements of the societal order were organized and administered by women, in particular mothers and their spheres of activity (Saidi 2010, 18).

Colonialism brought profound changes to Eastern African women's political status and their ability to organize. The loss of land experienced by most Africans especially affected women in Eastern Africa as it also meant an intensification of their economic reliance on men. Furthermore, colonialism pulled women away from their traditional roles in land cultivation and food production by forcing them into waged labor where they were often subject to acts of physical and sexual abuse. Victorian ideals of gender also were

introduced in Eastern Africa as a result of colonialism, excluding women from politics and positions in the administration, relegating them to the domestic sphere, and seeking to control women's sexuality and reproductive rights (Geiger, Musisi, and Allman 2002).

In several cases, women responded with force. In the area that today is southern Uganda and Rwanda, Muhusa, a woman described as having had an "extraordinary character," led armed protests and raids against German colonial authorities (Sheldon 2005, xxxviii). In Burundi and Tanzania, women mobilized to protest rising taxes during colonialism. As movements formed to overthrow the colonial system, women became active here as well. Bibi Titi Mohammed had a major role in the Tanzanian Nationalist Movement by organizing a women's section of the Tanganyika African National Union (TANU; Geiger 1987). This women's section of TANU participated in the battle to secure independence. Women elsewhere in Eastern Africa likewise were active in their own independence movements, and many fought to guarantee social, political, and economic women's rights in the new systems that followed independence.

Unfortunately, nearly all women's movements that emerged in the struggle to end Eastern African colonialism were co-opted upon independence by the new nationalist political parties. These new, and frequently massive, organizations used women to campaign for their own objectives and prevented other organizations from forming. A classic example is the national woman's organization *Umoja wa Wanawake wa Tanzania* (United Women of Tanzania; UWT) which first began as an affiliate of TANU. Although Tanganyikan women formed the backbone of the Tanzanian nationalist movement and were vital to its success, toward the end of colonialism male TANU leaders enlisted the help of the UWT to fundraise for male leader's

salaries and trips abroad. Once Tanzania achieved independence, only a few women maintained their political roles in the new system, and those who had held a variety of party positions prior to independence now took jobs as sweepers, cleaners, and in clothing factories (Geiger 1987, 25). The independent government determined that some women were only suitable for domestic positions, with educated women in particular called upon to teach their "less fortunate" sisters lessons in sewing, nursing, and cookery (Geiger 1987, 25).

Elsewhere, such as in Kenya, the state-run women's organization *Machdeleo Ya Wanawake*, which had the largest membership of any in the country after colonialism, confined women to domestic and childcare, handicrafts, agriculture, literacy, and sports. The absorption and co-optation of women's movements often by authoritarian ruling parties in Eastern Africa made it dangerous for women to campaign for issues at odds with the ruling party (Tripp 2003b; Fallon 2008; Tripp et al. 2009). As a result, women who were active across Eastern Africa in fighting for anti-colonial independence movements were often pushed aside once new governments came to power and were unable to campaign for women-specific issues. Unless they were willing to mobilize for the interests of the new regime, women in Eastern Africa could not be socially and politically active without incurring high costs.

Paradoxically, then, it was a combination of the 1970s global economic crisis along with a shift in international attention towards women's rights that allowed women's movements in Eastern Africa to re-emerge. The global economic crisis forced women to mobilize in order to improve their economic situations, often combining resources in order to make goods that could be sold. Additionally, the year 1975 was declared International Women's Year by the United Nations (UN)

and included the adoption of a World Plan of Action focused on securing equal access for women across a variety of institutional fields (education, employment, health, housing, family, nutrition, and political participation). In turn, many of the movements that women in Eastern Africa formed at this time drew on legacies of precolonial women's organizations already discussed, as well as organizations that existed during colonial times to mobilize for independence. However, they rose to prominence especially as a result of the new UN priorities.

Women's organizations were still limited at this time in what they could achieve as a result of their ties to the political party in power and the extent to which they depended on government funding. In many of the mass party-affiliated organizations, women's leadership roles had first to be approved by the ruling party that dictated the organization's agenda and, as a result, infrequently challenged the status quo. Women's organizations' activities were also often monitored to ensure compliance with government initiatives. Consequently, many of them were organized around religion, domestic concerns, and "development," narrowly defined to mean only income-generating enterprises such as handicrafts and farming to the neglect of women's rights. Issues of concern to women that were not approved by the state-run women's organizations were too dangerous to push for under authoritarianism.

Beginning in the late 1980s and early 1990s, state-affiliated women's organizations declined in significance and new independent associations burst onto the scene. This was largely a result of three factors. First, the global push for democracy also resulted in a shift among donors towards funding non-governmental organizations (NGOs) as opposed to states. These changes in global politics and priorities provided women with non-state-based forms of funding, which led to new opportunities and the possibility of functioning independently from the state. As independent mobilization became possible, so did independent women's movements.

