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**Transforming Women's Political Activism Through Self-Help
Groups: The Kenyan Experience**

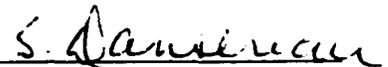
By

Marian Pelletier

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the
Master of Arts in
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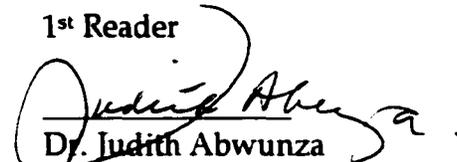
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ABSTRACT

MARIAN PELLETIER

TRANSFORMING WOMEN'S POLITICAL ACTIVISM THROUGH SELF-HELP GROUPS: THE KENYAN EXPERIENCE

Those who take counsel together do not perish.

(Kikuyu Proverb)

OCTOBER 1, 2001

The concept of "politics" as it is generally understood in most contemporary societies denotes the exercise of power in the public realm. This view tends to locate political involvement primarily within state structures and formal political institutions. Women have often been viewed as marginal to formal institutional politics of parties, executives and legislatures, as women's activities have largely been associated with the so-called "private sphere" of family and home. Furthermore, women's activities within the family as well as their extra-household activities, have been seen to be irrelevant to political inquiry, yet this neglects an important area of political activity. This thesis will argue that it is important to reconstruct the definition of what is "political" to incorporate a variety of women's activities by using a feminist approach to examining women's political activities.

As a result of a reorientation of our thinking about the political, in recent years men and women's participation in political structures in both First and Third Worlds has been re-examined. Of specific concern in this thesis is the fact that the roles of Kenyan impoverished women have not been adequately acknowledged and yet women's active role in grassroots informal structures have always been a part of Kenya's history. The thesis will examine the ways in which Kenyan women have been involved in political activism and how the political forms of their activism have changed over time. It will present a case study of Kenyan women's self-help groups to demonstrate how these groups are important sites of women's political activity, which channel rural and urban impoverished women's activism into the political sphere.

By situating women's role in politics from the colonial era to the present this thesis will highlight the trials and tribulations Kenyan women have had to face while they engage in political activism. It will also provide an opportunity to analyze how Kenyan women organize themselves in response to economic, political and social changes. Finally, this thesis hopes to provide an opportunity for a few Kenyan women to share their concerns, ideas and opinions, giving women who are often not recognized for their contributions to society a chance to "speak out".

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION: RESISTANCE AND THE CREATION OF SURVIVAL IMPERATIVES IN AFRICA

Throughout history women have mobilized in various forms to respond to the pressing social, cultural, economic and political needs of the time. Africa is no exception. The fulfillment of these needs has been a preoccupation of African women because of the multiple roles they play in production, reproduction, and community management. Despite the contributions of African women towards developing their nations, which is slowly being recognized, women continue to suffer from poverty because of constraining factors. The widespread poverty among the vast majority of African women is manifested in lack of economic resources, lack of basic services, low literacy levels and poor health.

Women make up fifty two per cent of Kenya's population of twenty-six million people. Eighty-five per cent of these women live in rural areas where households survive on less than four hundred US dollars a year. Seventy-four per cent of the women who live in the rural areas are engaged in subsistence farming, and the rest are either petty traders or work as casual laborers on other people's plantations. Population pressure has stimulated an expansion of cultivation into marginal land and forest. There is difficulty in finding fuelwood and consequently, women are increasing the time spent on fuel collection. Nine out of ten people rely on traditional natural sources for household water such as streams and springs. Water collection can consume up to forty per cent of a woman's day, and average from three to five hours daily. Women spend thirteen to fourteen hours daily working; two thirds of this time is divided among farming, gathering

household water and fuelwood, hygiene and other household activities (AFROL. Gender Profile, 2000: Inter-church Coalition on Africa, 1990).

Kenyan women are faced with a daunting array of social, economic, and political constraints. Even though women produce eighty per cent of the food, they own title to only five per cent of the land (Wacker, 1994: 134). In many parts of Kenya the number of women-headed rural households is estimated at twenty-seven per cent. Women-managed households (with migrant husbands) often account for another forty-seven per cent (Thomas-Slater, 1995:14). The recent Kenya National Household Welfare Monitoring and Evaluation survey concluded that mean incomes for male-headed households were nearly sixty percent higher than for households headed by females (World Bank: Country Gender Profile, January, 1999). Women are generally disadvantaged in terms of both income and consumption and thus more susceptible to poverty. Women are often the ones responsible for providing the family's food supply and this leads to increase agricultural and domestic responsibilities. Another key component of female poverty in Kenya as is elsewhere in Africa is "time poverty", as there are significant time allocation differentials between men and women. Women work longer hours than men and their workload, derived from simultaneously carrying out multiple roles, imposes severe time burdens and harsh tradeoffs, with important economic and welfare costs (The World Bank Group, Africa Region Number 85, April 1997). Women are trapped in a cycle of subsistence farming, poverty and dependence on a male dominated economy (Inter-Church Coalition on Africa: 1990).

The struggle to alleviate poverty presents a challenge to Kenyan women as well as to all African women but they have not resigned themselves to this predicament.

Everywhere in Africa and in Kenya women are generating innovative and imaginative initiatives for overcoming poverty. One strategy has been to organize themselves into informal grassroots organizations, to improve their social, economic and political positions (Chege, 1998:88). The hope is that their involvement will bring a sense of empowerment and better living conditions for both themselves and their families. Authors, such as Oduol and O'barr, have argued that women's participation in informal grassroots organizations has traditionally not been considered by political analysts to be political activity. Nevertheless, African women have and continue to organize politically at the grassroots level in many of their societies to address the difficulties that exist in both their communities and family lives.

A specific concern in this thesis is the fact that the political role of Kenyan rural and urban impoverished women have not been adequately acknowledged, yet their role in grassroots informal structures have long been a part of Kenya's history. This thesis will explore how **grassroots organizations channel impoverished rural and urban women's activism into the political sphere**. The objectives of the thesis are as follows: first to provide a historical analysis of Kenyan women's involvement in informal political structures such as self-help groups; secondly, to examine what type of political action comes out of these groups and whether or not this involvement has had an influence on women's social, economic and political positions.

In spite of the many difficulties they face, women in Kenya have developed strategies to help them cope with their problems. This is reflected in the high level of participation in self-help groups. According to statistics available from the Women's Bureau in the Ministry of Culture and Social Services, there were over 23,614 registered

women's groups with a membership of 1.4 million in 1990 (Women's Bureau Census, 1991). Women are organizing themselves on their own initiative to gain access to the means of production, land, credit and skills. Therefore, an examination of Kenyan's women's grassroots organizations can offer insights concerning women's responses to socio-economic change, women's political activism in the informal realm and the sort of strategies poor women develop in order to improve their personal autonomy.

One main argument of this thesis is to examine how Kenyan women use their autonomous women's organizations, as a political strategy to attempt to improve their economic, social and political conditions. Examining women's activism in African societies provides us with an opportunity to analyze how the forces of change and oppression have reduced women's political, social and economic opportunities and as a result, how women have organized themselves in response to these changes. This examination will also aid in an evaluation of whether or not women are achieving political empowerment through their involvement in self-help groups.

It becomes important, to analyze the impact of Kenyan women's associations and their political activities dating from the colonial era to the present. This helps to highlight the trials and tribulations women traditionally dealt with, and continue to face, while they engage in informal politics. It also assists us in understanding the changing place of Kenyan women in the social, economic and political settings of their own society. This will offer a more balanced interpretation of women's activities, in which women are no longer seen as objects, but as actors. Women from all countries have developed strategies to better their living conditions and the conditions of their families. Through examination of the strategies that Kenyan women have used to gain empowerment, we

may also discover some insight into the commonalties and differences of all women involved in the process of organizing for social change.

To answer the question of how grassroots organizations channel impoverished rural and urban women's activism into the political the thesis will do the following: Chapter One introduces and outlines the conceptual framework by reviewing critical debates in the following areas: first the **development literature** and how it pertains to gender. It is important to examine the link between women and development in order to gain an understanding of how past and present development polices affect women's actions. This link will be beneficial in analyzing women's roles in self-help groups and the roles that self-help groups have in the development process. Second it is important to examine the literature on **political theory** and more specifically, to examine the differences between mainstream and feminist political thought. This will enable us to have a better understanding of how women are often left out of discussions centered on political activity. It is also important to reconstruct a definition of "political" in order to incorporate all of women's activities and to evaluate whether or not self-help groups are a from of political activism. Third, the development and feminist literature is filled with references to the concept of **empowerment** not only as an important valid strategy for development but as a proposed solution. It is therefore important to examine the various debates and definitions pertaining to the empowerment literature in order to come up with a model which will be useful to evaluate Kenyan women's self-help groups.

This chapter will also outline the methods used in undertaking field research. My overall approach to examining and analyzing Kenyan women's self-help groups is based on feminist methods. This means that my research involves defining women as the focus

of analysis, and making women's struggles for social change more visible. It will also discuss any dilemmas encountered in the field.

Chapter Two provides a historical examination of the role of Kenyan rural women's political activism throughout the colonial period as part of the anti-colonial movement. It emphasizes the fact that although Kenyan women have contributed tremendously to the political history of Kenya, their contributions have not been adequately acknowledged. This is achieved by examining some of the protest movements in which Kenyan rural women were involved during the colonial era, from the 1920's up to and including the Mau Mau rebellion in the 1950's.

By situating women's role in the political history of the colonial era, this chapter seeks to highlight the ways rural women have contributed to Kenya's history and independence. This history also helps us to understand some of the reasons why women engage in protest moments, the various strategies which women use to struggle for their rights, and the consequences for Kenyan women resulting from their involvement in protest movements and the national struggle. This historical outlook also provides an opportunity to analyze how the force of change, such as colonialism, has been influential in changing women's position in society. This analysis proves useful in further discussions on how Kenyan women organize in response to these economic, political and social changes.

Chapter Three will provide a brief history of women's self-help groups and the influences, which have prompted them to become a major national movement in Kenya. Chapter Four will provide a detailed discussion of the data collected. The data will include a description of the area of research; a profile of some of the women who were

interviewed; a profile of the self-help groups involved in the interview process, as well as my own personal observations.

Chapter Five provides an analysis and discussion of the research. As a result of library research, interviews and personal observations I will raise the following questions: What have women learned as a result of their involvement in grassroots political structures? Have women gained new skills and self-confidence in their abilities as women, farmers and traders? Have impoverished women improved their economic, political and social circumstances as a result of their involvement in self-help groups? Are self-help groups an adequate agency for building organization and a strategy for social change, allowing poor Kenyan women to be political actors? This analysis will address these, and other important questions raised throughout the thesis.

DEVELOPING A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK.

I. DEVELOPMENT POLICIES

The issues concerning women and their roles in the development process have been increasingly examined over the years by intergovernmental, non-governmental and women's organizations to focus attention on the condition of women worldwide. Several researchers (Moser, 1989; Boserp, 1970; Rathgerber, 1990; Mosse, 1993) have shown that development planners in the 1940's and 1950's worked on the assumption that what would benefit one section of society, mainly men, would also trickle down to women. However, the ways of defining women's position in development and their actual position in development, have changed over the past four decades. This literature is important to explore, as it will outline the extent to which development policies and programs have been appropriate for meeting the gender needs of women.

Development is part of post-colonial structures and is been a term which covers a variety of different processes and activities. It is also considered to be a highly genderized process having had a different impact on women than men. Development is often seen as synonymous with wider forms of social and economic change. The question of what construes development and how to go about achieving development has been widely debated (Waylen, 1996). Definitions have ranged from whether economic growth constitutes development or whether development also includes a human factor that involves an increase in the well-being and improvement in living standards for the majority of people (Waylen, 1996; Patel, 1995; Burkey, 1993). The contribution that women can make to the success of community development is not always appreciated. According to Vickers (1997) women are often de-politicized in the development process.

Instead of being viewed as political actors with needs, interests, goals and values to determine and express for themselves, women are often seen as a “problem” (1997:17). This next section examines the impact of development policies and programs on women’s lives and women’s responses to these policies and programs. Thus, this analysis will further our understanding of the circumstances within which women do participate and have participated in political activities in the post-colonial period in order to empower themselves and to improve upon their, and their families’ living conditions.

The **Welfare Approach** introduced in the 1950s and 1960s is the earliest policy approach concerned with women in developing countries. In practice, women from vulnerable sectors were viewed primarily as mothers and caregivers and treated as recipients of food aid, family planning and other social welfare programs. This approach is based on modernization theory, one of the first theories, which influenced the role of development on third-world countries. Modernization theory, one of the more widely known traditional theoretical approaches accepted by western development theorists, was very influential during the 1950’s and 1960’s. It is based on the belief that developing societies are in the process of becoming similar to western societies (So, 1990). In its ideology that the transition from ‘traditional’ to “modern” societies was necessary, it also maintained that some of the traditional values were essential to modern society and these were maintained by women in the family (Waylen, 1996). The modernization approach also supports the western idea that women have been, to varying degrees, subordinate to men and that the formal structures of society which distribute power and authority are seen to determine the position of women (Wallace, 1991; Taplin, 1989). “This blend of liberalism also produced a view of women as closer to nature, justified a sexual division

of labour between mental (male) and physical (female) labour, and embraced a formal rather than substantive conception of equality” (Scott, 1990:5). Another criticism is that modernization theory is androcentric, in that it brought deeply held masculine and dualistic views of the world and of tradition into the public and private spheres. This version of masculine modernity has not integrated women into the development process, has not served women’s needs or improved their social position (Scott, 1990; Rathgeber, 1990; Boserup, 1970).

Thus, modernization theory has also been criticized for not recognizing the needs of women, not only in their role as social actors but in their roles as political actors. Ester Boserup’s work, “Women’s Role in Economic Development”, published in 1970, is seen as a landmark in the development of feminist critiques of development policies. It argues that processes of economic modernization marginalized women economically and socially and increased their independence on men (Waylen, 1996). The development projects that have been implemented through the welfare approach generally cater to improving women’s domestic skills such as childcare and nutrition (Waylen, 1996). During this decade the critique of the welfare approach resulted in the development of a number of alternative policy approaches to women in development.

The **Equity Approach** was introduced within the 1976-85 United Nations Women’s Decade. The United Nations was the first organization to openly recognize and discuss the importance of women’s roles in development issues as well as in economic issues. Women’s problems were put on the United Nations agenda and women’s key position in the developing process became more widely recognized. The unequal

relationships between women and men in developing societies and in economic and political spheres were challenged (Ahooja-Patel, 1995).

The Equity Approach sought to remove barriers to women's equal participation in the market and public life to be accomplished through state-led, top-down intervention such as changes in legislation, legal reforms and education programs. This approach recognized that women are active participants in the development process. Through both their productive and reproductive roles women provide a crucial, if often unacknowledged, contribution to economic growth. This approach begins with the basic assumption that economic strategies have frequently had a negative impact on women. It acknowledges that women must be brought into the development process through access to employment and the market place. It is also concerned with the inequality between women and men in both the public and private spheres of life and across socio-economic groups (Moser, 1993:63-64).

The **Anti-Poverty** approach, which emerged in the 1970's, was based on findings that women were among the poorest of the poor and on the recognition that they play a crucial role in meeting the basic needs of the family. Moser describes the anti-poverty approach as a "toned down version of equity" (1993:63). The assumption of this approach is that economic inequality between women and men is linked not to subordination, but to poverty. This approach aims to increase the employment and income generating options of low-income women through better access to productive resources. These income generation projects have been widely criticized for being under resourced, poorly planned and for increasing women's already heavy workload (Moser, 1993).

The Efficiency Approach, is one that has predominated since the 1980s debt crisis. Its purpose is to ensure that development is more efficient and effective through women's economic contribution. Women's participation is equated with equity for women. It seeks to meet practical gender needs while relying on women's reproductive, productive and community roles (Moser, 1993). It also emphasizes that unless women's potential and actual productive roles are recognized then development plans and projects would not succeed (Moser, 1993).

First World feminist academics, wanting to improve development analysis and policy, have criticized the above approaches on several counts. First, for the ways in which they homogenize women, ignoring their differences. Second, for the assumption that Third World women are viewed as passive objects of policy, not agents of change in their own right. Third, many of the policy prescriptions and projects are seen as primarily top-down, ones imposed from above (Waylen, 1993). As a result of the dissatisfaction with these approaches the Empowerment Approach is the most recent approach to have emerged. Its purpose is to empower women through greater self-reliance. It acknowledges inequalities between women and men. It also emphasizes the fact that women experience oppression differently according to race, class, colonial history and international economic order. It maintains that women have challenged oppressive structures and situations simultaneously at different levels.

The Empowerment Approach recognizes the triple role of women and seeks through bottom-up women's organizations to raise women's consciousness to challenge their subordination. It acknowledges the valuable function of different types of organizations, such as those who do direct political action and those that exchange

research and information, but this approach seeks to assist more traditional organizations to move towards greater awareness of feminist issues (Moser, 1993). In a rejection of the top-down imposition of many development schemes the focus has shifted towards bottom-up development. This entails a vibrant civil society created through grassroots collective organizing (Waylen, 1993).

A diverse range of women's organizations, movements and networks are now being viewed as potential agencies for development and women are viewed as "empowering themselves through organizations" (Moser, 1993:78). Self-help groups can be seen as another development alternative which the Empowerment Policy approach emphasizes and encourages. It is important to examine some of the characteristics of what constitutes alternative development as this approach is a useful way of understanding the development potential of self-help groups for marginalized rural and urban women in Kenya.

Another development puts the spotlight on human potential and is viewed by many authors as the only foundation for true development (Max-Neef, 1991; Burkey, 1993; Ghai, 1988).

Self-reliant participatory development is the only foundation for true development; human, political, economic and social. It is a slow process, one totally dependent on men and women themselves assisted by those who are willing to work and live among the people (Burkey, 1993:35).

It is considered development from below and involves the efforts of ordinary women and men who organize themselves in order to cope with their predicament. This form of development is based on people's values and ideas on how they see best to construct their own futures. Individuals design their own form of development on the basis of

autonomous action of community-based local or grassroots organizations (Max-Neef, 1991).

This model of development is useful for a discussion of Kenyan women's self-help groups as it outlines the dimensions which are important for human development, as well as the way in which they can be structures for political activism. Grassroots groups, which are organized by local people, can be a form of resistance to the situation in which they are considered subjects of oppression and instead present an opportunity for making changes within their lives and the lives of their communities. According to Ghai, "grassroots participatory organizations may [also] be regarded as foundations for a democratic society" (Ghai, 1988:241). Democracy is a translation of the Greek word "people's power". Esteva (1998) sees it not as a "government of the people, by the people, for the people" but "it is power in the hands of the people governing themselves." This implies having political policy in the communities. It is also the need to coordinate these independent bodies governed by the people. Self-help groups promote the democratic cause in three ways. First, in a representative democracy there is the presupposed idea that all major social and economic groups have a voice and a role in shaping national politics (Ghai, 1988). Typically, in most poor countries and in many rich ones, marginal groups often have very little voice or have a limited role in influencing government policies on social and economic matters. Collective strength is sometimes the only way to enhance the bargaining power of the disadvantaged. "Through their strengthened organizations, village communities acquire a stronger voice to hold local authorities and service providers accountable" (World Bank Group, Feb 2000).

