



# HISTORY OF FEMINISM IN KENYA

KENYA GROUP

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GROUP: Lillian Adawo, Lucy W. Gikonyo, Regina M. Kudu, Olga Mutoro,

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Feminism can be defined as the right to enough information available to every single woman so that she can make a choice to live which is non-discriminatory and which works within the principle of social, cultural, political and economic equity and independence. Feminism is also a global phenomenon which addresses various issues related to women across the world in a specific manner as applicable to a particular culture or society.



Feminism simply put can be seen as a movement for social, political and economic equality of men and women. It can also mean engaging with the government, the law, the social and cultural practices and beliefs of the society and participating in the gainful economic activity “all with a goal” of bringing equality among the sexes.<sup>1</sup> Feminism has also been defined as an ideology that seeks equality of both men and women. It deconstructs patriarchy and promotes gender equality. It also advocates the transformation of all social relations of power that oppress, exploit or marginalize any set of people- women and men, on the basis of their gender, age, sexual orientation, ability, race, religion, nationality, location, ability, class, caste or ethnicity.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Rise-of-womenhood.org

<sup>2</sup> Report on Feminist Leadership and Movement Building Institute (FLAMBI) by Nelly Njoki – Program Coordinator Amani Communities Africa (ACA)

Feminism appeared, for the first time, as early as the 19th Century, the century of large emancipatory, social movements, as an international social movement with an autonomous identity with theoretical and organizational structure, central to other important social movements, including various socialism and anarchism. As pointed out, capitalism disrupted gender relationships and as a result the **Suffrage Movement** was born in this context. A large number of women, much cheaper and docile than men were employed in Industrial jobs. However the opposite was true for the bourgeois, the new social class. Women were confined to their homes, like a symbol of male status and professional success. Women were increasingly outraged with the situation where they were considered legal property of men and denied access to education and liberal professions. In this context, women started to organize themselves to demand the right of suffrage, which explains why they were called suffragists. This did not mean that this was their only demand. On the contrary, suffragists fought for equality in all areas, calling for genuine universality of democratic and liberal values.<sup>3</sup>

Feminism is a diverse, competing and often opposing collection of social theories, political movements and moral philosophies largely motivated by or concerning the experience of women, especially in terms of their social, political and economic inequalities. One institutionally predominant type of feminism focuses on limiting or eliminating gender inequality to promote women's rights, interests and issues in society. Another opposing type of modern feminism, with deep historical roots, focuses on earning and establishing equity by and for women, vis-a-vis men to promote those same rights, interests and issues, regardless of gender considerations. Thus, as with an ideology, political movements or philosophy, there is no single, universal form of feminism that represents all feminists.

The most well known types of feminism are: liberal feminism, social feminism, radical feminism and post-modern feminism. This included feminist theory which is seen as an extension to feminism into theoretical or philosophical ground. It encompasses work done in a broad variety of discipline, prominently including the approaches to women's roles and lives

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<sup>3</sup> Extracts from the paper: "Transgressive, visible, and outspoken. Empowerment and employability of women. A model of Action: Beatriz Torres Martin.

and feminist politics in anthropology and sociology, economics, women's and gender studies, feminist literary criticism, and philosophy.

Feminist theory aims to understand the nature of inequality and focuses on gender politics, power relation and sexuality. While generally providing a critique of social relations, much of Feminist theory also focuses on analyzing gender inequality and the promotion of women's rights, interests and issues. Themes explored in Feminism include discrimination, stereotyping, objectification (especially sexual objectification), oppression and patriarchy.

There also is Cyber feminism is a woman-centered perspective that advocates women's use of new information and communications technologies for empowerment. Some cyber feminists see these technologies as inherently liberatory and argue that their development will lead to an end to male superiority because women are uniquely suited to life in the digital age (Millar, 1998). The term cyber feminism, which explicitly fuses gender and information technology, arose in the 1980s and early 1990s. Hawthorne and Klein in their book, "Cyber feminist" state: "Just as there are liberal, socialist, radical and post-modern feminists, so too one finds these positions reflected in the interpretations of Cyber feminism" (Hawthorne and Klein, 1999).

Cyber feminists saw the potential of the internet and computer science as technologies to level the playing and open new avenues for job opportunities and creativity for women where absence of sexism, racism and other oppression would serve as major contrasts between the virtual world and the real world.

