A GENDER ANALYSIS OF THE KENYAN CRISIS

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Introduction

Once seen as one of the most stable democracies in Africa, Kenya recently experienced violence of an unprecedented magnitude following the parliamentary and presidential elections of 27 December 2007. According to election results, the majority of the parliamentary seats were won by the opposition Orange Democratic Movement (ODM) party, led by Raila Odinga, who also was in the lead during the presidential elections. However, in a sudden turnaround, the Electoral Commission of Kenya announced that incumbent president Mwai Kibaki had won the election. While the dispute between the government and the opposition parties reached some form of resolution through international mediation, the consequences of the turmoil were, unfortunately, far-reaching and severe.

The reported election fraud that reinstated Kibaki into the presidency plunged Kenya into a serious political crisis, with huge economic and humanitarian ramifications. The ethnic-based violence in the aftermath of the disputed polls resulted in a trail of death, destruction and displacement. While the economic consequences were felt domestically, regionally and globally, the humanitarian costs in terms of large-scale killings and internal displacement were unprecedented in Kenya’s recent history. This article focuses specifically on the gender

Above: Sexual violence is the most widely documented victimisation that women suffer, particularly rape during armed conflict. Women walk past a poster emphasising this message, in Nairobi, Kenya.
dimension of the humanitarian disaster that followed the December 2007 elections, and the resultant conflict.

**Armed Violence and Gender**

Women experience conflict in numerous ways — as vulnerable victims, survivors, peace builders and combatants. However, despite the multifaceted experiences of women in conflict situations, it is the experience of victimisation that is most common. Women experience conflict-induced violence in a more protracted way, as part of the civilian population as well as due to their gender.

Women suffer physical violence in terms of indiscriminate and sometimes discriminate killings. However, the most widely documented victimisation that women suffer is sexual violence. This ghastly form of violence has long been accepted as an inevitable reality of armed conflict. Rape is the most widespread sexual violence, noted during armed conflict all over the globe.

A woman is attacked and robbed in the Kibera slum during the January 2008 riots in Nairobi, Kenya.
Besides rape, other forms of sexual violence have also been reported during armed violence. These include forced pregnancy, forced abortion, increase in prostitution, women trafficking, and so on. Women in Sudan, Iraq, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Sierra Leone, Rwanda, Kosovo and Bosnia-Herzegovina have reported brutal rapes, sexual assaults, sexual slavery and mutilation committed by male combatants. Despite the international recognition of ‘rape as an instrument of genocide, a form of torture, and a crime against humanity’, there is no apparent decrease in crisis situations, where impunity is the only rule dutifully abided by all the sides involved. The end to armed violence does not necessarily end violations against women. In post-armed conflict situations, many women continue to confront discrimination and sexual violence. The Kenyan Case

The large-scale victimisation of women during a crisis situation was quite evident in the recent violence that occurred in Kenya. The Kenyan women’s suffering was doubly significant, as they are both part of the unarmed civilian population and the discriminated-against gender group within a patriarchal society. As part of the civilian population, they were injured and killed, but their suffering transcended beyond the usual forms of violence to include sexual torture and the related adverse socio-cultural implications.

Killings

The post-election violence that started in Nairobi, Mombasa, Eldoret in the Rift Valley, and Kisumu in Nyanza, soon engulfed the country. Odinga supporters targeted and attacked members of Kibaki’s ethnic group, the Kikuyus, who were long resented for their
prominence in Kenya’s politics and economy. Human Rights Watch accused the ODM of organising, instigating and facilitating violence against the Kikuyus. It also accused the police of a ‘shoot to kill’ policy against protesters. Violence continued, regardless of the power-sharing agreement being brokered between Kibaki and Odinga. Reportedly, over 1 000 Kenyans died and uncountable numbers were injured in the post-election violence. Though the gender-based statistics are not yet available, women were part of the collateral damage, and many were killed and injured in the politically-instigated ethnic-based violence. There have been many horrific incidents, including the burning of a church in western Kenya containing dozens of Kikuyu women and children, who had sought refuge there.

Internal Displacement

The uprooting of people is almost inextricably related to all crisis situations where violence becomes the norm. While many people affected by the violence took shelter in safer parts of Kenya, numerous others fled to Uganda. Despite the terminology difference – wherein the former group is referred to as ‘internally displaced people’ and the latter group referred to as ‘refugees’ – the displacement situation was similar. The first phase of uprooting took place from the North Rift region and parts of western Kenya and Nyanza, where mainly Kikuyus were victimised and the perpetrators were the Luos, Luhyias and the Kalenjins. The second phase of displacement started when the Kikuyu militias retaliated by chasing the ‘enemy’ tribes from the areas where they were a majority. Reportedly, over 800 000 people fled their homes in the post-election crisis situation. Here again, although the gender-based assessments are not available, it can be easily estimated that women would have constituted at least fifty percent of the uprooted population, if not more.

Sexual Violence

Following the disputed 2007 elections, and like in any other crisis situation, women in Kenya were most vulnerable to sexual violence. In January 2008, it was reported that hospital admissions for rape had doubled in Kenya in the post-election scenario. In fact, the Nairobi Women’s Hospital and the Coast General Hospital in Mombasa reported a two- to threefold increase in the number of women and children seeking treatment for sexual assault since early January 2008. The Nairobi Women’s Hospital provided the following data: over eighty percent (356) of the treated cases were for sexual violence. Of these cases, ninety-three percent were adult women while the rest were children and men; only nine percent were cases of physical assault, seven percent were domestic violence-related cases, and four percent

Kenyan women emerged as an important pressure group for peace by means of negotiations.
A different kind of tragedy has befallen women in marriages and relationships across ethnic and tribal lines, who have been forced to separate from their spouses and partners. During the armed conflict, men belonging to rival ethnic groups had to flee from their homes and communities. While for some the separations have been temporary, with the couple reuniting after the country’s return to some stability, for many others the separation could be permanent, due to family or community pressures. These women, with no information regarding their husbands, face an uncertain future. They have been left to fend for themselves, with the community unwilling to take any responsibility for their ‘unappreciated act’ of marrying across ethnic and tribal lines. A news report quotes two women, whose husbands from a different ethnic tribe were forced to flee, saying that people of their own community have shunned them by asking: “Who told you to intermarry?” They state further: “We are now useless to the community; they don’t talk to us, anything... I’ll just believe that one day, one time, he (husband) will come.”