The second way in which grassroots participatory organizations promote democratic governance is through their institutional framework. These groups are generally run in an open democratic manner by promoting dialogue, group discussion and decision making through consensus (Ghai, 1988). Third, grassroots groups aid the democratic processes in poor countries by developing the intellectual, moral, managerial and technical capabilities of their members (Ghai, 1988).

Women have organized social networks as a way to deal with the pressures of their ever-changing world. These networks allow women to join forces in solidarity to promote political activism, not only within their own local communities but also at a national level. Development is a social, cultural and economic process. It is also a political process, which involves making choices between different social and economic options. Women's organizations have an important role to play as advocates of women's causes. They must exert pressure on those politically and technically responsible for planning. This is one way in which women can contribute to national planning and policy making. Women's needs, viewpoints and contributions will then have a better chance of being taken seriously.

It is now been recognized that women play an essential role in creating and implementing alternative visions and strategies for development in the Third World. Even education and development circles that do not use a feminist frame of reference consider women's organizations as essential catalysts for women's involvement in the process of social change (Solomon, 1994). In order to have a better understanding of how participation in grassroots organizations can lead to political action it is important to present some of the feminist literature centered on understanding Third World women.

As was pointed out previously in this thesis women are often viewed as “ a single unitary category” (Waylen, 1996: 43) in which differences are often ignored. It is therefore important not to categorize all women as being the same but to acknowledge differences based on culture and history.

II. African Women Organizing

Steady (1987) discusses the need for a **Theory of African Feminism** which she defines, “as an ideology, which encompasses freedom from expression, based on political, economic, social and cultural manifestations of racial, cultural, sexual and class biases.” (1987:4) Mikell (1997) discusses how the African feminist approach differs radically from the Western forms of feminism, since it owes its origins to different dynamics than those that generated western feminism. “It has been largely shaped by African women’s resistance to Western hegemony and its legacy within African culture” (Mikell, 1997:4). The African variant of feminism has grown out of a history of colonization, a change in gender roles and a strong cultural heritage. It is concerned with “bread, butter, culture and power” (1997:4).

Steady (1987) feels that when trying to develop an appropriate framework for examining African feminism, the concepts of parallel, autonomy, communalism, and cooperation are more useful than the frameworks of individualism, competition and opposition, which Western feminism tends to use (1987:8). African women’s struggle against female subordination and inequality is often described in terms of the relationship between the “private and public spheres”. This is an important framework to discuss, as it will be useful in understanding why women’s participation in informal organizations is

often not considered to be political activism. Other concepts discussed in this section are: i) women's sphere and woman's power; ii) the change in gender relationships as a result of historical influences; iii) ideology and consciousness; iv) women's voices.

i. Women's Sphere and Women's Power: Debates on the public/private dichotomy

The debate on women's power began with the formulation of the "public/private dichotomy" by Rosaldo and Lamphere (1974). Rosaldo's original theoretical construct relates to the "universal asymmetries in the actual activities and cultural evaluation of men and women to a universal, structural opposition between domestic and public spheres" (Rosaldo & Lamphere, 1974:41). The public and private are dichotomized to define male and female experiences. The public sphere is the place in which history is made and is associated with male activity. The private sphere is reserved for female activity, which is considered to be domestic. Traditionally, the concepts of "power" have been associated with the public sphere which leaves women "invisible" in the realm of public affairs (Stacy & Price, 1981). The over-valuing of the public sphere leaves little room for more private and personal types of power and activity common to women's lives, and yet "women have special modes of power different from but not inferior to the power men yield" (Solomon, 1994: 7).

Within Africa, public and private do not necessarily have the same meaning or separation as they might have in the West. Steady (1987) argues that in African life there is an overlap, rather than opposition between the public and private realms.

One important aspect of African feminism, which is both an aspect of the coping with inimical historical processes, as well as a feature of African societies, is the overlap, rather than the dichotomy between the public/private spheres (Steady, 1987:17).

Abwunza (1997) also agrees with this argument.

To say that only domestic power relations produce value for women is inappropriate in African societies: women participate in both domestic and public spheres. Women's power is felt and enhanced through their work in the private and public domains (Abwunza, 1997:31).

In the pre-colonial times, gender relationships in Africa were based on a dual-sex system. There was complementary participation between the public and private spheres. Women's worlds not only consisted of the important roles of reproduction and child rearing but also in the more public roles of maintaining the village and the community. Women's responsibilities were carried out in both public and private spheres through a continuum of household and extra-household activities, which means the distinction between domestic and public was often difficult to make in the gender roles throughout Africa (Mikell, 1997). "Women's contribution to the economy of traditional societies demonstrates how the household and political society are linked through their activities" (Mikell, 1997:9). The influence of colonialism in the nineteenth and twentieth century produces profound changes in the lives of African women. The social, political and economic changes introduced by colonialism influenced traditional gender relationship, dual sex roles and introduced a policy of "benign female exclusion" (Mikell, 1997:16) which attempted to create the public/private dichotomy.

[W]e cannot neglect women's power, their own wills and their roles in these processes of change. Women are not merely acted upon; they are also actors. They resist, often militantly, oppressive circumstances (Abwunza, 1997:33).

How then can the debates on the public/private help in understanding women's organizational strategies? One issue is the recognition that the public/private split is real but the private realm is just as important as the public. Women's power is therefore seen to be multi-faceted and operates outside of formal, societal defined authority structures (Stamm & Ryff, 1984:3). Stamm and Ryff's definition of power is 'the ability of an individual to influence or exert control over resources, action, or social relationships, which are valued by the community or group in which she/he participates' (1984:3-4). Women's personal connections which are based on networks in the private sphere can also become the basis for most economic, social and political transactions (Solomon, 1994). Stamm and Ryff describe three means by which women's networks can be a source of power. First, women provide each other assistance through exchange of labour and resources. Second, women's "gossip" is the primary communication system in the community and has implications for social control of behavior through public opinion. "Gossip is not only about people; it communicates information about both tradition and change. It is a uniquely powerful form of communication since it not only transmits ideas, but also consolidates opinions about these ideas" (March & Taqqu, 1986:24). Third, because family and individual reputations are important for social and economic transactions, women's influence through opinion making translates into some control over the transactions (1984:30). These three means are very important as they outline the potential of the political role of self-help groups. According to Sanday (1974) an important indicator of women's status in a society is the presence or absence of female "solidarity" groups, which she defines as "females grouping together in some regular way

to protect or represent their interests, and....recognized and effectual in this activity” (Sanday, 1974:192).

Susan Rodgers (1975) also applies similar ideas about women’s power to the domain of women’s organizations. She analyses the organizations in peasant societies where the domestic unit is the most important political, economic and social unit. Women’s power in this sphere is highly recognized and extends outward to the community. (Solomon, 1994) She examines the functions of inter-household networks and found “communication” to be every important for women. Since the division of labour brings women from heterogeneous backgrounds together more readily than men, women have an opportunity to communicate with people outside their immediate community. Women gain power through their informal networks as they engage in informal trading and other types of small-scale business outside their domestic domain.

According to other authors the term “public” does not mean just one thing, as defined by western legal-rational systems. The word public means both “collectivity” and “out in the open” (Solomon, 1994:15). In societies where state structures are not well developed, informal structures exercise more authority, and this includes women’s grassroots associations. The purposes of organizations may change according to need or history. “Cross-culturally, both the line between public and private domains and the consequent definition of those domains are much more flexible than western experience would suggest” (March & Taqqu, 1986:19).

March and Taqqu have outlined three sources of “solidarity” among women in different cultures; kinship, work and residence. “These bases are widely recognized as principles for association and this fact gives associations of these types potential for

political action and effect, regardless of their formal or informal nature” (1986:25). They have established criteria for measuring the effectiveness of women’s associations based on kinship, work and residence. Two criteria on which they focus is whether or not the groups are organized in a way that allow political skills to develop and where economic resources are either acquired and/or organized. The groups are considered highly equitable where resources and decision making involvement is equally distributed among all members (1986:46). Groups that offer these two components will be highly beneficial for women.

The public/private debate has made some general conclusions that are helpful to understanding women’s organizations. First is the conclusion that each culture must be examined not only for what it has in common with others,¹ but also for what is unique about the different levels and patterns of interaction among women and men. Secondly, a given culture may have a different definition of power and women may define power differently than men. Thus, the way of seeing “women’s sphere and women’s power” can be applicable to the study of women’s organizations. This is done by recognizing public and private as concepts and emphasizing their interrelationships rather than their dichotomies (Solomon, 1994:17). Therefore the public/private lens is an important perspective to consider when analyzing women’s self-help groups as catalysts for ordinary women to become political actors.

This section on the public/private debate provides an excellent prelude into the discussion on political theory. This discussion gives the necessary background for understanding the concept of how political spaces are considered part of the public realm and why women are often ignored or considered invisible in this sphere.

ii. Gender relationships and the influence of capitalism and colonialism

The second concept to be discussed is to examine the influences of capitalism and colonialism on women's roles especially in the area of production. Colonialism's place in African history is central to an understanding of African women and their political activism. A brief examination of colonialism will help provide an understanding of the changes in women's power in Africa.

In the pre-colonial period, people relied on kinship ties, and men and women were dependent on one another for their economic well being. "Women's and men's institutions were considered interrelated rather than hierarchical and cut across both private and public sectors of life" (Solomon, 1994:18). Women and men had a greater interdependence during this era, which created a degree of autonomy and political, economic and personal equality for women. "[A]frican women in most societies have been influential political actors in informal ways, if not through formal political roles" (Gordon, 1996:251). The substantial economic status which women had was frequently a result of their central role in production. With this status often came political rights. Women usually had political control over some area of activity, such as farming, trading or household and family affairs. They also formed political institutions to decide how to rule their own affairs or to influence the affairs of men (O'Barr, 1975:3-4).

Colonial relations of domination brought profound changes to African societies, mainly linked to the spread of capitalism. These changes altered the political, social and economic systems of pre-colonial states. It introduced the phenomena of cash cropping, taxes, wage labour, and migration, as well as European ideas about women's place being relegated to the private sphere of the home. This caused women to lose economic and

political power, become burdened with the work of survival, and more alienated from production (Solomon, 1994:18). For example, in parts of Kenya during the colonial period, many people were evicted and their lands turned into commercial, white-owned farms. These farms produced cash crops for the world market, using the former owners as laborers to do the work. Women still continued to be active in agricultural production, but because they did not control the cash crops they became more economically dependent on men. The interdependent relationship between men and women, which was characteristic of pre-colonial times broke down (Waylen, 1996: 55-62). The social, political and economic changes brought about through colonial laws and policies, and the manner in which colonizers handled men's and women's access to a cash economy, diminished women's power and autonomy. Colonialism resulted in the privatization of land, to which women had no access, wage labour, and dominance in cash crops. All of these resulted in a change in gender roles in relationship to the mode of production.

Women throughout this era of colonial rule did continue to organize as they had done before to promote their economic, political and social interests, but their interests changed. They struggled and were desperate to keep or regain not just their economic and political power, but to also keep intact their ethnic and cultural values and ideologies. Consequently women often relied on informal women's groups based upon family or ethnic affiliation, to provide welfare and to generate income-producing activities. Women in traditional African societies were involved in many institutions in which they exercised authority and political power. Many women were part of councils which dealt with everyday issues, such as birth and religious duties. During the colonial era these councils

mobilized themselves when they felt their rights had been disregarded or their sphere was being invaded (Odoul, 1993:166-169).

In colonial contexts, African women also became involved in nationalist movements involving struggles for liberation from colonialism and for economic empowerment. Some of the literature on nationalism has argued that women were of secondary importance to nationalist struggles. In reality they often played important roles in challenging colonial attempts to circumscribe their traditional power and authority. Nationalist movements, which have fought for a general transformation of the social structures of a country, have provided opportunities for women to become actively involved in a public role. As we will see in Chapter Two of this thesis, throughout Kenya's history there have been many examples of women's participation in political struggles of Kenya's independence. This participation has taken the form of both public activism and defiance (O'Barr, 1975:19).

This framework provides some important insights into African women's lives. It offers a lens to see African women's relationship to economic forces on a world scale. Next this framework provides a historical view of the African situation. It addresses the importance of the effect the colonial experience had on Africa. It attempts to explain its effect on women in the breakdown of women's autonomy, the increased isolation of households, women's double day and the breakup of collective social form. All of these are realities of contemporary African women's lives. In order to have a better understanding of African women's lives, it is important to link not only how they are determined by outside forces, but also how women act to change their situation and what meaning they give to their actions. This perspective reinforces how economic change has

affected the way women organize. For many African women, the entrance of men into wage labour intensified the women's activity in petty commodity production and income generating projects (Solomon, 1994:24). One important element to look at in regards to this topic is how women's activities relate to the economic relations of society and where their place is in the mode of production.

iii. Ideology and consciousness: The possibility of resistance

The third concept recognizes worldview and social ideologies as determining factors in the maintenance of sexual hierarchy and women's position, roles, and power. In this context ideology is defined as "a set of cultural beliefs that shape people's perception of such key dimensions of the social universe as gender, class, and race" (Bourque & Warren, 1981:79). This perspective recognizes that there may be multiple ideologies about women and their activities in a given society and that some of these ideologies may be contradictory, making the analysis of gender extremely complex (Solomon, 1994).

Consciousness often reflects social ideology and is a related concept in this framework. Female consciousness is about women's experience and is involved in giving and preserving life, nurturing and sustaining. Feminist consciousness is the reflection on women's experience drawing attention to pervasive patterns of subordination, limitation, and confinement (Solomon, 1994:28). These are just two ways of thinking about women's experience. They help in recognizing alternative worldviews, rather than just one hegemonic view.

This perspective can be extremely important for understanding women not only in Africa but also in other Third World countries. One of its principal strengths is that it goes beyond gender and class. The female consciousness has the potential to politicize

everyday networks and motivate female mass action. Kaplan (1982) discusses how a female consciousness can “politicize the networks of everyday life” (1982:55) and how this can bring the private into the public domain. In some cases, the female consciousness may have stronger implications for collective action and solidarity among women than the feminist consciousness, which links rights and power within the dominant system. As this kind of collective action is more common among women in lower socio-economic classes, looking at alternative kinds of consciousness is especially important when examining women’s activities among these classes. “Thus limiting studies of collective action among women to formal unions or women in political parties minimizes the importance of “women’s culture as it extends itself through networks” (Kaplan, 1982:60). The idea of different kinds of consciousness offers a framework that can see and accept women’s different understandings of their lives and different definitions of feminism. This is important when studying different cultures such as in Africa, where a western perspective of feminism may not always apply. Using women’s consciousness and ideology is a way to examine women’s organizations and their multiple purposes. “Women’s organizations form one of the important ways in which women participate in social life and institutional structures, both materially and socially. The meaning of women’s place in society is often acted out and represented through their organizational activity” (Solomon, 1994:33). This perspective allows us to see women’s own views of their organizational activity and looks at the elements of the meanings women and society give to their collective actions.

iv. Women's voices: Their own visions

The last concept to be explored in this literature is not so much a separate viewpoint, as it is a direct outgrowth of implications of the ideology and conscious way of seeing women's lives. Much of the literature provided on women's activism is done by finding meaning in women's actions and collectivities but this last view tries to explore the importance of the meanings women give themselves. It has often been difficult for "outsiders" to know exactly how and what women are seeing and experiencing but if there is the belief that organizations help to determine women's shape and purpose, then discovering African women's meanings become essential.

Women's accounts of their experiences can provide valuable understandings for other women's groups and a tool for self-reflection by the women themselves. By opening another way of seeing, women's voices can enhance outsider's ability to work with women's groups with deeper understanding (Solomon, 1994:34).

Women's own analysis of their experiences allows the researcher to have a fuller picture of women's experiences. The study of women's organizations not only educates us, but also provides a fuller understanding of women's lives, their struggles, and their accomplishments. It is the accounts women tell of their associations that are important, not only the fact that they organize, but also how they view and talk about their groups and what the groups mean to them. This section is important to the thesis because it offers alternative insights into the various ways of looking at women's lives, the issues they struggle for, and how they organize in response to these issues. The researcher must be conscious of ideologies which reflect an ethnocentric and hegemonic viewpoint when examining cultures other than one's own.

III GENDER AND POLITICAL THEORY

The concept of “politics” as it is generally understood in most contemporary societies, denotes the exercise of power in the public realm. This view tends to locate political involvement primarily within state structures and formal political institutions, which historically have been controlled and defined by men. Women have been viewed as absent from the formal institutional politics of parties, executives and legislatures, as women’s activities have largely been associated with the so-called “private sphere” of family and home. Furthermore, women’s activities within the family and household, as well as the extra-household activities, have been assumed to be irrelevant to political theory. The political has been defined as masculine, excluding many of these activities in which women are involved (Waylen, 1996). Jill Vickers (1997) has summarized some of the characteristics of the mainstream political science paradigm that have made it difficult to focus on women. She concludes that because the paradigm focuses on activities that take place within the public sphere of official state politics, it pays little attention to any other form of political activity, including that which occurs in local communities or institutions outside of the state, where most women do most of their politics. It excludes activities that take place in the domestic sphere such as production and community management, considering them non-political (Vickers, 1997:12).

To have a thorough understanding of the extent to which women and men participate in political structures, it is important to reconstruct the definition of what is “political” in order to incorporate a variety of women’s activities. Consequently, many feminist researchers have redefined politics as an expansion from traditional definitions of “political”. Bystydzienski defines politics as “an idea which includes everyday

experiences of oppressive conditions, the recognition of the injustice of power differences, and the many and varied attempts to change power relationships at all societal levels” (Bystydzienski, 1992:4). Vicker’s definition of politics is one that “involves all activity that is aimed at changing, maintaining or restoring power relationships in a society, its communities or institutions,[And] usually involves activity undertaken within a collective or group context” (Vickers, 1997:16). These definitions refer not only to participation in government activities but also to participation in less traditionally defined political activities. These involvements may include protest and social movements, local development projects and the use of “female activities” for the attainment of women’s empowerment. (We must recognize that these activities not only involve women but that men also participate in social movements, protest struggles and local development projects. Men and women often struggle for the same ideals and do so cooperatively.)

According to Randall (1987), political science and feminism have a lot to learn from each other. Feminism has encouraged political science to pay greater and more careful attention to women, who make up more than half of the world’s population, and it can contribute to a fuller understanding of both individual political systems and of politics itself.

What a feminist political science must do is to invent a new vocabulary of politics so that it can express the specific and different ways in which women have wielded power, been an authority, practiced citizenship and understood freedom (Vickers, 1997:9).

Resulting from a reorientation of our thinking about the “political”, men and women’s participation in political structures in both the First and the Third Worlds have

recently been re-examined. In the past, men's political behavior was seen as the norm by political scientists and women's political behavior, when examined or recognized at all, was analyzed as a deviation from the male norm (Waylen, 1996:10). This analysis has produced myths and stereotypes about women as politically passive, apolitical and conservative.

