

**ITEM V: MINORITY WOMEN & EFFECTIVE PARTICIPATION IN
ECONOMIC, SOCIAL & CULTURAL LIFE**

**SOCIAL MOBILIZATION & ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT FOR THE
MINORITY WIDOWS OF MT. ELGON - KENYA**

PRESENTED BY ATIENO JENNIPHER KERE

AT THE FOURTH SESSION OF MINORITY ISSUES FORUM IN GENEVA

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Introduction

Women In Fishing Industry Programme (WIFIP Education & Development) is a nationally registered Non Governmental Organization in Kenya that works with women and other marginalized groups focusing on socio-economic empowerment.

My presentation is based on nearly ten years experience working with grass-root women including minority women with specific reference to the war widows and minority women of Mt. Elgon.

THE MINORITY WIDOWS OF MOUNT ELGON: THE ISSUE

With support from ACORD International and in partnership with Civil Society Network, WIFIP pushed for the psycho social rehabilitation of nearly three hundred Mt. Elgon widows as the first step to reconstructing their lives socially and economically.

Most of them had lost their spouses without trace first in a war by their own and compounded by the government military sent in to salvage the situation and rescue the community from the hands of a lawless self acclaimed Land Defence Force. The government armed forces instead murdered the men and raped the women

Women suffered the most and so did their children witnessing their mothers and sisters being raped. These women physically survived SGBV and but remained traumatized and suffered psychological torture. They had been ripped of their dignity.

They also suffered internal displacement and loss of both shelter and livelihood.. Each one of them suffered in silence, the extent of suffering only gauged by the deafening whispers that went around the room once they were given a forum to share their experiences.

THE INTERVENTION

Psycho social support was a must for the healing process to start. Just over one year down the line, the women have bounced back to life with a bumper harvest of maize, onions also on the way. This outcome is the result of strategic capacity building on agribusiness, consultation and collaboration with government institutions, and close monitoring and reassurance.

The greatest success in this story is how the women through social mobilization and security system have blended with one another and have become keepers of each other. Despite missing out on some very basic needs, they promised not to sell the farm inputs donated to them and even supported one another to acquire farm land for planting the donated seed.

Recognizing the sexual and reproductive challenges faced by the widows, HIV & AIDS and reproductive health was mainstreamed in this intervention.

THE LENS OF MINORITY WOMEN

All these women are a minority by being women as well as widows. However, for the purpose of this forum, it is important to disaggregate the minority women from the Ogiek minority group constituting only 3% of the entire group and being even a further minority. They come from the remotest parts of Mt Elgon - communication with them is nearly impossible thanks to the mobile technology. The infrastructure is impossible especially during the rains, which is more often than not. Obviously, it is more difficult for the Ogiek woman to access market for her produce no matter how good it is. She has no choice but to sell through the exploitative middleman.

Culturally their men go hunting in the forest and the women claim that there are occasions when the men do not return home even for a whole month, apparently hunting. The widows would have to depend on their in-laws to bring a share of the hunted meat sometimes at a price. This practice exposes the woman to vulnerability and to the risk of sexually transmitted infections including HIV.

Reproductive health remains a great challenge witnessed by the high number of children the women have and the cultural norms they raise about family planning. As young as 20 year old women have upto five children while the older ones have even upto eight and still counting.

An analysis made by minority women on the resources they are able to access and control gives a very gloomy picture and leaves the woman in a most disadvantaged, exploited and unappreciated within the household. While they can access most of the resources at household level, they cannot make decisions over them and therefore has not control over them at all. Permission must be granted by the men. This is despite the fact that women provide labour for the household. These include but not limited to; land, livestock, poultry, household furniture and upholstery, Beehives/honey bags, forests, fishing boats and nets, children.

THE SPIRIT OF THE CONSTITUTION OF KENYA

The constitution of Kenya promulgated 4th August 2011 has a great deal of good intention not just to the woman in general but also to minority groups and therefore by extension minority women. It mirrors a lot of the draft recommendations on guaranteeing the rights of the minority woman.

Relevant Examples

A. Chapter: The Bill of Rights

- i. Equality and freedom from discrimination Clauses
 - Every person is equal before the law and has the right to equal protection and equal benefit of the law
 - **Women and men have the right to equal treatment, including the right to equal opportunities in political, economic, cultural and social spheres.**
 - The state shall not discriminate directly or indirectly against any person on any ground, including race, sex, pregnancy, marital status, ethnic or social origin, colour, age, disability, religion, conscience, belief, culture, dress, language or birth.
- ii. Human Dignity Clause
 - **Every person has inherent dignity and the right to have that dignity respected and protected**
- iii. Slavery, servitude & forced labour Clauses
 - Prohibit slavery and forced labour
- iv. **Minority and marginalized groups Clauses**
 - **Affirmative Programmes to ensure participation & representation**
 - **Special opportunities in education and economic fields**
 - **Special opportunities for access to employment**
- v. Protection of Property Clauses
- vi. **Economic and social rights Clauses – Right to:**
 - **Health care services including reproductive health care**
 - **Access to adequate housing and to reasonable standards of sanitation**
 - **Free from hunger**
 - **Clean & Safe water**
 - **Social security**
 - **Education**

B. Chapter 11: Devolved Government

- i. County assembly gender balance & diversity Clauses
 - **Not more than two thirds of either gender representation rule**
 - Legislation to ensure community and cultural diversity
 - Prescribe mechanisms to protect minorities within counties

LIMITATIONS OF ACCESS TO CONSTITUTIONAL PROVISIONS

However, it should be noted that provision in the constitution does not necessarily translate into implementation and enforcement. The women may not be able to take advantage of what is in the constitution for them due to prevailing low education, poor health, poor housing, high rate of child birth (many children), low self esteem and worse still manipulation of the playing ground by male chauvinists through nepotism, corruption, biased legislation and partisan change of constitution.

CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The government must be alive to protecting the gains so far made in the constitution
2. CSOs have a particular responsible in mobilizing minority women and grassroots communities to be vigilant and watchful on all violations on their rights and take appropriate action.
3. This is only one group of minority women but they resonate the plight of millions of women all over the world. Creating a critical mass of such groups through social mobilization and organization is crucial in the pursuit for gaining minority women's rights
4. Building the economic capacity of the woman impacts positively on her entire life operations and hence pivotal in her progression to satisfy basic needs at personal and household level, gain knowledge and build confidence, make choices and informed decisions, gain respect from the wider society including men making her an ambassador of change.
5. Capacity building should include skills training in livelihoods diversification, increasing knowledge base, access to credit (even in kind), and facilitating access to market. Non-formal and flexible learning approaches should be promoted.
6. Intervention strategies targeting minority women should mainstream economic empowerment to drive a holistic positive change. An economically empowered woman will have a blind eye for retrogressive cultural and social practices.