Currently, there are not many and explicit applications of feminist theory in the context of Information System research. However, the emerging area of cyber feminism can benefit from different types of feminism in order to build cyber feminist theories. Cyber feminism uses aspects of different feminist theories to reflect many interactions among information technologies, women and feminism. Rosser (2005) believes that Cyber feminism appears currently to pick and choose among aspects of various feminist theories in a somewhat uncritical fashion without developing a coherent or successor theory. Therefore she proposes a brief exploration of what each of the feminist theories suggest for this less developed theory of Cyber feminism.

Another theory developed is that of Liberal theory that seeks no special privileges for women and simply demands that everyone receives equal considerations without discrimination on the basis of sex. Liberal feminists would seek to remove barriers that prevent equal access for women to information technology, jobs not only to provide economic equality but to provide access to higher-paying jobs to women. In contrast to women feminism, social feminism rejects individualism and positivism. *Social feminism* believes that technology and the social shaping of technology have often been conceptualized in terms of men, excluding women at all levels. Socialist feminist reforms suggest that the allocation of resources for technology development should be determined by greatest benefit for the common good.

Radical feminism is another of the developed theories which maintains that women's oppression is the first most widespread and deepest oppression. Radical feminist reject most of the scientific theories, data and experiments not only because they excludes women but also because they are not women-centered. Radical feminist suggests that because men, masculinity, and patriarchy have become completely intertwined with technology and computer systems in our society, no truly feminist alternative to technology exists.

*Postmodern feminist theories* imply that universal research agenda or application of technologies will be appropriate and that various women will have different reactions to technologies depending upon their own class, race, sexuality, culture, country and other factors. This definition of postmodern feminism parallels to the description of the complex and diverse co-evolution of women and computing. In contrast to liberal feminism, postmodernism dissolves the universal subject and the possibility that women speak in a unified voice or that they can be universally addressed. Wajcman's (1991) thought analysis of the constructivist perspective on gender and technology reveals some of the issues embedded into its assumptions. She points out that there is no behavior or meaning which is universally and cross-culturally associated with either masculinity or femininity, that what is considered masculine in some societies is considered feminine or gender-neutral in others. It is not that gender difference does not exist but that it is manifested differently in different societies. Therefore, addressing the gender gap in IT employment based upon an assumed "women perspective" is problematic. She cite Harding (1986) in observing that there are as many different "women's experiences" as there are types of women.

## Waves of Feminism

Traditionally the history of feminism is divided into the three waves of feminism namely First wave, Second wave and Third wave. To mention briefly, the first wave dates back to the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is mostly believed that feminism evolved from America then to the rest of the world. In America the feminist movement began with the America Revolution. Mary Wollstonecraft wrote her famous 'Vindication of the Rights of Women'(1792) under the influence of the French Revolution The history of feminism in North- America started with some kind of organized activity from the time of "American war Independence" in the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century. Women participated in this struggle along with men and were strongly involved in boycotting the British made goods. Feminist movement got a new turn in America in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century when black women understood that for them to live a dignified life it was not only a fight to carry against racism but it was also a struggle against their own men who believed in traditional gender stereotyping and practiced social and cultural norms which encouraged bias and discrimination against women. During these times black women organized themselves and carried out their struggle in public platforms like church congregations. The real turning point in black women getting fully involved in the feminist movement came after the incidence when black feminist, Sojourner Truth, stood before the Second Annual Convention of Women's Rights in Akron Ohio in 1852 and quite outspokenly demanded the right for vote for Black American Women amongst other things.

The Second wave of Feminism on the other hand is especially associated with the period of 1960s to 1980s. This wave came as an explosion in America the spread across the world like fire. This movement was especially vocal in matter like civil rights, sexual liberation, childcare, health, welfare education, work and reproductive rights including the right to abortion. Cultural and social equalities for women were also an issue in the Second wave of Feminism. This Second wave campaigned heavily against the social and cultural stereotyping of women as "only capable of becoming housewives" and nothing more. It advocated for equal rights for women as of men to pursue a work life and career.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The central focus of the second wave feminism was on total gender equality – women as a group having the same social, political, legal and economic rights that men have.