Maud Eduards (1994) discusses how traditional political theory maintains that there are essential differences between women and men and that this is relevant to how women's political activism is viewed. Eduards elaborates on the concept of "agency" and how very important it is to any discussion on feminist political theory and practice. Agency is defined as "the capacity to initiate change, to commit oneself to a certain transformative course of action" (Eduards, 1994:181). All human beings will use this capacity in one way or another, to be an agent rather than a passive participant or a victim. Women are said to be closer to nature than men, with nature defined as unconscious and passive, so women are thought of as not having agency (Eduards, 1994). Feminist research has contributed to social science in acknowledging that women are agents as individuals and in collective actions, movements, and organizations (Eduards, 1994).

The most important difference between feminist and traditional political theories is that feminism, by definition, is a theory of women's agency and women's collective action; the thought being that only women, organized as women and acting on behalf of women, will work for a change of women's conditions in a way that challenges the sexual power relations, that is, male dominance (Eduards, 1994:182).

When women, in groups, are viewed as "agents of change", then women's demands for change are in principle defined as politically relevant (Eduards, 1994).

Whole areas of activity involving women become visible once the definition of the “political” is widened. The examination of women’s activism within the so-called “private sphere” illuminates their contributions to the “public sphere” and thus their participation in the world outside the home. Furthermore, the nature and scope of women’s activism suggests that the “public/private” split may not be a useful framework for understanding women’s lives. It has become clear, for example, that women use their roles as mothers or household managers as the basis for protests. Moreover many women’s activities include entering the “public sphere” and either making demands or acting collectively on a national, local or community level, as is illustrated by the tradition of women’s informal or voluntary associations. These sorts of activities can all be defined as the “politics of everyday life” and are rarely viewed by mainstream political analysts as being political (Waylen, 1996; Nelson & Chodhury, 1994).

Given these considerations it is not surprising that women’s participation in informal grassroots organizations has traditionally not been considered by political analysts to be political activity. Nelson and Chowdhury (1994:3,7) who looked at the patterns of women’s political engagement globally, found that the power and vitality of women’s political organizing were increasing everywhere. Local grassroots moments were being more accepted as indigenous political expressions of women’s interests.

Drawing on many studies done by feminist political scientists, anthropologists, geographers, sociologists and historians, Vickers has identified three major arenas in which women’s political activism occurs other than the formal institutions of official politics. First, women are active in achieving and resisting change, which affects their lives collectively within the institution of civil society. These can include unions and

churches. Second, women are active in mixed-sex movements focusing on change. Peace movements, community-development organizations and environmental groups all involve women as activists and sometimes as leaders. Finally, women have created autonomous women's organizations and movements. Some are traditional with decades of history behind them, others are more recent and often more radical (Vickers, 1997:33).

This thesis will challenge the view of the public/private dichotomy since, with a redefinition of the "political", women's activism within the co-called "private sphere" tends to be made public. For example, in many African societies where the domestic and public spheres are intertwined, women will initiate their own economic and social issues, thus becoming political actors. By looking at women's self-help groups, we can draw out from women's seemingly private activities, a public and political function that is usually not recognized as being political. Of specific concern in this thesis is the fact that the roles of Kenyan rural and urban poor women and their contribution to Kenya's political history have not been adequately acknowledged, yet women's active involvement in the informal political realms has been a part of Kenya's history. Although the acknowledgement of women's political roles is important it is essential to discuss whether or not this activism has helped to advance marginalized women socially and economically.

Women and Social Protest

Many political scholars now view social protest movements as "collective organised actions to bring about or resist change by means of various historically conditioned strategies". This view has challenged the definition of social protest as irrational, deviant

behaviour and affirms collective mobilisation by groups and individuals as a rational and political means of challenging the status quo in society (West & Blumberg, 1990:3-4).

Protest movements have traditionally been viewed as a male activity. Historically, men have been taught to be aggressive and openly political in social interactions. When men take part in protest movements their behaviour is considered to be the norm. Women across cultures have generally been perceived to be "apolitical". When women have taken part in an activity which is considered to be "political", such as protest movements, their behaviour has often been ignored, punished, misrepresented or repressed. However social scientists are now recognising that throughout history and cross-culturally, women have been active participants in social protest movements (West & Blumberg, 1990).

It has been suggested that when women are in situations where their economic, political and social position is threatened, they will engage in well-defined modes of behaviour which spill over into the public political realm. These modes of behaviour sometimes come in the form of protest movements as women struggle for independence, economic stability and autonomy. In the late phases of colonialism, nationalist movements had been important forms of collective organising. Women have participated actively in nationalist struggles for power and autonomy. More generally, an examination of protest movements provides us with an opportunity to see how women organise in response to problems within the economic and political structures of their societies. It gives us an opportunity to see how women and men join together in struggles for liberation and economic empowerment and to overcome barriers to rural, economic, political and social development (O'Barr, 1975:50).

As this discussion suggests, within recent years it has been acknowledged by political analysts and other scholars that both men and women have joined together to fight collectively around a wide spectrum of issues and goals. However, women's activism is also worthy of study in its own right. Thus it is important to examine the types of issues which draw women into social protest. Authors West and Blumberg suggest that these issues can be divided into four categories.

1. **Issues around economic survival:** Women participate in organised struggles to ensure the economic survival of their families. These issues may include labour struggles, strategies for obtaining food, jobs and housing.
2. **Nationalist or racial/ethnic issues:** Women participate in groups demanding national liberation or equality.
3. **Humanist or nurturing issues:** Women participate in movements which are centred on prison reform, education and health care.
4. **"Women's rights issues":** Women have been activists on behalf of their own rights as women and participate in groups on behalf of battered women, teen-age mothers, child brides and other such issues (West & Blumberg, 1990:13).

Women cross-culturally have worked at the grassroots level to struggle for these various issues. In many circumstances, women justify their political actions in order to clothe, feed and educate their children. Consequently the issues for which they struggle are sometimes characterised as maternal issues, or as evidence of a "female consciousness". Women emphasise their roles as wives and mothers in order to demand what is necessary for their own survival and the survival of their families and communities. Women use the roles which society has assigned to them to organise and protest for justice and human rights (Kaplan, 1997:1-9).

Also important when studying women and social protest is to ask whether or not there are consequences, either positive or negative, for women who engage in protest

movements. Feminist scholars vary in their views about the long-term effects of participation in social protest for women. On the one hand, women may suffer negative consequences from both the state and corporate authorities, and from their husbands and families. Moreover, women's involvement in protest movements does not always bring about economic, social or political gains for women. Despite their struggles to improve the conditions of their lives, their families or their communities, women may still be viewed as subordinates within the patriarchal structures of family and society. Conversely, some of the positive consequences of women's participation in social protest include women's greater sensitivity to their own subordination and the raising of their political consciousness, as well as improvements or transformations in their lives and the lives of their families and community members (Kaplan, 1997:21-24).

A cross-cultural understanding of how and why women are drawn into protest movements is important. It may expand our insight into the political nature of women's lives. It may help us to understand the diversity of strategies involved, and the reasons behind women's political actions, including the issues, which draw women into social protest, as outlined by West and Blumberg and referred to earlier. As will be discussed later in this thesis, Kenyan rural women in this research have protested primarily around issues of nationalism and economic survival. This does not mean that they do not struggle for women's rights or nurturing issues, but in the protest movements I have been studying and which have been documented, Kenyan women have given priority to those struggles which are centred around economic survival and national self-determination.

As women's political struggles focused on economic survival and national self-determination are of key significance to my thesis, I will centre my discussion in the thesis

on the nature and scope of those struggles in the Kenyan context. Examining women's activism in African societies provides us with an opportunity to analyse how the forces of change and oppression, such as those experienced by women in colonial regimes, have reduced women's political, social, and economic opportunities. As a result, women have organised themselves in response to these changes. Women work together to discover ways to improve economic, social and political conditions for themselves and their families and therefore do indeed, as suggested earlier, become drawn into social protest to ensure their, and their families', economic survival.

IV EMPOWERMENT ISSUES

Within any debate a shared understanding of the concepts is very often taken for granted, as any word can be assigned various meanings depending on the perspective of the user. The term “empowerment” has been used as a synonym for participation, for speaking out, or for meeting some basic needs. The empowerment literature is a useful tool in trying to analyze and comprehend what individual gains women have achieved as a result of their participation in grassroots organizations. It complements the literature on development and political theories, as it helps in understanding the individuality of women, their needs, their desires, and their material, social and psychological achievements, and moves from the collective to the individual. It becomes important to examine the various dimensions of the concept of empowerment. The ones discussed in this literature review include the concept of power; empowerment as meeting primary needs; participation as empowerment and empowerment as participation; and how the empowerment approach to development can be used to evaluate the level of a project.

Power

Vanessa Griffin, (1987) outlined some aspects of what empowerment meant to her. She stated that empowerment meant “adding to women’s power” and it entailed four characteristics. 1) to have control, or to gain further control, 2) having a say and being listened to, 3) being able to influence social changes and decisions affecting the whole society, 4) being recognized and respected as equal citizens and human beings with a contribution to make (Griffin, 1987:117-118).

Empowerment and the concept of power have numerous dimensions. Schuler and Rajasingham, (1992) have revealed six general categories that bring a sense of power to a

person. 1) sense of security and a vision of the future; 2) ability to earn a living; 3) ability to act effectively in the public sphere; 4) increased decision making power in the household; 5) participation in non-family solidarity groups; and 6) mobility and visibility in the community. Stromquist (1995) groups the dimensions broadly as cognitive, psychological, social, economic and political power.

Cognitive power refers to knowledge as an understanding of, and about the condition and causes of subordination (Monkman, 1998). Psychological power relates to the development of self-confidence and self-esteem, so women are able to motivate themselves into action. Positive feeling and beliefs in one's ability to act are central to having psychological power (Monkman, 1998; Friedmann, 1992). Economic power is the ability to control economic resources. Independence in controlling economic resources opens more options for addressing one's interests often serving to improve one's status in social settings (Monkman, 1998). Political power means not only having the power to vote but the power of voice and collective action, enabling the ability to analyze one's world and to organize and mobilize for social change (Monkman, 1988; Friedmann, 1992). Social power involves access to information, knowledge, skill, financial resources and the participation in social organizations (Friedmann, 1992). Friedmann stresses that women working with other women on projects can accomplish a great deal more than a single woman acting on her own (1992:116). Other authors such as Jaquette and Gordon, agree with Friedmann sharing the philosophy that networking and organization, and acting collectively tends to reinforce the process of women's social, psychological and political empowerment (Friedmann, 1992; Jaquette, 1989; Gordon; 1996).

Empowerment as meeting primary needs

According to Gordon (1996), empowerment is based on women increasing their own self-reliance and their rights to make choices that can influence change through control over political and economic resources (1996:159). This means that women must have a greater voice in shaping their societies. Moser suggests that most effective organizations are those that focus on “primary gender needs” (PGNs) such as health, employment, and basic services (1993:106-110). Friedmann has identified four main primary needs that command the most attention of women in disempowered households.

1. Time savings in the completion of household chores: solving the problems of potable water and fuel, acquiring improved cooking equipment, ready access to community facilities, day care for children, and better transportation to markets and services.
2. Improved health care.
3. Acquisition of knowledge, skill, and information relevant to traditional women’s tasks; for example, learning to read; learning how to improve personal hygiene, nutrition, and agricultural practices.
4. Expanded income opportunities from cash crops, small livestock, and artisan production, ensuring that women control their own earnings. (Friedmann, 1992:116)

Kathleen Cloud (1985) also adds to this list with needs such as: access to land, access to capital, credit and agricultural technologies. It is with these PGN’s that most poor women are concerned. Local women, through the process of collective self-organization and social mobilization, take an active part in trying to meet these needs which will give them power within the social, political and psychological aspects of their household (Friedmann, 1992:118).

Empowerment and Participation

According to Susan Holcombe (1995), participation and empowerment are linked. They are different in the definitions, but they depend on each other to give meaning and purpose. Participation represent action, or being part of an action such as the decision making process. Empowerment represents sharing control, the entitlement and the ability to participate, and to influence decisions. Participation is seen as an essential ingredient of empowerment and to be empowered means that one is participating (117). For some development projects, “empowerment is essential to participatory development” (OECD, 1995:8). These development initiatives value participation more for the qualitative benefits that it can bring to a project and the accompanying empowerment potential.

According to Oakley et al., “The relationship between participation and power is now widely accepted” (Oakley et al., 1991:10). In the past decade the idea of participation as a way of empowering rural women has gained tremendous support. It is through participation that people may become more aware of the nature of their oppression, gaining skills, knowledge, self-confidence, and a sense of power that they can bring to challenge the oppressive structures which they have identified. Projects whose primary objective is empowerment will look quite different than projects whose primary objective is efficiency. They will tend to be more bottom-up, people centered, with the participants as active agents (Burkey, 1993).

The potential for empowerment can be viewed at the individual level but also at the collective level. According to Dharm Ghai (1988), “Participation for empowerment necessitates the creation of organizations of the poor which are democratic, independent

and self-reliant” (Ghai, 1988:4). Participation is interpreted to imply a strengthening of the power of the deprived masses.

Its three main elements have been defined as “the sharing of power and scarce resources, deliberate efforts by social groups to control their own destinies and improve their living conditions, and opening up of opportunities from below” (Ghai, 1988 :218).

Here, empowerment can be seen as a transformation which occurs at the individual level or group level. Both lead to a building of strength and a gaining of power. This power can be used to attempt to attain group and individual development goals. The process of empowerment is both individual and collective. It is through involvement and participation in groups that people often develop their awareness and the ability to organize, to take action, and to bring about change. It is this building of collective strength in which poor women’s voices can be heard affecting change and becoming political actors in the process.

The Women’s Empowerment Approach

The “Women’s Empowerment Approach” was developed by Sara Longwe of Zambia (Kabira & Muthoni, 1994). “The Empowerment Approach” combines critiques of economic development theory, structures of male dominance, and the effects of colonialism on women’s capacity to provide for themselves and their children. This approach is explicitly political according to Vickers (1997), and is unpopular with governments and aid agencies. It argues that women must organize collectively to gain more representation in decision-making. It stresses women’s basic needs but maintains that equality and empowerment must receive a high priority too (1997:179). “The

empowerment approach recognizes the triple role of women and seeks through bottom up women's organizations to raise women's consciousness to challenge their subordination"

(Moser, 1993:76). The Women's Empowerment Framework has five levels of equality:

1. **Welfare:** This aims only at basic needs of women. It does not recognize or attempt to solve the underlying structural causes. This necessitates provision of welfare services. At this point women are merely passive beneficiaries of welfare benefits. **There is a zero level of empowerment, i.e. women's empowerment is absent.**
2. **Access:** The second level is essential for women to make meaningful progress. This involves equality of access to resources, such as education opportunities, land and credit. The path to empowerment is initiated when women recognize their lack of access to resources as a barrier to their growth and overall well being, and take action to address this. **When recognizing their lack of access, growth occurs.**
3. **Conscientization:** For women to take appropriate action to close gender gaps or gender inequalities there must be recognition that their problems stem from inherent structural and institutional discrimination. **This level refers to a belief gap. Empowerment means sensitization of the woman to a positive image of the self.**
4. **Participation:** This level is where women are making decisions alongside men equally. To reach this level however, mobilization is necessary. By organizing themselves and working collectively, women will be empowered to gain increased representation, which will lead, to increased empowerment and ultimately greater control. **This will occur when women mobilize themselves and are making decisions directly with men.**
5. **Control:** This is the ultimate level of equality and empowerment. Here, the balance of power between men and women is equal and neither party has dominance over the other. At this stage women and men are able to make decisions about their lives and play an active and equal role in the development process. Further, the contributions of women are fully recognized and rewarded. **Equality of control means a balance of power between women and men. (Karl, 1995:109; Vickers, 1997:179-180; Kabira & Muthoni, 1994:97-101)**

The *empowerment framework* can be a useful tool of evaluation. It has been used to assess what level of empowerment a project or program for women has achieved. It is

also applicable to measuring levels of empowerment in different sectors within the nation (Kabira & Muthoni, 1994).

This section outlined some of the considerations that are necessary for our understanding of women's involvement in political activity in the Third World. It examined some of the Third World policy approaches to women in development as well as identified the strategies women use when their needs are not being satisfied. This section also provided an important framework for understanding women's organizations from cultures other than our own. It aids in our understanding of women's sphere and women's power, which become essential to the discussion of the political activism of impoverished women.

As this thesis is exploring how grassroots organizations such as self-help groups provide an outlet for women to become political actors, it has been necessary to provide an alternative definition of what constitutes "political activity." The literature on political theory offers insight into understanding why women in the past were often regarded as not having political power. Once the definition of "political activity" is widened, then the activities of grassroots associations can be viewed as having the potential for being "political groups" that can influence change on both the local and national level.

In addition this literature focuses on the importance of what it means to have "power". This is an essential concept within any literature that examines the advancement of women. The empowerment literature is therefore useful in trying to address the following issues; the type of power women gain by participating in grassroots structures, whether or not this power helps women to make changes in their own lives and the lives of their communities, and whether or not this power encourages women to cross the

boundaries of the private into the public. These are just a few of the issues that this literature raises and are useful in the analysis of women's political action through self-help groups.

To evaluate the level of empowerment which impoverished Kenyan women gain as a result of their involvement in self-help groups, I will focus on five areas: 1) the aims and objective of the group; 2) the ability of women to control the distributions of goods, foods or services at the household level and beyond; 3) women's access to land, capital, agricultural technologies and time saving devices; 4) whether or not women see themselves as having power; 5) whether or not women see their membership in self-help groups as attributing to changes within the social, economic and political spheres of their immediate society. This evaluation will aid in the analysis of how grassroots organizations channel impoverished rural and urban women's activism into the political sphere.

The criteria, based on the literature, will be developed and used to assess the ability of self-help groups as an arena for impoverished Kenyan women to be political actors. The first criteria are presented in the model of the Women's Empowerment Framework as outlined in the empowerment literature. This model is used as a guide to assess the level of empowerment that these groups have achieved at the time this data was collected. This will enable us to analyze whether or not changes are occurring on both an individual and a collective level.

The second criteria are based on key concepts of democratic governance; including participation, leadership ability, increased decision making power, and mobility and visibility in the community, as outlined in the Another Development literature. The

third criteria are based on the concept of power which is outlined in both the political science and the empowerment literature. It includes psychological power; the development of self-confidence and self-esteem so that women are able to motivate themselves into action; social power, which includes access to information, knowledge and skills; and economic power which is the ability to earn a living by having access to resources, land, and capital as well as the ability of women to control the distribution of goods, foods and services at the household level and beyond. These criteria will aid in an evaluation of Kenyan women's self-help groups.

METHODS

My overall approach to examining and analyzing Kenyan women's self-help groups is based on a feminist methodology. By this I mean that my research involves defining women as the focus of analysis, and making visible women's struggles for social change that address activities usually considered in the private realm of household activities. The methodology is devoted to a description, analysis and interpretation of women's every day experiences. I have approached this through three different types of research: library research, open-ended interviews and personal observations. This type of research will help in an analysis of whether or not self-help groups are a vital agency for making social change therefore providing women an opportunity to become effective political actors.