Second, the continuing global emphasis on women's rights sustained and even increased the focus of international donors on improving the status of women worldwide. International women's movements motivated by the UN Conference on Women in Nairobi in 1985 and another UN Conference on Women in Beijing 10 years later encouraged women's organizations in Eastern Africa to push their governments to improve women's status and implement gender-based reforms (Snyder 2006). Many of these topics had been considered taboo in the past. However, the women's rights agendas that were promoted by international organizations allowed new women's networks to form, the proliferation of new norms concerning women's rights, and the diffusion of new strategies by which to achieve them. Conferences that focused on women's education, women's reproductive rights, violence against women, and other women-specific concerns profoundly affected women's movements in Eastern Africa. Coupled with access to resources separate from the state, women could now create organizations and mobilize to address a host of issues, which they did: land rights; violence against women including domestic violence, genital cutting, and rape; women's political representation and constitutional reforms to secure it; among others. Women in Eastern Africa mobilized around political agendas that had once been unthinkable (Tripp et al. 2009).

Third and finally, the end of numerous civil wars, and even genocide in the case of Rwanda, provided the social and political ruptures necessary for reconstruction. Women seized the opportunities provided by such upheavals, often insisting they have a role in rewriting state constitutions and restructuring the political order to include

legislative changes for gender equality. Often, war itself would alter traditional gender roles and provide women with new opportunities. In many cases, women in Eastern Africa demanded their inclusion in peace talks at the war's end. With the exception of Tanzania, all countries with the highest rate of women's legislative representation in Eastern Africa (Rwanda, Burundi, Uganda) emerged out of violent conflicts that took place in the 1980s and 1990s. Unique to women's movements, the autonomy obtained in recent decades by women's organizations has allowed women to select their own leaders and forge alliances across patronage networks, including cleavages defined by ethnicity, race, religion, urban–rural, and general divides (Tripp 2003a, 253).

The impact of the recent remarkable rise of women in formal Eastern African politics remains to be seen. Each country is currently under authoritarian or semi-authoritarian rule, but unlike the past where states co-opted some women's organizations and dismantled others, so far it seems as if women MPs have been working to advocate on behalf of women's interests without eliminating local women's organizations. In Rwanda, for example, the Forum of Rwandan Women Parliamentarians has worked closely with women's organizations and government ministries to enact an inheritance law that allows women to own property in their own names, to inherit property, to enter into legal contest, and to seek paid employment. Similarly, women MPs in Rwanda have initiated pro-child legislation and anti-gender-based violence legislation, even passing a Gender Based Violence Bill in 2008 and creating an anti-violence movement in Rwanda in the process. In Uganda, women members of the constitutional assembly have also fought to secure provisions for women such as a Domestic Violence Bill, an Anti-Female Genital Mutilation Bill,

and a Marriage and Divorce Bill in 2009. In Tanzania, women's increasing legislative representation has resulted not only in an attempt to advocate for laws that represent women's interests (including access to university education, maternity leave, land reform, and prevention of, as well as punishment for, gender-based violence), but also the establishment of a women's caucus to provide parliamentary skills training. This has led to a more interactive parliamentary system between women and men in Tanzania, as well as a rise in women MPs' contribution to parliamentary debates and articulation of women's interests. These are but a few examples of how, at the formal institutional level, women's movements in Eastern Africa have contributed to significant progress for women's rights.

However, at the same time, increased pressure by women's movements to transform the laws and culture of their respective countries has resulted in some cases in a backlash. For example, despite Uganda's gains noted here, men in parliament have recently introduced several bills that set women back. In particular, the Anti-Pornography Bill, signed in 2013 and which was quickly renamed the Mini-skirt Bill, restricts women from wearing clothing such as mini-skirts and cleavage-bearing tops deemed to excite public sexual cravings. Similarly, in 2004, the Kenyan government passed a bill allowing polygamy allowing men to marry as many women as they wished. While the bill originally provided women with the right to veto their husband's choice, male members of parliament introduced a wording that dropped this clause. In both cases, numerous women's movements have mobilized to protest these laws. Nonetheless, examples such as these call into question Eastern African governments' genuine commitment to advance the rights of women beyond their formal legal representation. There are also concerns that

electoral gender quotas are being used by authoritarian regimes in Eastern Africa such as Rwanda and Uganda to quiet international dissent and calls for democracy.

SEE ALSO: Colonialism and Gender; NGOs and Grassroots Organizing; Postcolonialism, Theoretical and Critical Perspectives on; Representation; Third World Women; Women's Political Representation

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