The third wave of Feminism is in fact a continuation of the second wave of feminism beginning from the early 1990s and it focuses on the perceived failures of the second wave of feminism. Further the movement broadens into global dimensions with different shades of feminism becoming visible based on specific to a particular society or culture. Feminism primarily started as a phenomenon in Europe and America in its early days and now it has spread throughout the world in various ways.<sup>5</sup>

### **Feminism in Africa**

To understand the concept of feminism better we have to have its history in Africa. In Africa women were active in the struggle against colonial powers and were also fighting for better reproductive rights. Age for marriage was raised in some of the African countries like Egypt in this period. Today we talk about African Feminism because African women themselves do so and because they have quite a clear idea of what they mean when they use the term. This can be seen from the example of Albertina Sisulu, the respected senior women in the African National Congress (ANC) of South Africa and also the wife of Walter Sisulu when she symbolized this new wave of female activism when she joined the women's walkout at the ANC Party Conference in Durban in 1992. The walkout demanded that the ANC commit itself to 33% female representation in parliament and other government positions in the new South Africa to come. Women's movement in Africa continent reflects the gendered cultural, social and political organization of the numerous African societies in which they are located. There is enough evidence to suggest that African history is replete with diverse examples of mobilization against women's oppression, even though these have often been omitted by historians. The available evidence suggests that women's movement in Africa reflect the traditions of organization that have characterized spiritual and material life in Africa as far back as history goes. African women have long been organized around lineage and kinship groupings, and around women's religious, cultural and political duties and their productive and reproductive roles. The record also shows these existing organizations were sporadically activated to defend women's interests.

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<sup>5</sup> Rise of womanhood.org

## Feminism in Kenya

Kenyan women were organized in *mumikanda* (work parties) and in various social and welfare groups- *ngwatio* among the Kikuyu-speaking communities, and *mwethya* among the Kamba-speaking communities. In Nigeria, Igbo women were organized as in various patrilineage wives and daughters associations and governed through women councils. Such networks of women collectively imposed sanctions on their husbands who erred (the practice of “sitting on a man”) and proved capable of instigating widespread civil disturbances when they found their interests compromised.

As colonialism gained ground, some of the earlier women’s organizations and groups were redirected by missionary groups and colonial governments, often through volunteers with a degree of Western Education. These modern “women’s club” were often designed to “civilize” and “uplift” African women, usually by instilling Western European Ideologies of domesticity and offering training in related skills (Tranberg Hansen). Examples of women’s groups coming together as larger bodies include the Mother’s Union and the Catholic Women’s Club in Uganda, the Federation of Nigerian Women’s society, the National Council of Women of Kenya, and the Association of Women’s Club in Zimbabwe. When nationalists movements gained momentum, seemingly conventional women’s groups and associations-charitable and welfare groups, mothers groups and market women’s associations, often directed their energies in support of Nationalists groups.<sup>6</sup>

The women’s movement in Kenya has faced many challenges to gain equality in political, social and economic aspects of the society due to the patriarchal nature of the Kenyan society. Some of the most notable women who have contributed immensely to the feminist movement in Kenya are; the late Professor Wangare Muta Maathai who was an environmental and political activist. In 1977 she formed the Green Belt Movement, a non-profit organization that aimed to promote conservation of the environment and at the same time women’s rights. She worked to improve women’s livelihoods by increasing their access to resources such as clean water and firewood for cooking; the movement is also known to involve women in planting trees.

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<sup>6</sup> Africa and African Diaspora Feminism

The struggle for affirmative action in Kenya can be traced back to 1996 when the Honorable Charity Ngilu moved a motion in Parliament on the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action, however it did not pass. In 1997 Hon. Phoebe Asiyo tabled the first affirmative action bill in Parliament but it flopped. Despite the fact that the bill was not passed, this created an opportunity for other female members of parliament to push for an increase in the number of women in Parliament. In 2007 the Minister for Justice and Constitutional Affairs, the Hon. Martha Karua tabled the Constitutional (Amendment) Bill 2007 on Affirmative Action that aimed at creating 50 automatic seats for women in the 10<sup>th</sup> Parliament and create additional 40 Constituencies in the Kenya. She defended the creation of 50 special seats as an affirmative action issue, which sought to put women's representation in Parliament at par with their population size. This move led to an uproar from other members of Parliament who felt that the Hon Minister had personalized the Bill and that the Bill had major gap. Parliament therefore refused to adopt the Bill. Outside Parliament the Hon. Minister received support from women in the civil society, former MPs, Women bodies such as Maendeleo ya Wanawake, the National Women Coordinating Committee, educationists and media specialists.<sup>7</sup> The struggle for affirmative action finally bore fruit as the Kenya Constitution which was promulgated in 2010 provides a legal framework for gender equality and women's empowerment. Notably, affirmative action is guaranteed in the Constitution in a couple of provisions including Article 27 (8) that states that the State shall take legislative and other measures to implement the principle that not more than two-thirds of the members of elective or appointive bodies shall be of the same gender. Article 81 (b) provides that not more than two-thirds of the members of elective public bodies shall be of the same gender.<sup>8</sup>