An important research component is to consult written secondary sources and journal articles to examine the history of self-help groups in Kenya. The objective of the material is to develop a history of women's political involvement in protest and political action through self-help groups. From this we may understand the organizational structure of the groups, the goals and functions of groups, and the reasons why women organize self-help groups.

There are several reasons why the use of interviews with rural Kenyan women is important to this research. As indicated above, women were often ignored in traditional research in the social sciences. Making women's lives visible through interviews challenges traditional social science research and is a fundamental component of feminist research. Also collecting women's accounts of their lives offers insight into what is important to them as individuals and as a community. Feminist research, which is

foremost about women and their experiences, is devoted to a description, analysis, explanation and interpretation of women's world. Nielsen (1990) summarizes the basic epistemological principles which are important when doing feminist research and consequently, the research for this thesis.²

First of all, feminist research should acknowledge the importance of gender viewing it as a crucial influence on the network of relations encompassing the research act. This characteristic will be relevant to my research as I examine women's experiences, and try to document their voices.

Second, consciousness raising can be central to feminist research. It can incorporate the researcher's feminist consciousness into research as a source of knowledge. Consciousness raising techniques can be used to elicit data from respondents, while providing an opportune way in which to examine women's worlds. Consciousness raising also employs principles, which enable women to discuss and understand their experiences from their own viewpoints. The significance of a methodology that promotes consciousness raising is that it provides an atmosphere where women can come together to discuss ideas and opinions. This researcher tried to provide a safe and open environment where women would feel free to do this.

Third, feminist research should be designed to provide a vision of the future, as well as a structural picture of the present. This thesis will focus on the lives of poor rural Kenyan women, and try to provide a picture of the present conditions in which they exist. This thesis will also examine the strategies which Kenyan women use in order to provide a decent future for themselves and their families.

These principles should provide guidelines which enable the researcher to bring women's lives, and hence their voices, to the forefront. This creates research that challenges the invisibility of women in all social science disciplines, focusing on the contributions and accomplishment of women's lives in both the public and private spheres. This will be relevant to my research as I emphasize the importance of acknowledging rural women's contribution to Kenya's political history. Also, this research may provide an opportunity for a few Kenyan poor women, not often recognized for their contributions to society, an opportunity to share their concerns, ideas and opinions, giving them the chance to "speak out".

Another component of this research will include my own relevant observations of my experiences in Kenya while conducting the research. Many feminist researchers now recognize that including the experiences of the researcher is central to feminist research (Baker, 1996: 26). I believe that it is important to incorporate the observations of my own experience into this thesis and to acknowledge that my voice as the researcher, is an integral part of the research methodology and the written text.

The field component for this thesis occurred over a period of five weeks from June to July 2000.³ Three and a half weeks were spent in the village of Kenyatta in the Machakos district (see map, Appendix A). Members of three rural women's self-help groups were interviewed. The remaining time was spent in the capital city of Nairobi, where a group from the Mathare slum was interviewed. Although most of the interviews were done in a group setting, three individual women and one man were also interviewed.

Questions asked in the interviews are used to collect data to obtain a history of the group, the groups' goals, the organizational structure of the groups, the group

membership, why women organize self-help groups, the work that women do within the group, and if women feel that they are political actors as a result of belonging to a self-help group. (See Appendix B for interview questions) The data collected through open ended interviews will enable us to assess whether or not women's domestic activity can actually be a forum of political activity. Can self-help groups be empowering on an individual basis? Can the formation of an association, where a collective is formed to handle these private issues in a public way, create a more visible space? Is it then taken up by other activities which are also public, such as putting pressure on local decision makers for resources? By listening to women's experiences, we will have a better understanding of Kenyan women's political lives.

One method for data collection I employed took the form of a semi-structured interview. Pre-arranged times were set with each group prior to my arrival in Kenya to accommodate as many members as possible. Interviews usually took place after the women had finished their group work. Another method of gathering information was through participant observation. This included observing and taking part in the women's group's activities and attending meetings. It also included being a part of the everyday routine of these women's lives. Situations included going to the river at laundry time, accompanying women to various social functions, sharing a meal and conversation at somebody's home. In addition I was able to observe my host family as they went about their day to day activities. It was important to become involved in the daily affairs of the local women. They were most kind in devoting their time and energy to answering my questions and welcoming me into their homes and communities. An interpreter enabled

me to communicate with the people in the community and create a two-way learning experience.

I chose Kenya (and specifically Kenyatta) as the focus for my research due to my involvement with the people of this village over the past fifteen years. I first went to Kenya with a volunteer organization in the mid-1980's to teach in a rural high school. It was through this experience that I was introduced to the individual women who would later organize the self-help group, later the focus of this project. I returned on three separate occasions, always visiting the same area and people. It was during my second trip to Kenya in 1990 that I became interested in how women organize themselves in order to overcome their situation of poverty. It is my interest and admiration for the women who struggle every day to feed, clothe and educate their children that has prompted me to do this thesis on women's self-help groups in Kenya.

In summation, the use of library research, open-ended interviews and personal observations will allow me to discuss the way in which poor women struggle for social change. These forms of research can contribute to our fuller understanding of women's lives and the strategies they employ to obtain empowerment.

Dilemmas Encountered During The Research Process

There were two dilemmas faced during the research process, which are important for me to address at this point. The main one was the language barrier between myself as the researcher and the people who were participating in the research. As a result of not knowing the local dialect the interviews had to go through two translations, from English to Kamba and back to English. Consequently, it is possible that some of the meaning of the women's words have been lost in the translation.

A second possible concern or dilemma was the issue of having a man as my research assistant instead of a woman. Due to circumstances it was difficult to arrange for a local woman to accompany me for the interviews. This was mainly due to the fact that very few of the local women in the area I was staying had a working knowledge of English. When it was feasible, I did engage other women to help in the interview process.

David, my research assistant is a very good friend of mine who I have known for over fifteen years. It was David who first introduced me to his community and to the women who were interviewed for this project. David is very well respected in his community and has a general concern for the people of this area and the issues with which they struggle on a day to day basis. His personal qualities made him the logical choice for assisting me with this project. It is important to address these concerns because as a researcher engaged in a feminist methodology it is essential to acknowledge some of the issues which may act as barriers to obtaining the truth.

NOTES TO CHAPTER ONE

¹ This is an important discussion for this thesis as myself, as the researcher, is examining a culture other than my own. It is essential that I try to understand the women I am studying from a point of view which includes their definitions and ideologies.

² For more information on this topic see Joyce McCarl Nielsen. Feminist Research Methods. Boulder; Westview Press, 1990, p.71-80. Also see Pat Baker, Hearing and Writing Women's Voices. Mount Saint Vincent University, Unpublished paper 1997.

³ Although the time frame may have seemed relatively short, I felt that the five weeks was a significant amount of time to accomplish what I wanted to do for this thesis. My introduction to this area of Kenya in 1984 and continuous visits over the years provided me with the luxury of already establishing a relationship with individuals of the community. This was a major barrier overcome and is quite important when trying to establish a setting with promotes trust and respect. I did not have to go through the process of becoming established and as a result was comfortable with re-entering into the community and beginning the research.

CHAPTER TWO: KENYAN WOMEN'S INVOLVEMENT IN NATIONAL POLITICAL MOVEMENTS: THE STRUGGLE FOR INDEPENDENCE

The primary purpose of this chapter is to trace the role of Kenyan women's political activism throughout the colonial period as part of the anti-colonial movement. This is done in order to demonstrate the existence of women's political action in spite of their lack of recognition and exclusion both as colonial subjects and as women. It emphasises rural women's contributions to the country's political history and how their contributions have not been adequately acknowledged. The chapter accomplishes this by examining some of the protest movements which involved Kenyan women during the colonial period of Kenya's history. To begin with a discussion of the well-known Harry Thuku riot in the 1920's, is important because it was the first documented example of female militancy. At the time of the riot, women were not seen as political actors and very little was written about their activities and associations. This was a very significant event for its recognition of women as political persons by colonial and African leaders. This chapter will then examine some of the other protest movements in which women played a part, including the Mau Mau rebellion in the 1950's. An analysis of women's involvement during the Mau Mau helps to examine women's motivations and aspirations for their political protest during this anti-colonial struggle.

The major objective of this chapter is to highlight both the positive and negative consequences, for Kenyan rural women as a result of their involvement in the struggle for independence. This history also helps us to understand why women take part in protest movements and the various strategies which women use to struggle for their rights. This historical outlook will provide an opportunity to analyse how the forces of change, such as colonialism, have been influential in changing women's position in society. This analysis

will be constructive in further discussions on how Kenyan rural women organise themselves in response to these economic, political and social changes. It will also contribute to our understanding of women's more "public" political actions.

The Harry Thuku Riot

The interaction between Africans¹ and Europeans and the changes brought about from colonialism provided a general setting for the development of political activism in early Kenya. The riot situated in this instance was initiated as a result of the growing resistance to colonialism. To be specific, to understand the significance of the Harry Thuku riot in 1922 and why women were involved, it is necessary to provide a brief background on colonisation in Kenya. The 1880's saw the beginnings of colonialism in Kenya when the first European travellers arrived in Kenya settling in what was known as Kikuyu (the major ethnic group in Kenya) country. These first Europeans were British with interests in farming and Kenya's natural resources. The Imperial British East Africa Company monopolized the trade in Kenya during this time. With the 1890's, came the building of railways, mission activity, and European settlement in Kenya (Likimani, 1975:6-10).

Throughout this period, European demands for land and resources introduced changes to African social organisation. This would eventually lead to conflicts between Africans and Europeans, a situation that occurred not only in Kenya but in other parts of Africa as well. The colonial administrators appropriated land and provided subsidies for the white settlers in areas of high agricultural potential. They instituted a transport infrastructure to facilitate trade. This was detrimental to the indigenous Kenyan people, who lost access to land and consequently their agricultural and pastoral way of life.

The land issue affected women directly, quickly bringing them into the ranks of radical young nationalists. The pre-colonial social contract vested land in men but women were the major cultivators. They controlled the disposition of food, determining what was to be consumed, stored, or traded. When the British expropriated and sold or gifted the most productive land to European males, women were thrown into more intense competition for cultivation rights in the reserves. This forced a shift in the labor patterns for women and reversed traditional patterns and gender roles. Where women once had been the primary farmers, now large numbers of men became farm workers. Women had the double burden of cultivating the traditional subsistence crops and serving as wage labourers. Therefore, economic change for women was a result of their loss of control over the productive process and their organised struggle to regain it (Presley, 1992; Robertson, 1997).

The colonial administrators demanded low cost labour from the local people for the white settlers, enforced taxes, and established a public/private distinction in which men were viewed as breadwinners and women as domestic helpmates. This public/private dichotomy did not exist to the same degree in pre-colonial times; it was only with the influence of colonialism that it developed in any substantial way. The colonial state not only brought changes to the economic and political spheres of Kenya, but also to the social structure of its people. Resistance by many African peoples to the intrusion of British power at the end of the nineteenth century was an early expression of nationalism in Kenya (Nelson & Chowdury 1994: 416-417).

During the 1920's, African political associations began to be organized in the capital city of Nairobi. This was done to resist the European attempts to cut African wages, to seek improvements in education, and to remove the colour barrier. In the rural areas, protest

focused on land alienation by the colonial settlers and the poor conditions of agricultural labour for Africans. As the colonial state consolidated itself, protests started in the growing urban centres.

In this context, one of the first documented occurrences of women's collective action was the Harry Thuku massacre in Nairobi. Harry Thuku was a young Kikuyu clerk who co-founded one of Kenya's first political associations in the 1920's, The East African Association. Thuku toured the rural areas speaking to large and enthusiastic crowds, articulating the people's grievances against the colonial government and mobilising popular support. The East African Association spoke out against increased taxation, the lack of title deeds for African lands, the reduction of African wages by one-third, and Kipande (fingerprint registration and work history in the terms of a pass). Thuku and the association also stood up for women, as he and others were opposed to the forcible removal of young girls from their homes for employment on settler plantations. Young women were routinely being used as workers for picking coffee. They and their parents were deeply opposed to the practice of the young women being taken for labourers, considering the women to be working as slaves. Women labourers were demoralised and threatened by physical brutality. The subject of female labour abuse was brought to the attention of many people through the efforts of Harry Thuku. The Kikuyu women were aware and supportive of the activity of the East Africa Association. They credited it and Harry Thuku for speaking out on their behalf and with forcing the government to stop the abuses (Rosberg, 1970; O'Barr, 1987).

Concerned with the continuous growing support for Thuku, by fellow Africans, the British government arrested him on March 14, 1922. An estimated crowd of seven to eight

thousand people, including approximately two hundred women from the urban and rural areas, gathered outside the police station where Thuku was held, demanding his release. Negotiations for his release between the colonial secretary and some male African leaders were not successful and the authorities asked the crowd to disperse. The crowd was angry and the women in particular expressed their dissatisfaction. The women were angry with the male African leaders for not arriving at a compromise to free Thuku and felt that their leaders had surrendered to the British. To emphasise the extent of female displeasure with both colonial and African male leadership, one of the women, Mary Nyanjiru, presented the traditional insult, *Guturama*.

Mary Muthoni Nyanjiru leapt to her feet, pulled her dress right up over her shoulders and shouted to the men: "You take my dress and give me your trousers. You men are cowards. What are you waiting for? Our leader is in there. Lets get him." The hundreds of women trilled their *ngemi* (traditional high-pitched cry) in approbation and from that moment on trouble was inevitable. Mary and others pushed on until the bayonets and rifles were pricking their throats, and then the firing started. Mary was the first to die (Rosberg, 1970:51).

Mary Muthoni Nyanjiru was the first woman to be killed in a politically motivated challenge to the British. Her actions have also passed into local lore as the beginning of women's political involvement. An eyewitness to the incident also estimated that fifty six people were killed and many others arrested (Presley, 1992:112).

Guturama, the act of exposing a woman's genitals to an offending party was a quite common challenge women issued towards men. This act, an expression of feelings of anger, frustration or revenge, was the strongest challenge that women could direct towards men. By challenging men to give up their trousers, women were indicating that they did not recognise the authority of the men they had insulted. In the situation of Harry Thuku,

Nyanjiru's actions implied that men had proven incapable of dealing with the situation and that women should take over to free Thuku (McDonald, 1997:80-83).

The efforts of the women in the Harry Thuku incident, although not successful in releasing Thuku, provided a strong testimony to the political dynamism of women. Many witnesses who testified at the inquest, regarding the riot, were impressed with the women's unity and courage. They had refused to follow an order from their leaders and the colonial authority and chose open defiance to support their stance.

Although this incident of female militancy is the only one documented in the literature, women's resistance towards gender-based oppression existed in other forms. This included many demonstrations of artistic expression, such as songs and dances. One woman, ninety-year old Lucy Nymabura remembers how in the 1920's and 1930's they sang resistance songs such as *Muthirigu* and *Kanyegenyuri* (Kabira & Nzioki, 1993:30). These were songs that mocked the whites for their cultural, economic and political imperialism. Although *Murthirigu* was sung by both men and women, *Kanyegenyuri* was danced by women alone using songs to ridicule and mock the colonialists and express their support for freedom fighters (Kabira & Nzioki, 1993: 30).

Women's Protest Movements in the 1940's and 1950's.

Several other historical instances demonstrate how rural African Kenyan women gathered collectively to protect their interests throughout the colonial period. Although only presented in the barest details, these incidents do suggest that women used their power to demonstrate when they felt their rights had been disregarded. Women who felt they were being taken advantage of did activities like organise work stoppages and strikes. The work

stoppages involved staying away from work and sometimes forming picket lines outside the gates of estates. They were distinct from strikes as the stoppages were spontaneous, of short duration, and did not spread to other industries. For example in 1947, the Kikuyu women in Kiambo refused to pick coffee because they felt they were being underpaid. Women picketed several roads and a number of women leaders were apprehended for questioning. Although these stoppages were well co-ordinated at the local level with an efficient method of communicating grievances, women's labour protest never became formally linked to more organised movements such as the trade union movement in Kenya (Presley, 1992). "Even though women lacked the linkages to the more formal male organisations, women's protest reveals the beginning of a rural female proletariat collective consciousness" (Presley, 1992:69). Women did more than recognise the commonality of their work conditions, they planned demonstrations aimed at improving their rate of pay. "This was all done without the formal aid of male dominated political associations and trade unions" (Presley, 1992:69).

Other cases of women's protest during the colonial era include an incident in 1938 when a number of Ndia women went to Nairobi to protest against forced labour on erosion control measures. At the same time over two thousand Kamba women protested against forced destocking of cattle. In 1939, Igembe women looted a shop when they felt that the Asian owner was not giving them a fair price for produce (Robertson, 1997:245). In 1947 Kikuyu women protested against forced labour of terracing work. The women claimed that the forced labour kept them away from their *shambas* and domestic work, so they laid down their tools in protest, despite threats by the colonial administrative (Kabira & Nzioki, 1993: 32-33).

Women's rebellion in the rural areas took a more violent turn in 1951 as the nationalist movement and protest grew. The government ordered massive inoculation of animals in the area of Muranga in order to control rinderpest. The cattle began to die as a result of the inoculations and anti-inoculation demonstrations followed. Hundreds of women from Muranga stormed the inoculation centres, burning down the cattle pens and chasing away the inoculation inspectors. Over five hundred women were arrested and many others injured. The main reason for this action was based on the women's concern that the death of the cattle would result in no milk for their children. The women felt that they could not sit idly by and let the government destroy their cattle. It was important for them to demonstrate their concerns. (McDonald, 1997:82-85) The women's view of this riot is well captured in the following song:

We women of Muranga were arrested for refusing
to have our cattle poisoned. And because we
rejected such colonial laws we were thrown into
prison cells and our children were wailing because
they had no milk to drink.

Chorus

We beseech you, our Ngai (God) Take
us away from this slavery

We were taken to Nairobi after being
finger-printed and on our way they kept asking us,
Do you belong to this conspiracy, Fighting for
Liberation? and our children continued wailing
because they had no milk to drink (McDonald, 1997:85).

These are some of the documented incidents which illustrate the existence of rural women's collective activism during the colonial period. "Poor women tended to participate more because the burden of forced labour fell more heavily upon them" (Robertson,

1997:246). It is apparent that rural Kenyan women took a political stance on issues, which threatened their economic survival and the loss of their basic rights and the rights of their children. Although much of women's protest is spontaneous and not necessarily linked to other formal organisations it shows that women took initiative on their own without the influence of men. Kenyan women have a history of protest over issues concerned with their labour, agricultural well being, and the eradication of their traditional and cultural ways. Women were affected in different ways by the colonial regime than men. Much of their workload was increased with the additional agricultural work and forced labour on roads and farms. "That the realm of work was the first to produce protests of any magnitude and that women organised these protests is logical" (Robertson, 1997:246).