While marriages were a unifying factor between more than 40 tribal communities living in Kenya, the ethnic divisions may now be further emphasised in the aftermath of the violence, thus further rupturing the socio-cultural fabric in Kenya. There are no complete statistics on how many families have been affected by the recent violence, but the impact has been particularly felt in western Kenya, where tribal tensions have been most inflamed following the disputed re-election of President Kibaki.

### Status of Women

The nature and extent of gender-based violence in any crisis situation is also an indicator of the status of women in the particular society. Since women in Kenya have a comparatively low socio-economic status, their vulnerability substantially increased in the crisis following the disputed re-election. That women in Kenya have lower status than their male counterparts is indicated across all spheres of life – social, cultural,
economic and political. Relating women’s low status to the post-election violence scenario is quite important, as neither the pre-election violence nor its subsequent harsh impact on women received due attention. It is also important to note that, during the election campaign, many women – both candidates and their supporters – reported 255 cases of assaults. The assaults were designed to intimidate and terrorise aspirant women into withdrawing, and ranged from verbal intimidation to physical harm. Hundreds of women received telephonic threats, some women were beaten and many others were publicly humiliated by being called ‘prostitute’ while they addressed rallies. In a shocking incident, an aspiring parliamentarian was shot dead in Nairobi, while another was dragged from a campaign convoy and gang raped. Consequently, many women withdrew from the electoral fray.

Although the number of women aspirants was highest in the 2007 elections, slightly more than a dozen women were elected, accounting for less than the number of successful women than in the previous election. Interestingly, there was no apparent bar on women playing a tacit political role as voters. Of Kenya’s 14 million voters, 6.7 million were women. The elections turn-out was unprecedented, indicating that women too participated overwhelmingly in the elections, as voters. It is not surprising that women remain under-represented in Kenya’s politics. The specific targeting of women candidates and their supporters in the recent elections substantiates the deep-rooted gender bias that exists. This biased gender perspective, deeply entrenched in Kenyan society, revealed itself in its worst form in the recent post-election situation. Although women suffered even prior to the elections, this continued in a more ghastly form in the post-election scenario. The effects of this will likely continue to be experienced for a long time to come. The Kenyan case shows that women’s suffering, generally as part of the civilian population and specifically due to their gender, is not given due and serious attention by those who hold the power, in order to affect the situation positively.

Peace Attempts

Despite being targeted victims, Kenyan women emerged as an important pressure group, favouring peace by means of negotiation. They organised peace
marches to show solidarity with victims. Women’s organisations like GROOTS worked towards long-term reconciliation processes. Peace dialogues were organised to bring divided communities together to highlight the common suffering among ethnic groups, so as to enable non-violent advocacy action. Many other organisations, like the Gender Violence Recovery Centre (GVRC), offered free medical services, counselling and referral to legal services for the victims of sexual violence. The GVRC also dispatched mobile units to the slums and camps set up for internally displaced persons, to provide services to needy women. Many international organisations like Global Fund for Women, Urgent Action Fund, African Women’s Development Fund, Action Aid International, Vital Voices, Nairobi Peace Initiative, and so on, contributed to the efforts to address the gender-based violence that occurred in Kenya.

A significant number of Kenyan women called for an immediate end to inter-ethnic killings, impunity and gross violations of human rights – especially the increasing cases of sexual crimes and gang rapes – in a communiqué handed over to the mediation team, led by former UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan. They also appealed for urgent attention to be paid to the special needs of women and children. Women’s groups also called for constitutional reforms, and measures to restore the rule of law and order. Advocating peace and reconciliation, these groups also demanded their due place in the peace process, as reaffirmed in United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security; the African Union Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality; and the protocol to the African Charter on the Rights of Women in Africa. Annan reaffirmed the need to have women at the peacebuilding table though, in the later stages, the ‘persistent use of women’s bodies as the battlefield for political gain and influence’. While the Annan-led mediation has succeeded in restoring some stability in Kenya, the achievement of positive peace, where women are treated as equals and are free of oppression in all forms, still remains a distant dream.

**Conclusion**

Although the Kenyan crisis has brought into focus diverse issues ranging from democracy to good governance and from corruption to human rights, the gender implications of the crisis needs serious analysis and attention from a broader perspective. In patriarchal systems that remain entrenched, to varying degrees, in every culture, country and continent, women continue to suffer in all spheres of life, be it socio-cultural, economic or political. Violence against women in situations of armed conflict is thus mostly an extension of the gender discrimination that already persists and exists during times of peace. Although it is argued that conflict situations bring empowerment for women, there can be no denying the fact that, generally, the impact of armed violence on women is hugely negative and, where empowerment does occur, it is either accidental, partial or marked with tragedy. The overwhelming negative impact of violence, as evident in Kenya, needs to be given urgent international, regional and local attention. Amongst other things, the Kenyan crisis has once again brought into focus the ‘persistent use of women’s bodies as the battlefield for political gain and influence’.

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**Endnotes**