It is a fact that women in Kenya still struggle with issues such as domestic Violence, poverty, Female Genital Mutilation, and other social injustices. Since the passing of the new Constitution women/men (either gender) must comprise at least one third of all elective or appointive positions. Recently, the major debate in Kenya has been on the two- third rule on

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<sup>7</sup> African Woman and Child Feature Service:50 Special Seats for Women:Debate and Media Coverage Reports. Available at [http://www.awcfs.org/dmdocuments/research/The 50 Special Seats for Women Debate and Media Coverage](http://www.awcfs.org/dmdocuments/research/The%2050%20Special%20Seats%20for%20Women%20Debate%20and%20Media%20Coverage)

<sup>8</sup> The Kenyan Constitution (2010)

representation embedded in the new Constitution. The cabinet has been keen on amending this Article but this position has changed after several protests from the various women rights organizations in the country. To most people and especially men, the move by the women's rights organizations has been as a silk-cushioned landing for women in the rough and tumble world of politics.

### **Challenges**

Feminism is still treated with suspicion among Kenyans not just by men but even some women who have worked in the women's and gender movement for many years. This is due to a misconception of what feminism is and its association with the more radical stance that is given more publicity than the core of feminism which is basically humanism, justice and fairness for all.<sup>9</sup>

Feminist ideology can clarify for women their power especially as voters and show them the ways this power can be used to resist oppression and exploitation. If Kenyan women are to achieve their quest for equality and equity, they must continue to fight the negative challenge that perpetuate their marginalized positions.<sup>10</sup>

### **Feminist Organizations and movements and their contribution to the advancement of women rights in Kenya.**

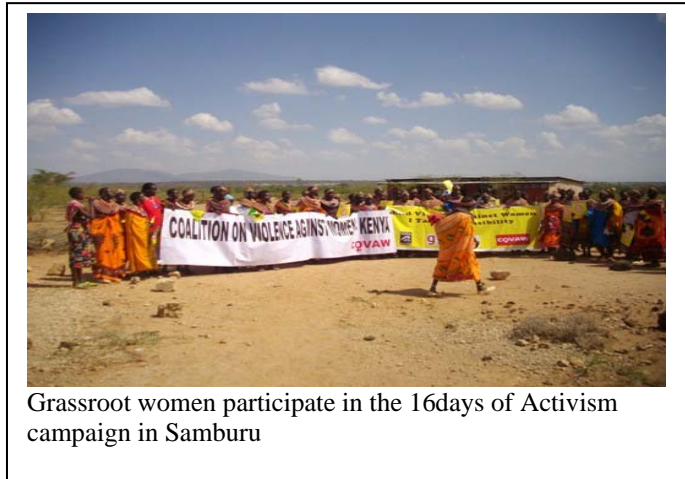
In Kenya we have several feminists' organizations that have contributed to the advancement of women's rights in the country. For instance we have **Coalition on Violence against Women-Kenya (COVAW-K)**. This is one of the feminists organizations in Kenya that provides women space in that it does not employ men except for the drivers. COVAW believes in giving women chances to work and prove and improve themselves. In addition COVAW is credited with breaking the silence on violence against women something that has facilitated media coverage

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<sup>9</sup> This may make even women who describe their stance as feminists not to say so publicly for fear of being seen as men – bashers or people who stand against family values.