It was during the nationalist struggle of the Mau Mau rebellion that women made the greatest impact on Kenya's political history. Here they served as spies, soldiers, organizers and recruiters. The role of women, especially the Kikuyu, Embu and Meru women, was quite crucial for the survival of Mau Mau fighters. The women as a group contributed to the Mau Mau freedom struggle due to their belief in the struggle and the fact that the fighters were either husbands or children. The women were the basic source of subsistence for the freedom fighters, branded as bandits, criminals and terrorists, and sought after by the security forces. Being on the run most of the time, the fighters were unable to produce their own food. As a result, they depended solely on food supplies from women in the villages. The village women provided shelter to freedom fighters whenever their lives were in danger. Women were also used as couriers. Under the watchful eyes of the security forces and homeguards, women smuggled guns, clothing, medicine, and other provisions to the freedom fighters. In urban centres, women were used as spies. They spied on security

forces and colonial administrators from whom they obtained information on military plans and operations for the freedom fighters (Kabiria & Nzioki, 1993: 33-35). Women also assumed leadership roles in managing resources and people, and male nationalists viewed women as allies, this will be demonstrated in the following discussion on the Mau Mau.

Kenyan Struggles for Independence: The Mau Mau Rebellion, 1952-1960.

The Mau Mau movement is significant to Kenya's history, as it was the first major struggle for Kenya's independence from British colonial rule. Scholars have described and analysed the movement at length because it provides a wonderful history of a people seeking political and cultural freedom.

Even though Mau Mau has been studied extensively, its more recent analysis centres upon the impact of the rebellion on women and women's impact on the rebellion. Earlier studies of the Mau Mau tended to exclude women and their contribution not only to the rebellion but to Kenya's nationalism. When women's activities have been described in the literature, they were either portrayed as victims of Mau Mau, as prostitutes, or as women forced to take the oath of allegiance to the Mau Mau (Oduol, 1993). These views suggested that women were secondary actors in the struggle for Kenya's independence. It has been only recently, with the growth in feminist scholarship, that the literature pertaining to women's active involvement in Kenya's struggle for independence is becoming visible and recognised. Current literature now discusses the critical roles women had in the Mau Mau rebellion and the reasons why women joined the movement.

The Mau Mau refers to events beginning in the late 1940's and ending with independence in 1963. In order to understand the context in which the Mau Mau rebellion

occurred, I provide here a brief synopsis of the events surrounding the revolt. In 1948 and 1949, rural and urban unrest increased as Africans became increasingly dissatisfied with the colonial government. For many Africans 1950 was a year of desperation, as more of their land was taken over by the European settlers. Under these circumstances the Mau Mau became their last hope. The movement was a nationalist struggle, which occurred when Kikuyu peasants (the main ethnic group involved in the Mau Mau) revolted against the economic, political and cultural conditions placed upon them by the British colonialists. It was largely a grassroots movement that drew its supporters from poor peasants, urban proletarians, squatters and the unemployed. The increasing presence of the European settler community, in combination with the establishment of a colonial government that relied on British political structures, created a racially structured society in which the Europeans occupied a dominant and privileged position. The government had enacted new legislation in 1912 and 1913 aimed at forcing Africans into the labour market so they could not become self-sufficient. Increasing land alienation, economic frustration, poverty and the continual demeaning of African pride contributed to the growth of the nationalist movement and opposition to colonialism. The African Kenyan people resisted colonial economic and political structures as they began demanding control of themselves, their economy and their future (Likimani, 1985).

Colonial rule had profound consequences for African women. Kenyan rural women lost their economic power due to the introduction of various programs that were all aimed at "man the farmer". The provision of western-style education was also gender biased, as men studied skills necessary for public work, while women learned domestic service. Men took on new roles to aid them in finding alternative employment, whereas women were

economically marginalized. Subsistence farming normally performed by rural women was declining, and women were forced to do communal labour. The effects of land alienation, taxation, lack of adequate education, and women's exclusion from politics drew women from both the urban and rural areas, particularly the Kikuyu, Embu and Meru ethnic groups, to the nationalist ideology.

During the early stages of the Mau Mau revolt, women were allocated domestic chores such as cooking, gathering firewood and cleaning firearms. While these roles were essential to the movement, women gradually gained responsibilities as leaders and warriors. Women performed tasks such as recruitment of guerrillas and arranging for candidates to take the oaths, an activity practised among the Mau Mau². Their work included intimidating the candidates in order to make sure that they did not betray the struggle. Women were also sought as spies and acted as go-betweens while carrying food and firearms. Women joined the fighters in the forest and served in combat alongside men. Consequently, the European settlers worried not only about the African men and their violence, but were also concerned about the African women, as their organisational skills and their support were difficult to eliminate.

Although women comprised only about five per cent of the total guerrilla army, there was a very large "civilian army" of dedicated women vital to the movement. Women who did join the guerrilla fighters in the forest overcame the stereotyped roles that were prescribed for them, and operated beyond the limits set by society. Also by joining the guerrillas, "women challenged formal British domination and the patriarchal traditional political authority in a society where overt political power and decision making processes regarding the public issues were largely dominated by men" (Odoul, 1993:171).

Women's high visibility in the movement is indicated by their mention in colonial records. For example, before the government declared the state of emergency in 1952 there was very little female crime, so no prison facilities had been built for women. Women's activism caused the government to respond by arresting and interrogating women. Women were treated no differently than men, as they were forced to endure physical punishment, forced labour and inadequate food and clothing.

The fact that women were a significant portion of the prison population and that they were not accorded any special treatment because of gender is little known and rarely mentioned in the historiography of Mau Mau, although these facts were not hidden from public view during the emergency (McDonald, 1987:89).

There are also documented examples of women holding senior positions in the military ranks of the forest fighters, such as Marshall General Muthoni, who led the Mau Mau warriors during battles and was greatly respected for her character and strength. Wanjiru Nyamatu, was referred to as "Nyina Wa Anake" (the mother of senior warriors). She was responsible for the recruitment of new guerrillas, the administration of oathing ceremonies and acted as a judge in the Mau Mau courts which passed sentences for anti-Mau Mau crimes, a position previously considered a male domain. Two other women worthy of mention are Wagiri-Njoroge, who led the Mau Mau guerrillas in the killing of Europeans for seven months before she was finally captured, and Me Katilili, who frequently addressed large crowds at oathing ceremonies, belittling the British colonists and calling them cowards (McDonald, 1997; Odoul, 1993).

Women's political abilities and their leadership qualities were recognised in African comments that stated there was no difference between a male or female leader. Women were included in the decision-making processes of the guerrilla councils and their

contributions were encouraged. Ruth Gathoni, a former freedom fighter, summarises what the Mau Mau did for women.

Mau Mau created joint women and men councils. Women's voices were heard during Mau Mau. Earlier women only heard what had been decided. They did not help to make decisions (McDonald, 1987:89).

Women played a very important role in the Mau Mau rebellion by participating in various capacities to make independence a reality. Women's political abilities were recognized during this time period as women became leaders in their struggle for freedom. Not only did the movement, as well as other previous demonstrations, show the power and strength of women, but it was demonstrated that women can mobilize to serve a political and social purpose when they feel their rights have been disregarded. The Mau Mau experience taught women the skills and confidence required to participate successfully in contemporary politics. It also encouraged them to organize themselves in regard to social and economic concerns. This nationalist movement was clearly an empowering episode in the history of rural Kenyan women's activism.

Women's contributions to the Mau Mau rebellion were important. Women moved beyond their roles as mothers and wives, becoming political actors in what was traditionally considered a male domain, overstepping their bounds of the private sphere of the home to which the colonial government had consigned women as domestic help mates. Women contributed their skills, their intelligence, and their dedication to a cause, which would eventually lead their country to independence.

The nationalist movement as epitomised in the Mau Mau rebellion was a dramatic event, and it opened new opportunities for women. Women's participation in the nationalist movement forced the government's attention to the necessity of using some of its resources to develop programs to serve women and their needs. As a result, formal organizations such

as Maendeleo Ya Wanawake were established. Women's collectives, especially those involving self-help, business, or financial projects were also inspired by the Mau Mau (McDonald, 1987; Presley, 1993). "The extent of the ordinary women's entry into traditionally male roles as heads of families, business women, political brokers and other roles are testimony to the landmark of Mau Mau women" (McDonald, 1987:96).

It is important however, not to ignore some of the constraints and negative impacts which the Mau Mau rebellion may have exerted on women's social position. At the end of the colonial period, with its economic, political and cultural transformations, many Kenyan rural women were still faced with a double set of disadvantages. Families were left in poverty as the rebellion left women widowed and children orphaned. Accesses to the resources of the new society were decidedly more limited for women than they were for men. The nationalist movement was an empowering episode in the history of Kenya's women, but it did not resolve many of the issues which Kenyan women faced in the past and still face today, poverty, oppression, and their lack of recognition in the political and economic realms. Although women were recognized for their political activism during the anti-colonial struggle this did not carry through into greater gains in women's formal political involvement in the institutional politics of the nation.

Independence was not forthcoming with noticeable changes for Kenyan women economically, politically or socially. The new government had clearly indicated in its new constitution "that political participation by men and women should be on equal terms, including standing for elective office" (Oduol, 1993:173). Yet this did not result in any changes for women as the government failed to involve them on an equal basis with the men in the country's economic, political and social institutions. The early years of

independence up to 1971 indicate no major landmarks in women's involvement in formal politics. It wasn't until the 1970's to the early 80's that women began serving in Parliament, as five women are elected and two more nominated. Although women constitute fifty two per cent of the total population, and sixty per cent of the electorate an insignificant number of them have been elected into parliament. As of 1998, six out of a total of one hundred and eighty eight sitting members were involved as elected women parliamentarians (AAWORD, 1998:2).³

Male domination and patriarchy continue to manifest in all spheres of life but more obviously in the political field. Some of the other factors that constrain women in their efforts to actively participate in formal politics are: the triple-roles they play as producers, maintainers and reproducers; the emergence of violence in Kenyan politics; lack of resources; and lack of formal education (AAWORD, 1998).

Although women are faced by many constraints when it comes to participating in formal political institutions, they still manage to actively involve themselves in informal grassroots political groups. While not well represented in formal politics, women are very active in other spheres, especially when we expand the definition of what is considered political activity. "Given their near exclusion from the formal political machinery, women become politically engaged through women's organizations" (Nelson & Chowdhury, 1994:416). Kenyan women are politically active at the grass-roots level, where institutionalized male political machinery is weaker. Chapter Three explores women's "everyday forms of resistance". It uncovers the constraints that act as barriers to women's social, economic and political advancement.

Kenyan women are aware of their disadvantaged socio-economic position on the macro as well as micro levels. The organizations that women are forming act as vehicles for increased productivity and channels of expressing, conveying and lobbying for their views and interests. Kenyan women understand clearly that individuals working together as a group can accomplish what otherwise would be impossible (Inter- Church Coalition on Africa, 1990:4 & 5). Researchers such as Wacker (1994) and Thomas-Slater (1995) have found that women's groups are an important channel for women who are often not represented within the formal decision-making institutions, as it allows them to indirectly influence decision makers through their women's groups. "Women's groups increasingly provide forums for women to test and encourage their public voices with their respective communities. In these ways women are asserting themselves in the male-dominated power structures" (Thomas-Slater, 1995:101).

NOTES TO CHAPTER TWO

¹ It is important to note for the purpose of this thesis that the term African will refer to those Kenyans of different ethnic groups who are of African Descent. The term Kenyan by itself is insufficient as it incorporates many other ethnic groups such as those of Asian and European descent.

² In many African societies, the taking of an oath was both a sacred and a social event. It was done before witnesses with the purpose of renewing or clarifying an individual's position with a group and the groups' values and norms. By binding a person to the values of a group, the oath became an important factor in establishing social solidarity. The use of oaths in African politics served not only the function of building social solidarity but also of raising the level of political commitment. The oaths were therefore used during the Mau Mau by those supporters who wanted to renew their loyalty to the nationalist cause. Oaths were taken by the freedom fighters as an instrument through which to sustain morale during an increasingly difficult situation (Rosberg, 1970:244-249).

³ AAWORD is the association of African Women for Research and Development located in Nairobi. AAWORD is a forum for African women researchers in development. Their objective is to improve the status and quality of life in general through women. The association published a book, which presents profiles of women candidates in the 1997 general election. The book contains interviews of 93 candidates.

CHAPTER THREE

WOMEN'S GROUPS IN KENYA: THE MOVE FROM COLONIALISM TO THE POSTCOLONIAL PERIOD.

Historical Background of Women's Mobilization

For women in Kenya, collective action is not a new concept, but it has flourished in the post-independence period. Women's self-help groups, as organizations can be traced back to pre-colonial times, when women come together in groups to assist one another in specific tasks or work projects (Khasiani & Njiro, 1993). In pre colonial times they helped each other organize agricultural work groups, child support networks, and social welfare activities to cope with their socially assigned work and family responsibilities. These groups tended to be informal and were formed by women who had common problems and whose solution needed group effort (Malombe, 2000) These groups were based on the traditional division of labour that assigned most of the day-to-day responsibility for food production to women. Women would gather in small groups to cultivate and harvest each other's crops, moving from one farm to the other until the work was done. This system relieved some of the burdens of an increased workload, time constraints, as well as providing extra labour during peak agricultural seasons, such as harvest time. By working together, women were able to make their labor more efficient and productive (Malombe, 2000:4-5).

During the colonial period, just before the Second World War, women's groups became more formalized as efforts sprang up to improve Africans' standard of living. Through the efforts of European women, small centers were established in rural areas to teach African women and men to spin and weave cloth. Women and girls were making socks, pullovers and blankets that were necessary and important contributions to their

families. One important function of these centers or clubs was to provide a forum for social interaction and a place to exchange ideas among women. The clubs also provided practical and informal education so that new ideas in agriculture and health could be introduced to the communities. Furthermore, colonial officials saw the clubs as a means of helping to produce better housewives and mothers, thereby promoting a stable social and political environment and further entrenching women's roles within the private sphere of the home (Chitere, 1988:50-56).

The Maendeleo Ya Wanawake Organization

Within Kenya, women's more formal organizations have been established long before independence. The *Maendeleo Ya Wanawake* Organization (MYW, Swahili for "progress for women") was one of the first women's groups formed during the pre-independence struggles and was supported financially by the Kenyan government. It was organized by a small group of European women in 1952, under the auspices of the colonial government to raise Kenyan living standards by improving the situation for rural women. The group was influential in starting literacy class, day-care and encouraging self-help for women. The organization was not only responsible for bringing individual women together, but it also functioned as a support group, which provided counsel and instruction for local self-help groups. The origins of *Maendeleo* are not unique. Like women's organizations elsewhere in the Third world, it was influenced by the post-World War II colonial social development policies. At the Cambridge conference of 1948 called, "The Encouragement of Initiative in African Society", a new concept of development emphasising Community Development emerged. The Secretary of state for the Colonies adopted the recommendation of the Cambridge conference and defined community development as "a

movement designed to promote better living for the whole community with the active participation and if possible, on the initiative of the community” (Khasiani & Njiro, 1993:95). The *MYW* would be a part of this movement and eventually would become the largest voluntary women’s association in Kenya. It has survived over forty years of trials and tribulations and still remains a vital component of Kenyan women’s participation in formalised and grassroots organisations. The *MYW* is important to examine for the main reason that it has extensive countryside networks extending between its national headquarters in Nairobi and local villages, thereby including grassroots women.

European women started the *MYW* organization, but it was not long before African women became totally immersed in the organisation. By 1955 Kenyan women became actively involved as leaders, since the community development policy of the colonial government emphasised that the success of the *MYW* organization depended primarily on African women leaders. Also by 1955, there were over 400 African women’s clubs in Kenya with a membership of over 40,000. All of these clubs were under the auspices of the *MYW* movement which was sponsored by the government (Khasiani & Njiro, 1993; Wipper, 1975).

The *MYW* organization received a fair amount of resistance during this period. From one direction, colonial settlers demonstrated extreme opposition to the education of Africans. This was because many African women were squatters on or near colonial farms and the colonialists felt that the ignorance of the African women was a great advantage in terms of having an available supply of cheap labour. From another direction, there was resistance from the African population, most among the Kikuyu tribe who felt that the colonial authorities were using *MYW* organization as a tool to suppress the efforts of Mau

Mau (Khasiani & Njiro; Aubrey, 1997). During the Mau Mau uprising, the aim of the MYW was to divert women's attention from the revolt to home and community improvement activities. In the rural villages, members of the organization were involved in distributing food to families and caring for children of missing parents. The MYW organization also acted in close alliance with the colonial government during the Mau Mau rebellion; the organization would later be viewed by some scholars as the government's way of controlling and domesticating women.

Within the national historical context the "women's clubs" are a reflection of one of the ways in which African women were to be "domesticated" while being displaced from agricultural production (Wallace, 1991: 246).

It seems clear that when the colonial government acknowledged the determination of the Kenyan people to achieve independence, they realized that gender solidarity would be of benefit to the government if they were to maintain control in Kenya. Training African women to take leadership roles in welfare issues would hopefully divert women from taking part in the protest struggle (Khasiani & Njiro, 1993).

The *MYW* organization was considered successful because of its conservative ideology, which did not challenge Kenya's patriarchy. The organization did not make radical demands for women's rights but concentrated on what was considered "home making" issues, such as housing allowances for women, day care and handicrafts. Fundamentally, *MYW* was a welfare and development organization. It gained attention and respect as a "women's organization" from the state because of its apolitical, subtle and stereotypical feminine approach as opposed to a more up front approach. *MYW* organization was also successful because it did not discriminate against race or tribe. All ethnic groups,

African, European and Asian women were part of the organization, although African women made up a larger proportion of the organization's membership (Aubrey, 1997).

When *MYW* organization was first organized, its main purpose was to improve the economic standing for women. During the period from 1971-1984, the *MYW* functioned as a welfare and development organization whose focus was on nation building and development. In the 1990's the focus is no longer on nation building but is still on improving the economic conditions for women. Its role in development was and still is to assist women in Kenya. It established four national programs with the help of foreign donors. These programs are geared towards improving the health of women and children. The *MYW* organization is also interested in developing leadership for women, improving their living standards and voicing women's concerns. It is also aimed at strengthening women's participation in rural community development projects as well as being involved in social justice for women and speaking out on their behalf.

The *MYW* has been viewed as an organization that was able to voice the concerns and aspirations of women. It was the first large-scale women's organization, which publicly spoke out for women's needs. The organization was not only responsible for bringing individual women together, but it also functioned as a support group, which provided counsel and instruction for local self-help groups. Rural women responded very quickly to the *MYW* organization, as it gave them an opportunity to form their own associations in which to exchange ideas and promote their common interests. The *MYW* has been very successful in the organizing of women into self-help groups; such as women's groups and women's group programs have therefore come to be viewed as a key to integrating women

in development programs (Chitere, 1988; Khasiani, 1993; Aubrey, 1997). One Kenyan woman describes the usefulness of the MYW and what the organization did for her.

If it was not for *Maendeleo* — my husband died a long time ago — I could not have built these houses. Now I am self-reliant. All of this compound is mine. The buildings are rented to others. I make all of this from MYW. It is not possible for one individual to do the work. We must come together in a group and exchange ideas (Wipper, 1975:111).

In the immediate post-independence era, women's groups became much more interested in development projects. When Kenya attained independence in 1963, women realised that political independence would not necessarily mean economic gains for themselves and their families. In the early years of independence the Kenyan government encouraged self-help action by rural people as part of their development strategy. Co-operative work on communal projects had been the most characteristic form of self-help in Kenya and is called *Harambee* (Winnans, 1977). (See below) Women's efforts were more focused on self-help activities and therefore a rapid expansion of self-help groups was taking place. At the local level, the activities of rural women groups were co-ordinated by the *MYW* organization. The *MYW* and rural women's self-help groups were more concerned with income-generating schemes because they felt this was the only way women could achieve some economic independence (Khasiani & Njiro, 1993; Chitere, 1988).

The Harambee Movement

Local self-help development efforts, also known as *Harambee*, (The Swahili term for "let's pull together") have been encouraged by the Kenyan government since independence. After independence, when aspirations for development and improved living conditions were much higher than the economic capacity of the new central government a

call for *Harambee* was made. The movement had some limited success in the first three years, but from 1967 onward it really gained momentum (Monsted, 1978). The basis for these projects was, that the local community should raise money and provide communal labour for new projects such as schools, health centres, water projects, bridges, rural access roads, churches, etc.

The concept of *Harambee* became a national slogan and a motto in June of 1963 by the new Kenyan president, Jomo Kenyatta following the electoral victory of his party in May 1963. On that occasion he issued a call for unity and joint work to build the nation in the spirit of *Harambee*. The word has since assumed great ideological significance and is spoken repeatedly on political occasions; *Harambee* speeches have been featured at every *Madaraka* (independence) Day celebration since 1963 and it is the only word appearing on the national coat of arms. It is also used in the discussion of Kenya's economic and social development and is an integral part of Kenya's political life (Winans & Haugerud, 1977).

Since 1978, when Daniel Arap Moi became president of Kenya, the term *Harambee* has been used more broadly to identify not only small-scale, local projects, but also nationwide development projects. The central values of the approach which has been repeatedly articulated not only by administrative officers and community development workers, but also by politicians include: local initiatives, use of locally mobilised resources, local leadership and indigenous legitimising principles (Mbithi & Rasmusson, 1977; Mutiso, 1975).

Harambee is a grassroots form of social exchange of labour and mutual assistance. It was and still is quite relevant in the rural areas and is applied in day to day life activities such as collective weeding, bush clearing, harvesting and fund raising (Thomas, 1994;

Mbithi, 1997). People contribute cash, labour and material as well as their management skills to organise and operate these projects. The concept of *Harambee* is one, which denotes community and collective self-reliance.

[s]elf-help participation rates by rural people [are] an affirmation of their solidarity in opposition to the leadership of the nation as a means to build a new political base among people with indigenous values instead of the metropolitan values of the high status leadership (Winans & Haugerud, 1977:336).

The post-independence period witnessed the emergence of more self-help groups for women, as they realised that political independence in the country did not automatically bring about an improvement in their economic, social or political position. The history of *Harambee* groups in Kenya is the history of the mobilisation of rural peasants to improve their own infrastructure. It is also the history of how women's initiative and labour made possible the success of these projects (Monsted, 1978). The ideology of *Harambee* has been a powerful tool for women's assertion of control over their labour and earnings. *Harambee* has been influential in creating women's self-help groups as a means to empower women politically and economically within the community (Gordon, 1996; Khasiani & Njiro, 1993). Poor peasant rural women, who are so frequently neglected by government and development agencies, form these groups. Self help groups are the "basic strategies employed by women to cope collectively with the problems and opportunities of social and economic change" (Stamp, 1986:33).

Self Help Groups

Although the main objective of self-help groups is to assist women to improve their living conditions and becoming self-reliant, women also take part in activities and projects

aimed at improving the environment and the country. Projects such as tree planting, forest conservation, water projects and the construction of roads and schools are just some of the activities in which women take part on a national scale. Other community level projects include various co-operatives such as agriculture, fishing and home crafts. It is the concept of *Harambee* which highlights what people can do together in their communities without waiting for the government to initiate projects (Chitere, 1988; Khasiani, 1993).

Women's self-help groups generally refer to relatively small local community based groups formed for the purpose of working collectively and socializing on a regular basis. Many members have links of friendship, which help to build respect and accountability. The groups encourage self-help, offering individual members an opportunity to improve their welfare and those of their families (Srujana, 1996:29-30). Membership offers many women the best hope for improving their lives and these groups have come to play a significant role in the social and economic life of their communities. In Kenya, they produce goods which contribute to their local economies and are a major force in the country's self-help development efforts. Self-help groups not only benefit women on a local and individual level by providing women an opportunity to take part in a decision making process but they also serve other functions. The groups act as an avenue for learning and exchanging information and ideas. They provide women with an arena in which to exercise and develop their talents. They have even become a source for emotional and economic support (Khasiani, 1993). These groups can also help women to achieve a social standing within the community and are natural vehicles for liberating and strengthening women in a patriarchal society (Malombe, 1993).

Approximately ninety per cent of the Kenyan population lives in the rural areas. Self-help groups draw most of their membership from women, who form the majority of the rural population (Kabira & Nzioki, 1993). Their main objectives are to improve women's living conditions and to assist them in becoming self-reliant. The women take on diverse income-generating projects as a way to fulfill their objectives. In general, the activities of the women's groups can be divided into two categories; income generating and welfare activities (Malombe, 1993; Kabira & Nzioki, 1993). In the first category, women's groups involve themselves in different types of projects such as raising money through agricultural labour, dances, making baskets, and growing produce such as maize, beans and *sukumawiki* (kale). Income-generating activities are largely welfare in nature, since the income obtained by the women is used to buy food, clothing and other essential needs of the family (Kabira & Nzioki, 1993). Generally, it appears that women are engaged in activities that are meant to improve the welfare of their families and communities as a way of accessing what they need.

Each woman's group has an executive committee consisting of a chairperson, secretary and treasurer. These women have the responsibility of initiating ideas and guiding the group throughout the decision-making process. The groups may get advice from outside sources regarding what projects to undertake, but the final decision belongs to the women of the group. Participation in women's associations is therefore a very important part of the members lives (Malombe, 1993).

Some of the more recognizable accomplishments of women's groups include a Kamba women's group in Kitui District, which was the largest employer in the small town of Kabati with 120 employees. In one year they had installed 104 water tanks, built

193 two-room houses and a number of ventilated latrines. In 1971, 367 women's groups in Kiamu with a total membership of 18,350, improved 5600 houses, bought 900 cattle and 8800 water tanks, cultivated 30,000 acres and earned Ksh. 812,000 (Robertson, 1997:251). During this same time, a group in Mraru raised money to buy a bus and began a public transport service that made money and was a benefit to both the members and the community (Leonard, 1989).¹ Attendees at a 1990 "Habitat for Humanity" conference in Nairobi were stunned by descriptions given by three Kenyan women of their unassisted community building efforts. One group bought a house and built another one to get rental income. Another group built five small rental houses and a house that they used for lodging when in town and for daycare (Robertson, 1997:251). These examples show how women's self-help groups in Kenya are making changes within in their areas.

The experience of these initiatives shows that once the people are organized in voluntary, cooperative groups and are given the necessary motivation, they decide on their own to carry through social changes of far-reaching significance (Ghai, 1988:241).

Self-help groups have been influential in women's involvement in the political process for the nation. Women have actively involved themselves in negotiating with the state for monies to finance their projects (Chitere 1988; Khasiani, 1993). Not only have self-help groups provided women with an avenue of self-reliance, but they have also encouraged women to become more actively involved with more formal political organizations.

The self-help movement is an important instrument for achieving mass participation in national development

and for providing a means of raising the living standards of participants and those who would otherwise not have access to inputs and services necessary for them to achieve a better standard of living (Kiros, 1985: 170).

“The movement has helped women to build confidence in themselves and participate fully in public life” (Kabira & Nzioki, 1993:63).

The growth and expansion of women’s groups has been phenomenal since independence. The reason for this increase can be linked to many factors. Due to the changing economic demands, many men from the rural areas have had to migrate elsewhere in order to supplement the family income. This leaves women with the sole responsibility of managing the farms and the income for their family. Although husbands try to assist with monthly financial support, in many cases this is not adequate to meet the needs of the family. Women must attempt to satisfy their needs without relying as much on their husbands. Thus any organization or movement that appears to provide them a way out of poverty by raising their material life is readily accepted and supported. This initiative to form women’s development oriented activity groups in Kenya came as a result of women’s realization that they had to rely on themselves to alter the level of their material life (Malombe 1993; Srujana 1996). Rural women use their involvement in self-help groups as a way to empower themselves politically and economically within the community. The large membership of women in these grassroots organizations also demonstrates a consciousness on the part of women that they are capable of a self-reliant existence (Srujana, 1996; Stamp, 1989).

The Relationship of Women's Groups to the State and Politicians

In principle, the Kenya government has been working to make women active partners in the national development process. In 1976, the Women's Bureau was formed under the Ministry of Culture and Social Services as an initial step by the government to establish an infrastructure for planning, programming and implementation of important aspects of women's issues (Kabira & Nzioki, 1993). Women's groups came under a specific project designed to help women become part of the development process. The Bureau has been cited as a catalyst inspiring women's groups to undertake entrepreneurial activities such as small scale businesses, making of handicrafts, and community improvement. Since the establishment of the Bureau, there has been an increase in formation and resurgence of women's groups. Some of the groups registered with the Women's Bureau have been provided with financial, material and technical assistance, but the majority of groups are lacking in resources. Although these efforts are meant to bring women into the mainstream of economic development, there has been very little impact on the situation of women (Kabira & Nzioki, 1993).

Many women's groups do not have the economic, material, and technical resources necessary for improving their circumstances. Authors such as Abwunza and Stamp discuss how the Government expects women to organize their own development without the proper resources to do so. "Some of us believe that the onus is put on poor women to improve their circumstance even though their means are blocked by lack of resources" (Abwunza). "[Kenyan] women become targets of development policy, problematic targets, where self-reliance is seen to be introduced from above and permits

the paradox at the heart of the movement in Kenya to prod rural women into self-help groups” (Stamp, 1989:152).

Women’s groups are seen as useful to politicians to garner votes and entertainment during election campaigns. Women’s groups may be used solely for the purpose of benefiting the politician, without any regard for the group members. Promises of gifts, such as money or food, in exchange for votes of which the politician has no intention of delivering exploit these groups. “Some women group leaders have been known to “sell” their members to would be political “buyers” during elections for petty things like a pound of sugar and other similar handouts” (Kagwiria Mbogori, 2001). Many politicians cannot deny the fact that women’s groups are already a political force. Women’s participation during state functions reinforces political links between men (i.e. the chief and MP) to gain favors from higher authorities for displaying the women, particularly when there is an outside visitor (Kabira & Nzioki 1993). Politicians can relate to women’s groups as long as they depend on them for achieving the power, status and wealth that goes with politics. When women struggle to achieve power, male politicians are quick to advise them to keep out of politics. Politicians see politics as a man’s domain in which women have no business. Any direct attempt by women’s groups to get involved in politics is frowned upon. Male politicians view women’s roles as those, which support men by engaging in subordinate roles of dancing, cooking, and voting. “Kenyan politicians view women’s groups as a vehicle for their own advancement” (Kabira & Nzioki, 1993:73).

As was pointed out earlier in the thesis, collective strength is sometimes the only way to enhance the bargaining power of the disadvantaged. It is also a way of making the

state and politicians accountable. The four extracts taken from newspapers portray how women's collective voice is at work in Kenya.

Women say no to bus project idea (Daily Nation, Tuesday, Dec. 5, 1989)

Members of the Nakuru Maendeleo Ya Wanawake Organization on Saturday rejected a proposal to start a women's bus project for fear that it would collapse due to mismanagement. Speakers at the meeting expressed fear that a bus project could be mismanaged by men since women could not be expected to be employed as drivers and conductors.

Hands off women's groups, parties told

(Daily Nation, Wednesday, Feb. 14, 1990)

The secretary-general of the organisation of African trade Unions Unity (OATUU), Mr. Hassan Sunmou, says the annexation of trade unions and women's organisations by some political parties in Africa will cause a crisis.

"Let the governments of Africa know that they can co-exist separately with the trade unions and women's organizations, but champion a common course from different platforms. Trade unions and women's and youth organisations need to exist separately," he said.

Self-help groups cautioned (Daily Nation, Tuesday, Oct. 2, 1990)

Members of self-help groups in Sirisia, said at the weekend that self-help groups were important "vehicles" for rural development and should not be embroiled in politics.

Mr. Muliro warned leaders of such groups against embezzling funds and advised them to keep account books to avoid suspicion.

A Group with a vision (Daily Nation, July 12, 2000)

The Maragoli community of Western Kenya have contrived many ways of fighting the Killer HIV/Aids. Our Initial aim when we started this group in 1991 was to grapple with famine that frequently hits this area by coming together and producing items for sell," says 72 year old Teresa Kahori..

Alarmed by the increasing number of young people who were taking drugs, hooliganism and other vices due to unemployment and idleness the group purchased goats and income accruing from the pottery "to keep the young men busy."

It is clear that women's groups are a force to reckon with. The fact that government officials can "warn" them, try to advise, manipulate

and discourage them from political participation indicates that the women are challenging certain instructional structures (Kabira & Nzioki, 1993:4).

Kenyan women's groups constitute important grassroots organizations, whose activities remain largely undocumented and unanalyzed. Rather than being simply organizations for coping with development, which is the overt aim cited by most of them, these groups are also vital organizations for resistance to exploitation (Stamp, 1989). "Women's groups formed by neighboring farmers were the only formal organization of rural women recognized by government ministries, donors and political parties" (Wacker, 1994:135).

This chapter has provided a brief history of women's mobilization in Kenya through the use of grassroots organizations. It is important to have an understanding of these organizations and to document their purposes, goals and composition in order to be able to assess the potential role that women's groups have in the social, economic and political life of the country.

NOTES TO CHAPTER THREE

¹ For more information on this group see Jill Kneerim's article "Village Women Organize: The Mraru, Kenya Bus Service" in Ann Leonard, Seeds. New York: The Feminist Press, 1989 p.15-31.

CHAPTER FOUR: WOMEN'S RESPONSES TO CHANGE: A CASE STUDY OF KENYAN WOMEN'S SELF-HELP GROUPS.

Chapter four will present the case study of four women's self-help groups in Kenya. The description to follow includes excerpts from interviews with women's groups and individual women, documents by various women's groups, and my own observations and analysis made throughout the course of the research. In order to examine how women's self-help group's channel marginalized women into the political sphere the criteria outlined in Chapter one will be used for measuring these groups.

Profile of the groups

The four groups selected for this case study include three rural groups from the Katangi and Kenyatta market in the Machakos district (refer to map) and one group from the Nairobi area. All of them are income-generating groups. Before presenting a profile of the three rural groups it is important to provide a description of the locale in which these groups are situated. This will help in understanding the problems that the people in this community are faced with.

Katangi and Kenyatta are home to the *Akamba (Kamba)* people who have occupied this region for several generations. The *Akamba* people are considered to be agro-pastoralists as cattle are still a measure of wealth. Most farmers raise two crops per year, used for their own subsistence and for sale in the market. The main crops grown in this area tend to be maize, beans and cow beans. Small quantities of fruit such as citrus, papaya, mango and bananas are grown when the crop conditions are right. (Thomas-Slater, 1995) The climate is transitional from sub-humid to semi-arid, with a mean annual temperature of 21 degree centigrade (range 13-27 degrees).

Rainfall is extremely unpredictable both within and between years, seasonal rainfall can vary between 140-730 millimeters. The two rainy seasons usually occur in April and November to December.¹ The soil consists of shallow, red-brown sandy loam. The plant life is limited to dry brush with trees, poor grass, thorn bushes, sand and bare rock. This makes it very difficult to grow crops, or to graze their animals (Thomas-Slater, 1995:50-56; Kenya Primary Atlas, 1996).

Kenyatta is situated between the Atni River and the Yatta Plateau and has a population of fifty to two hundred inhabitants per Kilometer. Most of homes are close to the Athi River, the main water supply for the area (Kenya Primary Atlas, 1996). Only two families had water pumps at the time I visited, for the rest of the population in this area, women and children collect water with a burro, walking many kilometers.

Cattle and goats are the most important domestic animals in this area. Oxen serve as draft animals and as an investment. (The family that I stayed with lost their oxen to drought and this was viewed as a major loss of income.) Some families keep one or two cows for milk but due to drought it made more difficult to find enough food for animals. Goats represent smaller, more flexible investments, and they provide a periodic source of ready cash, as well as milk and occasional meat for the farm household. (Thomas-Slater, 1995; Kenya Primary Atlas) The cattle, goats and any sheep are confined to corrals at night. Their manure is applied to one of the crops during planting season. Management for grazing varies from tethering to careful herding. This is generally done with the use of hired help or school age children at the end of their school day.

The women have the primary burden of meeting the family's basic needs for food, water and fuel. The husband's main responsibilities are to generate sufficient cash

income to pay for school fees and major capital expenditures. Within the Machakos sublocations, households are managed by the women. Their husbands seek employment outside their communities, working in Nairobi, Machakos or Mombassa. This puts an additional onus on women, who have much of the responsibility of running a household on a daily basis. Men, if they are able, will return home at harvest time to help in some of the agricultural activities such as plowing.

In order to understand how the women combine their self-help group work with their everyday activities, I will describe a typical work day for the Kamba women. (This is based on my observations during my recent trip to Kenya) For the majority of women, involved in self-help group work a day might consist of the following activities: The day begins at sunrise (approximately six a.m.), preparing the morning tea for her family and/or milking the cow. After the morning meal of tea and bread she may spend the next hour or two doing household chores such as laundry, dishes, going for water at the river, and assisting the house-girl or house-boy in getting the animals ready for grazing. At approximately 10 a.m., she would gather her tools such as a hoe/shovel or watering can and walk to the site where the women's group is working on a project. (At the time of my visit the Ndethye Ngutethye self-help group, one of the main groups interviewed for this thesis, was in the process of preparing a plot of land for the construction of a new building. The women were going to use this building as a meeting place and as a place to sell and store their produce. (We spent two mornings gathering stones and rocks which were to be used to build the foundation.) The women may have to walk for fifteen minutes up to an hour to arrive at the site where the group work is done. Work periods last up to four hours, before breaking for lunch and returning home to do their daily

chores. After a lunch of *bimba na boso* (the staple diet of beans and maize), the women continue to tasks of tending their garden, collecting water and firewood, and preparing the evening meal. Women and children can spend up to fifteen hours or more a week on just the two tasks of gathering fuel and water. A woman's day usually ends with a bath and looking after her children or other family members. Bedtime would be anywhere between nine p.m. to ten p.m.

The first group, interviewed, was a group called **Ndethye Ngutethye** (Kamba for self-help group). One of the reasons for selecting this group is because of my relationship with a few members of the group based on previous visits to Kenya. The second reason is because of its location and proximately to my friend David. David hosted me at his family's home, and also acted as my research assistant, introducing me to various individuals and groups in area, as well as being my interpreter.

This **Ndethye Ngutethye** group is located in the Kenyatta area and was started in 1994. It has a membership of approximately thirty members who range in ages from nineteen to seventy. In the words of the members, the group was established for the following reasons: to uplift one another from poverty; to uplift the economic, political and social status within and outside the village; to work together in unison and bring about efforts to support their families; to set up development projects.