<sup>10</sup> Daily Nation – 26<sup>th</sup> April 2011, Kenya ; Fminism Vs Gender Agenda by Nyokabi Kamau

on the phenomenon as well as empower women to take steps to end violence in their lives. COVAW has contributed to the advancement of women's rights because it has raised a reasonable level of awareness on violence against women.<sup>11</sup>



Grassroot women participate in the 16days of Activism campaign in Samburu

There is also the **Education Center For Women in Democracy (ECWD)**, that conduct capacity building for aspiring women leaders, providing women's human rights education (through training workshops and seminars for community based human rights educator and policy makers), and engaging in community mobilization. ECWD is also active in women human rights education, civic education at community level, community mobilization, training workshops and seminars, development and publications of resource materials and awareness creation through media and research and information dissemination on women's human rights issues.<sup>12</sup>

Another organization is the **Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA - Kenya)**. It is a non-profit, non-partisan membership organization committed to the creation of a society that is free from all forms of discrimination against women. They have done this through the provision of legal aid to indigent women, engagement on legal, policy and legislative reform, treaty monitoring and research among other programmatic interventions. FIDA has contributed to the advancement of women's rights by providing services such as quality legal services to a limited

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<sup>11</sup> [www.covaw.or.ke](http://www.covaw.or.ke)

<sup>12</sup> ECWD website

number of women, creating awareness on legal rights and educating women on self-representation, research, monitor and report women's rights violations and they also lobby and advocate for reforms of laws and policies that discriminate against women.<sup>13</sup> FIDA is also well known for employing women to empower them and involve them in the process of fighting for the rights of women in Kenya.

We have networks such as **The Solidarity for African Women's Rights (SOAWR)** Coalition is a regional network comprised of 37 national, regional and international civil society organizations working towards the promotion and protection of women's human rights in Africa. Since its inauguration in 2004, SOAWR's main area of focus has been to compel African states to urgently sign, ratify, domesticate and implement the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (hereinafter referred to as 'the Protocol').

In addition to campaigns for ratification, the SOAWR Coalition has recently scaled up its focus on the next critical levels of domestication and implementation of the Protocol, as a way of translating the ideals enshrined in the Protocol into realities lived and enjoyed by African women. In October 2010, Kenya ratified the protocol.

This came with several challenges such as :

- ratification with reservations, such as in the case of Kenya Article 10 (3) and Article 14 (2) (c)
- wavering political will to prioritize the implementation of women's rights,
- negative cultural, religious and attitudinal perceptions
- practices which undermine the progressive provisions of the Protocol.
- conservative and militaristic political climate and often times prohibitive operating environments for human rights activists

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<sup>13</sup> [www.fidakenya.org](http://www.fidakenya.org)

Currently COVAW-K is working on providing support for accelerated domestication and implementation of the Protocol through a multi-sectoral approach to integrate the Protocol in national laws, policies and budgets.

Equality Now carried out a training on using the Protocol in litigating on behalf of women and girls before national and regional judicial mechanisms, to select cases and strategies to make the Protocol an effective tool to safe guard the rights of women and girls in their countries, to encourage lawyers to push for judge made law that can add pressure on governments to enact new laws and policies that reflect the rights provided for within the Protocol.

**Achievements:**

- Use of the protocol to support the arguments in court.
- Arena to seek for remedies at the African court African Commission

SOAWR has contributed to the advancement of women's rights by:

- Producing advocacy material in various media including special issues of Pambazuka News.
- Having participated in African Union Summit, engaging with ambassadors and ministers, holding press conferences and discussions with national civil society organizations.
- Written to African presidents on several occasions about their commitment to ratify, domesticate and implement the protocol as declared in the Solemn Declaration on Gender equality in Africa adopted in July 2004.
- Brought together AU decision makers, government representatives and women's leaders in parallel with African Union Conferences and regional economic unions to ensure the visibility of women's rights.

Following a conference held in Uganda from 10<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> of April 2010 dubbed **Feminist Leadership and Movement Building Institute (FLAMBI)**,<sup>14</sup> the participants a number of them

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<sup>14</sup> Conference brought together a number of women from Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, sudan, Ethiopia, SOMALIA AND outh Africa. The panelists and tutors were a diverse team of women feminists from Uganda, India, Sudan and Nicaragua.

Kenyan, met and formed themselves into a loose network called Feminist in Kenya Action (FIKA). This movement meets regularly to strategize on building the feminist movement in Kenya. Following the referendum held in Kenya in 2010, FIKA in collaboration with other like minded organizations identified a YES campaign strategy targeting young women in Nairobi.