The main objectives of this group are to: improve women's status; to become self-reliant; to develop families by educating them; to improve life styles; and to have a better relationship in the neighborhood. Some of the reasons that women gave for joining the group are: "to gain knowledge, which is power, from my fellow members in economic, social and political matters." "I heard from a friend of mine about its importance." "I

fear being left alone by my friends.” “I saw others forming hands together and working together.”

As part of the interview process with this group I was involved in the actual work which the self-help group was engaged. Previously in 1998 the group received a small amount of money (three hundred Canadian dollars) from a Canadian group. This money was used to buy a plot of land on which to construct a building that the group could use it as a meeting place. When asked why they did not utilize the existing empty buildings in the area one woman replied, **“ownership is important and this will be a place to call our own.”**

The interview process went as follows: The women in the group were aware of my purpose in Kenya. My friend and interpreter David had arranged meeting time prior to my arrival in the village. This was done to ensure that most of the members would be able to attend. On the first day, we met at eleven a.m. and spent an hour picking and dragging rocks to the site where the construction was under way. (While I was in the area we spent a couple of mornings engaged in this type of work. The members have hired a man to dig the foundation and to assist with the brick laying.) The interview afterwards lasted almost an hour, starting with prayer and a welcome message from the *Chairlady*. It was conducted in Kamba and translated into English. Twenty out of thirty members attended. The group utilizes two meeting places, because the women are so spread out geographically. Meetings were held at the local market where we gathered rocks and held interviews. It ended with the women showing me their traditional dances. Further meetings also took place at a plot of land close to the river where they have planted vegetables. The women divide themselves into small groups and every group has a day

in which they must go to the garden to water their plants. These vegetables will be used for their own consumption and to sell in the market.

This group has been organized for a relatively short period of time but their commitment to each other has helped them to be somewhat successful in attaining their goals. The women in this group have known each other for a very long time, and understand each other and the problems in the area. They come together out of responsibility for providing for their families and this has motivated their actions. Members realize that they need each other to undertake the development activities in which they attempt.

The second group interviewed was the **Kakindu** self-help group. This group is located in Kenyatta market. The reason for examining this group is because it has been established for almost thirty years. It has a membership of almost fifty members, comprised of both women and men. The group started in 1971 when twenty women and men joined together to come up with a plan of providing water to the neighboring community. This was done so people would not have to travel as far to gather water. (The nearest water supply is approximately two kilometers away at the Athi River.) The goal of the group was to establish a *borehole*. The group has been successful in achieving this goal. Members are committed to the group and it has maintained its membership throughout the decades. As one member summarized the importance of the group, “**A person cannot do it alone we must join together.**”

I met with this group on two different occasions. On one of the occasions the community development worker was in attendance as well as the councilor for this area.

The counselor spoke about the importance of people becoming self-reliant and how they must rely on each other.

According to the Community Development worker in the area there are approximately thirty groups in this district. Women started most of these groups and only a few have a mixed membership of women and men. The Community Development worker is hired by the government and her main role is to visit the various self-help groups and to advise them on how to stay together.²

Some of the barriers and problems that both the Ndethye Ngutethye and the Kakindu groups face include: poor roads, lack of transport, lack of capital, lack of skill, lack of food, no tools or machines, illiteracy for many of the group members, lack of land, poor attendance, poor economy, poor political systems, lack of good advisors, lack of adequate rainfall, and lack of support from society. Another common problem for members of not only these two groups, but also other groups as well, are time constraints. **“If members have to spend too much time working at the borehole or going to meetings this takes away from the work on the shambas.”** (Member of the Kakindu group) Time poverty is one of the issues faced by most African women and women in other parts of the world, as pointed out earlier in this thesis.

Members from both the Ndethye Ngutethye group and the Kakindu group felt that the types of resources which would be useful to help the group attain their goals include: better education on how to lead in their own development projects, financial support, machines and tools, improvement in education and practical skills.

The third rural group examined for this case study was the **Yatta South Women Group** located in the village of Kantangi. The reason for selecting this group is because

it is a group which has been identified as highly successful by other women's groups and by churches and NGO's. Here is a description of the group and its successes as told by Phoebe Makasi a co-chairperson of the group. This description is presented in a document mailed to me after my return to Canada.³

Yatta South Women Group (YSWG) is a Community Based Organization that operates in Yatta Division, Machakos District in Eastern Province of Kenya. It was started in 1986 by groups of rural women from Yatta Division. Its original objective was to promote and intensify income generating activities with major emphasis on buying and selling sisal (a type of plant that grows in the area.) baskets.

YSWG is an umbrella of 31 women's groups having about 2064 members. Since 1992 the group has broadened its purpose to include a community development program. This was in response to many problems faced by the community in Katangi. The community development focuses on improving food security, primary health care, access to safe drinking water, and diversifying income-generating activities.

The main objective being, improving the quality of women's lives through income generating activities, the main activity for the group at the time of inception was finding market for traditional baskets "Kiondo" made by the women. YSWG has two sectors namely, 1) economic development sector; and 2)-community/social-development sector.

In the economic development sector each member weaves baskets and these baskets are brought to the center where they are priced and sent to the customers. The weaving of baskets has greatly changed the way of life of women and some of the noted impacts are as follows:

- 1. Women have been able to pay school fees for their children and meet domestic expenses.**
- 2. Money earned circulates within the community hence boosting the economy of Katangi division.**
- 3. Women are economically empowered. They are recognized as contributors rather than recipients, hence, they are consulted in decision making.**
- 4. Women are able to defend their rights since they are no longer beggars.**
- 5. Men are also challenged to work hard.**

In addition to selling and weaving of baskets women are undertaking other projects like:

- Bee Keeping and honey harvesting.**

- Participating in shows and campaigns e.g. aids awareness campaign.
- Planting of trees.
- Knitting of school sweaters.
- Making of mosquito nets.
- Operating a posho mill (mill for grinding maize).

The economic development sector supports itself but the community development sector is funded by MS-Kenya (a Danish Organization) in Partnership with YSWG. The Danish Organization also sends some Danish Development workers to work hand in hand with YSWG. The economic sector faces a challenge in that especially when there is drought the members lack money to purchase materials. If this sector were funded from elsewhere possibly YSWG center would be an international market. At the times when women lack money to buy beehives, but with their little income they always try to weave baskets, and plant crops.

The Yatta South Women's group has received outside financial help, as well as support from partnership groups from other countries. All managers and leaders are women. They direct, supervise and organize the operation. This group has accomplished many income generating opportunities for the women of the community and is a positive role model for other groups.

The fourth group to be interviewed for this thesis is a group called **Humma Women's Group**. This group is based in Nairobi and is made up of members who are from the Mathare slum. A brief background of the area in which these women come from will provide an idea of what difficult circumstances the members of this group are faced with.

Background of Mathare Slum

Mathare was bush before Kenya became independent in 1963. After independence, people were free from colonial rule and they were able to organize individual ways of living. In 1964, a man from Ukambani called Mutisya built the first carton house and Mathere 1, which was named after Mutisya, was born. Mathare at

present is divided into five locations. Mathare is located at the left-hand side of Juja road and is one and a half kilometers from the city center. Mathare is about 2,500 hectares approximately in size, with a population of over half a million residents (Grieco, 1998).

Dwelling houses are mainly made of mud and old iron sheets. There is no drainage system in the area and sanitation facilities are nonexistent. Houses are haphazardly built without proper plans or access roads. Narrow meandering paths are the only access to most homes. Initially the government ignored the area completely. The communities were forced to develop their own support mechanism. As a result education, health, economic and even administrative structures are informal in nature. Residents of the area initiated them. Initially all residents were squatters, but some residents now own plots through the squatter upgrading programs (Grieco, 1998: 126-135).

Profile of the Humma Women's Group

There are over two hundred women groups in the Mathare area alone. These groups are run by committees headed by a chairperson, a secretary, treasurer and three to eight other committee members. The **Humama Women's Group** is just one of the groups which was organized by the women of this area. What I present below is the document of the MEMORANDUM OF THE HUMAMA WOMEN GROUP as written by the chairperson and secretary.⁴

MEMORANDUM OF THE HUMAMA GROUP

INTRODUCTION

Humama project came in to being as out come of several meetings held by members of various groups existing in Mathare Valley. In the hope of importance of deem. Humama project as an umbrella consisting of other small groups: Heri Women Group, Upendo Men and Women Group, Makao Women Group and Machuma Women Group.

The members of Humana live in Mathare Valley in Village 1 and 11. They are people who have been brought together by a common need, which is shelter. This is because their present environment is an unpredictable one socially, physically and economically. They face threats such as eviction because they are squatters, they also face fires and floods, which could make them shelterless and affect their daily activities at anytime. Their houses are nothing but shanties made of places of carton papers, scrap metal, pieces of timber and clay. Naturally over crowded with up to ten persons living in one room, they pay between 500 Ksh to 600 Ksh (\$10.00 to\$12. Canadian.) rent per month per 10x10ft. rooms. **(As was noted before, many people in Kenya live on less than 400 US dollars per year)**

Humama project has a total membership of 240 members, however the total population from the village 1&2 is approximately 6000 families. Humama was formed in conjunction with the late Fr. Crol and Undugu social workers team after the members had been invited to watch a film depicting poor women living in poor conditions but who were working hard to improve their lives. Through the late Fr. Crol the founder of Undugu Society, Mrs. Ingrid Munro visited Humama in1988 with assistance of Undugu social workers to help and support each other to a better life. Eighty percent of Humama women's groups are single mothers and widows with many children. Many are very poor, even they can not afford a shack in Mathare slums. Instead they live in the streets in the city. Life on the streets is extremely hazardous for the women. Their children are constant victims of both physical and sexual abuse by the men of the streets. They survive by begging, collecting and selling scrap metal and waste papers. The children also assist their mothers, they also engage in petty larceny such as pick pocketing and snatching handbags. Many are engaged in prostitution. They also sell illegal brew called "Changaa". There are many kinds of sickness among the families due to lack of proper shelter and access to even the most basic sanitation and water. They also suffer from respiratory diseases, diarrheas, lice, worms because of their inadequate diet.

Training

Humama women identified their need as job training for none had formal skills or credit to start up viable businesses. Humama [received a loan] of K.shs. 1.3million in 1989 from the African Housing Society and started the first phase of Komarock Estate. (A new subdivision nears the outskirts of the city, close to the

airport.) Humama made efforts to win a large-scale income generating activity producing roofing tiles for commercial scale. The Humama factory has also turned into a training group for other supported co-operates from all over Africa. Humama women train many groups from both Kenya and also women from Rwanda in 1997.

Humama factory business provides employment to 50 members. It was started in February 1989 and managed to win a contract to supply roofing tiles for 2000 housing units in Komarock Phase 1. The factory produces 3000 tiles every day with women working in two shifts up to now. Humama continues with the Komarock phase 4 and hopes to get phase 5 next year.

Members get paid 120 Ksh per day with the supervisor making 150 Ksh. (This is equivalent to approximately three Canadian dollars, depending on what the exchange rate is.) At the time of this interview the group needed a machine to help make shingles. This would lighten their load tremendously. They also needed a permanent location for their factory as this land is on loan to them from City Counsel, and they can be evicted at any time. The chairperson of the group Veronica, commented on the importance of having ownership to land.

If we have our own land then we can have a lot of development. The children can join us and help in the factory. Land can give freedom. In Mathare we were drinking Changaa, and prostituting and the children were street boys and girls. Now we have changed, we can educate our children.

This group has been very successful in obtaining their goals. Many women would like to join the group but due to its high membership it has to limit its members. This group is also very proud of the fact that it consists of four ethnic groups; Luo, Kamba, Kikuyu and Luhya. Everyone cooperates freely and is respectful of each other's differences regardless of a woman's ethnic background. The women of this group also view their husbands as being very supportive of women's participation in the group as husbands see the economic contribution that women make to the family as being very

important. **“In the beginning it was hard but now husbands have accepted. Men have seen it as being good because it generates income. People learn from this group about themselves and others.”**

ANAYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF THE CASE STUDY

It is useful to examine the four case studies by using the criteria defined in Chapter One in order to assess whether or not women’s self-help groups in Kenya are a strategy for women to become political actors. As empowerment and political activity are interrelated it is important to once again look at a definition of empowerment and political activity as reflected in the literature review of this thesis. Using the concepts as outlined by the Griffin, some aspects of empowerment are: having control or to gain further control, to be recognized and respected as human beings, and for an individual or a group to have the ability to mobilize the available resources for the benefit of social change. Political power refers to the “ability or the right of women to control and influence group decisions including assignment of roles beyond the household level” (Kabira & Nzioki, 1993:78).

According to the “Women’s Empowerment Framework” model, welfare activities are generally the lowest level of empowerment with its aims being fulfilling the basic needs of women and their families. Often it is women’s responses to issues of poverty that bring them together to take care of their needs at the household level. It is by addressing problems at the household level that women overcome their boundaries of the private sphere and enter into the public realm to try and change their present situation of poverty and subordination. Women come together to organize household needs and plan

for the future of their children and families. This has been the primary objective for the formation of groups and explains why they first and foremost address problems at the household level.

The four groups in this study, although were initially formed for different reasons, have the common goal of trying to fulfill basic needs. Some of their main focuses include access to safe drinking water, improved shelter, skills for job training, and to learn new income generating activities.

The second level of the Women's Empowerment Approach Framework is the ability to have access to resources, education, skills, and opportunities. Of the four groups involved only the Humama and the Yatta South Women's group have direct access to the above factors. The members of these groups are exposed to new opportunities, which enables its members to move forward in their efforts towards development. The members of the Humama group have direct access to wage employment and have had to learn new skills in order to be able to work at the groups' new economic ventures. Both of the groups have had financial support from outside sources, which has enabled further development of their group. The other two rural groups, because of their locale, often do not have the opportunity to attend workshops nor to have resource people come in to offer direction and support. Some of the members do admit that they have learned or improved their skills and as one woman points out from the Ndethye Ngutethye group, her reason for joining the group was **“to gain knowledge which is power from my fellow members in economic, social and political matters.”**

The third level of Longwe's model is conscientization where women are aware of their status and empowerment means sensitization of the women to a positive image of

self. It can be concluded that the members in three of the groups have a high conscientization of gender awareness. Women recognize the issues concerning them and design strategies to address their problems. They also see themselves as the only sources of power for their own advancement. The members of three out of the four groups have made comments, which show that they have a very high conscientization or gender awareness.

We were happy to answer Mutanu's (my Kamba name, given to me by the Ndethye Ngutethye women's group) questions without pressure. It was good to come together because we were able to learn from each other about the past and present.

Men want to come and lead us in the group but that is what we fight for. We can do work and earn our living even without the lead of men. (Member of the Ndethye Ngutethye group)

Women carry a heavy load. The women's groups are good as women can go to the group for support. Women's work is vital to the community (Veronica)

Women are able to defend their rights since they are no longer beggars. (Member of the Yatta South self help group)

In the beginning it was hard, but now husbands have accepted. Men have seen it as being good. (Member of the Humama group)

After learning and working the women can carry the spade and now they can wear the overalls. (Perpetual)

We want to be able to participate fully in politics and in a social and economic manner without being dominated by men. (Member of the Ndethye Ngutethye group)

Participation is the fourth level of the model. By organizing themselves and working collectively women will gain representation and collective power. Participation can also be interpreted to imply a strengthening of the power of the deprived masses (Ghai, 1998). Members of these four groups seem dedicated and committed to their

group. Women are working collectively to make changes within their families and in their communities. **“We have power, strength, we became a group to help ourselves.”** (Member of the Humama group) The fact that women continue to organize and participate in groups means that women are continuing to resist the forces which oppress them economically, politically and socially. It is through participation that leads to empowerment at local levels. People learn a different kind of politics when they work productively and constructively with others who experience the same predicaments.

Control over production, land and labour is considered a very high level of empowerment. It means that the contributions of women are fully recognized and respected.

By helping the women of the area one helps the entire community. It has to be the women because the men go away to work. (Joseph, a relative of one of the members of the Ndethye Ngutethye group)

Women are hard working in this area. Help the women and you can help the community. (Samuel, the husband of a member of the Ndethye Ngutethye group)

Money earned circulates within the community hence boosting the economy of Kantagi division. (Member of the YSWG)

Women are economically empowered. They are recognized as contributors rather than recipients, hence, they are consulted in decision making. (Member of the YSWG)

Women have been able to pay school fees for their children and meet domestic expenses. (Member of the YSWG)

Of the four groups in this study only one of them had direct ownership of land and was aware of the power that this ownership gave them. **“Ownership is important and this will be a place to call our own.”**(Member of the Ndethye Ngutethye group)

The Humama group has been struggling for ownership of the property in which they have their factory and realize the importance of this ownership for their own advancement. **“If we have our own land then we can have a lot of development.”**

Control also means that women have control over their lives and become independent and self-reliant, both individually and collectively. The women of these groups recognize that individually they are weak but collectively they can achieve some of their goals. They have a spirit of commitment, determination sharing and togetherness, which demonstrates their collective action in the struggle against poverty and gender-based oppression. Women use their traditional roles to organize change and become political actors in the process. These groups also give women the first real chance most of them have had to gain more economic self-reliance, by becoming more actively involved in improving their own community's quality of life. Therefore economic strength lies in mutual assistance and this leads to political activism. Women use their designated roles to influence factors that have been determining their place in society. The women's groups are addressing some very important issues and their membership in self-help groups is an expression of resistance to dual exploitation based on gender and class. Power for these Kenyan women has been the power to protect common interests.

The second set of criteria used to evaluate self-help groups is based on Democratic Governance. One way in which self-help groups promote democratic governance is through their institutional framework. Each group has a method of coordinating and implementing policy in their group. In order to explain how the self-

help groups govern themselves Mary, the secretary for the Nethye Ngutethye group, explains how her group is organized.

Secretary, chairlady and treasurer make the mainstream and active parts of the organization of the group. They take and withdraw money of the group when there is a need. The work or job of chairlady is to organize the group's affairs and to maintain order during the committee time. The job of the woman, which is a secretary of the group, is to keep the group's records, write minutes and writes letters when required. The role of the treasurer is to collect the money and keep account of the group's account.

All members participate in the decision making process and the group follows an electoral process of which leadership is based on democratic voting. The treasurer is held accountable to the group for proper use of funds and members are honest and respectful of one another.

This description can be generalized for the rest of the self-help groups in this case study and generally for all self-help groups in Kenya. The Kakindu Self-help group has an executive committee of nine people, five women and four men. It is this committee that has the main decisions making responsibilities.

Another aspect of self-help groups promoting the democratic process is the ability of groups' to develop the capabilities of their members. When the women were asked how their roles as secretary, chairlady and treasurer helped them develop as individuals, this is what Mary, the secretary of the Ndethye Ngutethye group, had to say.

Sometimes I find it difficult to do my job and other times not so difficult. My little education makes me work under fear of making mistakes. For example, I do not understand English and Swahili fluently. My family and friends do support my work. For example, my husband who has a good education taught me how to record minutes during meeting of the group. My friends gave me new ideas of how to write agendas in short form. The jobs help me to do other kinds of things such as writing reports for the group and this has helped me to improve my educational performance.

When asked if the women saw themselves as being “political”, the women could only understand politics in the broader macro sense. They do not see themselves as “political” actors because politics is viewed as negative. Some of the women stated their opinion of local politics in relation to the group.

Because of the remoteness local politicians do not come.
 They might use the group for their own needs.
 They offer false promises.
 Politics are corrupt.

The third criteria for analyzing the political activism of self-help groups are an examination of the concept “power”. This includes psychological, social and economic power. Despite the group’s difficulties, the members of Ndethue Ngutethye self-help group acknowledge that they have achieved personal growth by being members of a woman’s self-help group. When questioned, the women shared a wide spectrum of answers.

- I have improved my knowledge of basket making.
- I can get my small amount of money and use it with out being questioned.
- I can now associate freely with my comrades in and outside the group.
- I am now able to assist my husband financially to educate our children.
- I am able to clothe and feed my children better than before I joined the group.
- We as women have gained self-reliance.
- Men want to come and lead us in the group but that is what we fight for. We can do work and earn our living even without the lead of men.
- We help one another to fight for better participation in the economy and in politics.
- A person cannot do it alone.

Jasinda, is one of the members of the Humama group and has been a supervisor in the factory for the past five years. She had this to say about her involvement in the group and what it has done for her personally.

My life has changed very much since I joined this group. I had many problems in Mathare. I had two children and no husband and no work. I was drinking lots of *Changaa* and prostituting. My children were also sniffing glue. I went to Mama Veronica (The chair lady of the group) who helped me by getting the members to contribute money and by encouraging me to join the group. I now have a prominent position in the group. I have taken training and am able to train other women. I have a room near the factory and my children are now being educated and also work at the factory. Being a member of this group has definitely changed my life.

Perpetual has been the secretary of the Humama group for the past six years and had this to say about the many benefits she has gained as a result of being a member of this group.

This group has contributed a lot. With this group I went for training. I had a chance to go to the U.K. I was able to learn computer and to teach others about bookkeeping and stock keeping. In this work we can change our life. Before I could not speak English. The NGO has changed the life of women. After learning and working the women can carry the spade and now they can wear the overalls⁵. (Like a man) This group was the first one. We have taught many groups in Kenya, Nairobi and in Uganda. We have also gone to train [others] in Rwanda and Zambia. Now we are able to help ourselves. So we thank those who trained us and we hope that we can help other people to climb up.

When asked if the women had power the women of the Humama group

responded: **“We have power, strength, we became a group to help ourselves. Our motto is: TO GO FORWARD, BACKWARD NEVER.”**

The comments made by the women illustrate that women are experiencing psychological and social power and therefore achieving individual and collective empowerment. The motto expressed above portrays a willingness and a self-confidence to continue to organizing for change on both a personal level and on a collective level.

In regard to the importance of obtaining economic power two men who are relatives of members of the Netheye Ngutethye women’s group in Kenyatta demonstrate best how important women’s contributions are to the community. This is what Joseph a

relative of one of the members of this group felt about the importance of the group not only to women but also to the community.

I am happy about the group because women help the shamba to develop. Men do not help much but we allow our partners to join groups. By helping the women of the area one helps the entire community. It has to be the women because the men go away to work.

Samuel whose wife is a member of this group had this to say in regard to the changes that have taken place in the local area over the decades. He also responded to how women are involved in making positive economic contributions to the community.

Buildings have changed from huts to brick. Within the family there have been big changes because of poor economy. Many people have to leave the area to find work. Women are in charge of the home and women do the family affairs. There are big changes for women over the past 20 years. They are organized. Young girls are also the same as boys, they need education. **How can women develop more?** Women need machines to pump water. If women have the machine then they can grow food, and this will develop the area. Men will come back to the village.

Women are hard working in this area. If they can get help, like a machine they can change the economy of the area. They can build a brighter future for the area and for their families. Help the women and you can help the community. The food in the store (grain storing shed) is out of the work of my wife. **(Samuel would like to come back to the village. He works as a wood carver in Mombassa. Samuel also belongs to a self-help group in Mombassa and knows the importance of being part of a group. The group helped him to go to India so that his son could have an operation; otherwise his son would have died.)**

Profile of a community leader: Josephine

Josephine is a very active member of the Netheye Ngutethye group, as well as several others in the area. Josephine was chosen for the interview because of her willingness to participate and share her views and opinions with me. She also believes in the importance of self-help groups and working together. I have known Josephine for the

past ten years. Because of this relationship, she felt comfortable engaging in the interview.

Many people in the community admire Josephine for her community activism. She is a very dynamic woman who is regarded as a leader by the women and men of her community. Josephine is beautiful, talented, educated, outspoken and is truly a leader of her community. She has ten children, four of whom are still in primary school. She belongs to the parents' group at the school and has been responsible for raising money to buy textbooks. She is one of the very few women in the area who can speak English and has graduated from form IV (equivalent to grade 11 in Canada). Her husband is a migrant worker who has had to move away in order to find employment. (Most of the men in this area have migrated to Mombassa where they work as wood carvers.) Josephine's husband is very good about sending home his remittances. Josephine is considered to be one of the wealthier people of the area. She has a fairly modern house and even has a large container to collect rainwater. This is considered a sign of wealth. Josephine is one of the few women in the area who owns and rides a bicycle. She is a very busy woman and we tried many times to make an appointment for this interview. She was always engaged in some activity that took her away from home. Eventually we were successful.

Here are some of her opinions pertaining to the roles of women and women's groups in her area.

Women do become leaders of their groups but men do not see them always as being leaders. My husband does not refuse, I can go anywhere. It is harder to feed children. Having a smaller amount of children is good, so that they can have food and education. In our area we do all the work, fieldwork, housework, work on the *shamba*. Women carry a heavy load. Old traditions hold women back. It is education, which makes a difference. Teach both boys and girls and that can make a big difference. Women can move up through education. The dowry should be eliminated as it cannot make men and women equal. Buying a wife is

not good. Education will help to change this. Bad economy also causes women to be exploited by men. The women's groups are good as women can go to the group for support. Women's work is vital to the community and I am glad that I am a part of a group.

What Josephine's comments reveal is that women are still bound by certain traditions and more explicitly the economic and political climate of the country. It is these barriers that bring women together in order to achieve emotional and economic support. Being a member of a group is also a way for women to stand up and take action for what is important for the survival of their own lives and the lives of their family.

There are two common characteristics in the women portrayed in these case studies. The first is poverty or the lack of appropriate basic needs in their household. Whether in rural or urban areas these women have not received the full benefit of the development process. The second characteristic is their common voice of protest, challenge, and the initiative for change. These studies also project a commitment to grassroots leadership as a means of strengthening and nourishing the dormant power of impoverished women.

In summary, the women in this case study are addressing issues related to empowerment. Women are also acting as agents who are active participants in changing their own lives and of those in the communities in which they live. Women's group as a collective, can be a major political force on the social, economic and political structures in Kenya. Kenyan women have been and continue to be major actors in the historical process.

NOTES TO CHAPTER FOUR

¹ At the time this data was collected the area was experiencing severe drought due to lack of rain during the past rainy seasons in both 1999 and 2000.

² The community development worker in this area seems to do very little in the way of advising the groups in Kenyatta of the various channels and organizations within Kenya that may be able to assist financially. Nevertheless she does plan workshops in the major villages of the district. Most of the women of this area are unable to attend due to the great distances that they are required to travel and time constraints.

³ Due to time constraints on both parties we were only able to spend a very short time with this with members of this organization. We were not able to have a personal interview with the leaders of this more formal group. This description is taken directly from on a letter I received from the chair lady upon my return to Canada.

⁴ This was taken from the memorandum, which was given to me to read. The authors are Veronica Muthoni (the chairlady of the group), and Perpetual Ondondo (the secretary).

⁵ This is a very important comment to make because it portrays how the women feel about their work and themselves. They no longer have to depend on men economically and emotionally and in fact they see themselves as being equal to men in the sphere of economics.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

This thesis has intended to demonstrate how impoverished Kenyan rural and urban women channel their political action into the public sphere through participation in self-help groups. This thesis has presented a reconstruction of political activity that includes everyday activities of individuals within a collective context or a group and is aimed at influencing or exerting control over resources, actions and social relationships. This thesis has demonstrated that women are agents of change and active participants in the power order, rather than passive victims of domination or oppression.

Women's organizations are essential catalysts to women's involvement in the process of social change. Social change is about trying to get people who have generally been excluded to promote their interests. Social change and development happens when people with common interests organize themselves. It is when citizens come together in solidarity around the various issues that impact people's daily lives. If politics are grounded in people's lived experiences then most people become active in social change by focusing on situations they see every day, situations that are problematic to them.

The main objectives of these self-help groups are to improve the living conditions for women and their families, and for women to become self-reliant. Women want to rid themselves and their children of poverty and to provide a good quality of life for their families. These rural and urban women's groups try to undertake their own development without any foreign or central government assistance, but are confronted with many obstacles. There is a number of social, political, and economic constraints that the Kenyan women's groups are facing. As this thesis has pointed out, women are marginalized at all levels of Kenyan society. Thirty percent of Kenyan women are

illiterate, compared with fourteen per cent of men. Women make up just twenty three per cent of the judiciary and the civil service. Even in agriculture, just one in five extension workers employed by the government to tell farmers about appropriate agricultural practices are women (Crawley, 01).

Most traditional societies in Kenya are patriarchal in nature and are characterized by male dominance in decision-making. Kenyan traditions also place women at a disadvantage at the social level and in political participation. Women are overburdened with various chores that include family and agricultural duties. Women face serious time constraints, for in addition to their domestic chores there is an increase in demand for women labor in agriculture, which often goes unrecognized. Women are faced by economic constraints. These include: limited access to and control of land; insufficient technical training for women in food production and marketing operations; agricultural policies favoring male farmers; lack of basic resources; and a general lack of male support for women's economic ventures.

Kenyan women are caught in the contradictions of institutions that both protect them and oppress them. They are confined within a cycle of subsistence farming, poverty and dependence on a male-dominated economy. In spite of the many difficulties they face, rural and urban poor women in Kenya share a vibrant confidence in themselves and a hopeful enthusiasm for the future. This outlook is reflected in the high level of women's participation in self-help groups. Through this participation, women identify their own economic, cultural, psychological and educational needs. The women in this case study have admitted that they have benefited from a sense of well being through sharing and moral support. The positive effects that self-help groups have had on

women's self-identity and self-confidence are quite significant. Women learn organizational leadership and participatory skills in these groups, as women's collectives serve as a source of identity, pride and moral support for members.

The groups' also demonstrate the emergence of a community-based form of democratic governance. The members make democratic decisions after discussion, with an organized system of rules and regulations, which they establish themselves by what they know of other groups (Malombe, 1999). Self-help groups provide a model of grassroots democratic decision making, enabling impoverished women to become political actors in their own right.

The group participation also helps broaden women's knowledge and enhances their awareness of the world. Being a member brings women a sense of control over their own destinies and provides support for a common purpose. Collective ownership through self-help groups is the closest that many women will come to owning some form of property which does not bear the title of their husband, father or brother (Huston, 1979:xvi).

The mobilization of rural women into self-help groups has been very successful and has come to be viewed as the key towards integrating rural women in development. Rural women's self-help groups have also helped to give impoverished rural and urban women in Kenya an unprecedented visibility on social, cultural, political and national economic levels. These groups can empower poor women to participate in public life by giving them collective confidence, bargaining power and pooled resources. Many authors believe that ultimately it is women's political strength that will enable them to

meet their needs and begin to make some dent in national and international structures which presently exclude and devalue them (Wallace, 1991:248-249).

This study has challenged the view that women's activities do not constitute political activism, as is reflected in mainstream political theory. It has done this by examining the types of groups that women organize in response to the ever-pressing needs of economic survival. Kenyan rural women and urban impoverished women are vividly aware of their disadvantaged socio-economic position. They have demonstrated their ability to organize within the domestic realm and to make this a political realm as well. Women have organized themselves through their own initiatives to gain access to means of production, land, credit and skills. Women's self-help groups have emerged from the initiatives of women who felt that their needs were not being met by the government or by conventional development programs. Women's groups are viable institutions for women at the local level. They offer members opportunities that can only be obtained when resources are pooled. These women have demonstrated that even though they are aware of the many barriers, with which they are faced in their daily struggles, they use their involvement in self-help groups as an avenue to build ties with others and to extract resources as best as they can. It is through these grassroots organizations that women try to resist the unfair practices that come with living in a patriarchal society and try to use their political spaces wisely. Empowerment for impoverished Kenyan women is about self-organization. As a result of participation in self-help groups women are also achieving individual accomplishments. This is reflected in many of the comments of the women involved in this case study. Collective empowerment can therefore emerge into personal power. Self-help groups are a place for

people to come together to organize, to shape decisions that affect their lives, and to act politically.

It is true that these groups have not yet completely changed women's social, political and economic position, but they have made a significant difference in women's lives. Here, one Kenyan woman summarizes the change which she has noticed in the social position of Kenyan women, and attributes this change to women's involvement in grassroots organizations.

The Kenyan woman is freer now-----freer from household confinement and more confident. She can talk to anyone and explain or air her opinion. Women are aware of their problems and what they should do to help look for solutions. Women will start a project such as water re-distribution or building a school-----simply because they see a need for it. As soon as women have the opportunity to play an important role in decision making they are ready to participate (Huston, 1979:101).

In conclusion, the women in this case study are definitely agents of change. Through their collective action they have formulated strategies to deal with the oppressive forces which surround their lives. Collective action for change is therefore a political action. Women are making a difference in both their communities and in their own lives and this is political activity. Self-help groups are an adequate agency for building organization and a strategy for social change, allowing impoverished Kenyan women to become political actors.

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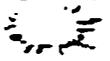
The World Bank Group, Africa Region, No. 85, April 1997. www.worldbank.org/afr/findings.

APPENDIX A
MAP OF KENYA

Interactive Map of Kenya

[CIA map of Kenya - 254K](#) (full version of the interactive map).

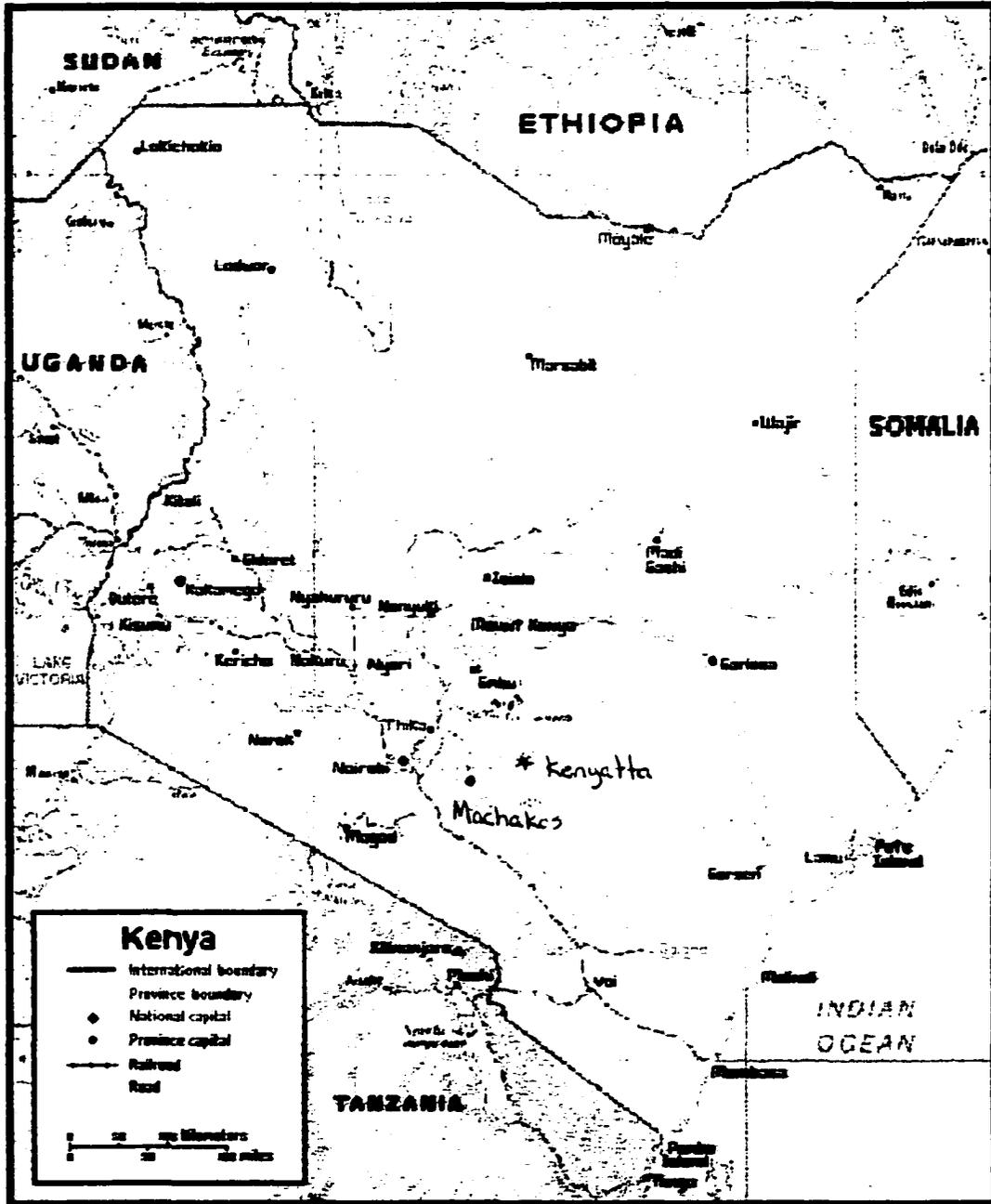
[Large map of Kenya - 777K](#) (larger and more detailed than the one below).



[Dialect map of Kenya - 325K](#) (shows major Kenyan dialects by region).

There is also a [text only](#) listing of places available.

Locations marked with  are interactive.



APPENDIX B
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

QUESTIONS FOR WOMEN'S GROUPS

1. Why was the group formed? What were the reasons that brought you together?
2. When was the group established?
3. How is the group organized? How often do you meet? How does the group operate?
4. Who was the first person to think of organizing a group and why?
5. How many members are in the group?
6. Are there other groups like this one in your areas? How many? Why did you choose to join or form this group?
7. What is the purpose of the group? What are its goals?
8. Is there a central leader? How are decisions made in the group?
9. What is the dropout rate? Why do people leave the group?
10. What are the group's long term projects?
11. What does the group make its decisions about?
12. Has the group been successful in meeting its goals so far?
13. What are some of the problems or barriers that the group faces?
14. What have you gained personally by being a member of the group?
15. What have been some of the highlights in the history of your group?
16. What have been some of the low points?
17. Where would you like to see the group go from here?
18. What kinds of resources would be useful to the group in helping to meet the group's goals?
19. Has your life changed significantly due to your involvement in this group? If so how?
20. How do you feel about politics? What is your definition of power?
21. Do you feel that you gain power by being a member of the group?
22. Do you have any questions?

APPENDIX C
PICTURES