The aim of the campaign dubbed “**Waremba ni Yes**” (WYN)<sup>15</sup> was to lobby the women to vote yes to the new Constitution which holds a number of economic, political and cultural rights in favour of women in Kenya.



**Kenya Female Advisory Organization (KEFEADO)** which is a gender concern National NGO registered in Kenya as a non-partisan and non-profit making Organization in 1994. The organization is regionally based with its head office in Kisumu, the Headquarters of Nyanza Province.

The driving force behind the establishment of KEFEADO was a felt need to bridge the development gaps and particularly the gender and human rights specific gaps. It was felt that a holistic approach to development process including child development, would be ideal and its application would gradually reduce the Gender blind practices that characterize traditional socialization process in our society, the analysis of beliefs and myths would also help in understanding their implications on the human rights and Gender inequalities and inequities most of which adversely affect women and girls.

It was and is still the conviction in KEFEADO that, a systematic objective dialogue and review of both authentic and "perceived" cultural values will enhance the identification of social ills within the society thereby reducing the gender based violence, non-democratic process and human rights abuses which continue to polarize families and by extension disorganize the

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<sup>15</sup> A Kiswahili word meaning all the pretty girls will vote for the new Constitution.



learning institutions thereby presenting a situation where more time is spent discussing conflicts instead of focusing on academics and other aspects of human resource development.<sup>16</sup>

**GROOTS Kenya** is another feminist movement. It is a network of women self-help groups and community organizations in Kenya. It was formed as a response to inadequate visibility of grassroots women in development and decision-making forums that directly impact them and their communities. GROOTS Kenya bridges this gap through initiatives that are community-centered and women-led.

The network's objective is to "ensure that grassroots women are masters of their own destiny through their direct participation in decision making processes." Thus GROOTS Kenya's goal is to strengthen the role of grassroots women in community development by serving as a platform for grassroots women's groups and individuals to: come together, to share their ideas/experiences, to network and to find avenues to directly participate in decision making, planning, and implementation of issues that affect them.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> <http://www.kefeado.co.ke>

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.groots.org/members/kenya.htm>

## CONCLUSION

It is a known fact that Women in most African societies have little or no decision making power and limited participation in political processes, including negotiations for peace. Historically women trapped in war zones have been portrayed as victims and less often as peace negotiators, mediators and national leaders with impact on conflicts that affect them.

The UN Security Council on Women, Peace and Security which was passed in 2000 stresses the importance of women's participation in all aspects of peace processes and provides a political framework, in which women's issues and perspectives become relevant to all functions of the Security Council. This resolution was passed after the acknowledgement that women are particularly well placed to be part of peace negotiations and that their capabilities as peace builders have been overlooked<sup>18</sup>.

A good example is Chief Sekina of the Munda tribe in the Maridi Rural Council (South Sudan) who was empowered to settle disputes not only between individuals but also between various groups in the community. The chief and her assistants would engage the community in debate on issues that were likely to generate conflict<sup>19</sup>.

In Kenya many women have defied tradition and have come out strongly to champion for peace within their communities. The late Dekha Ibrahim a Kenyan peace builder contributed immensely to peace building and conflict management by bringing together people from warring clans in Wajir district in the North Eastern Province of Kenya. Once an agreement had been reached between the warring clans, Dekha together with members of her community was able to set up the Wajir Peace Committee with representatives from the clans, government security organs, Parliamentarians, Civil Servants, Muslim and Christian Religious leaders and NGOs to implement the agreement. Dekha was assigned Secretary of this Peace Committee.

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<sup>18</sup> Designing a PeaceBuilding Infrastructure: Taking a Systems Approach To the Prevention of Deadly Conflict. Published by UN Non-Governmental Liaison Service (NGLS)

<sup>19</sup> Sudan Between Peace and War: Internally Displaced Women in Khartoum and South and West Kordofan. By Amna E Badri and Intisar I. Abdei Sadig Published by United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM)



## History of Feminism in Kenya

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The women of Kenya acknowledge the devastating elements of their history: the violent aftershocks of colonialism. But they are not just survivors. They are creators, boldly writing a new narrative.<sup>20</sup>

“ If you believe in equal rights for women, you are a feminist, no “iffs” or “buts”!<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Brooke Elise Axtell in *Feminism in Kenya : A New Narrative*

<sup>21</sup> Report on FLAMBI by Nelly Njoki – Program Coordinator Amani Communities Africa (ACA)

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