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Intersecting inequalities in women's political inclusion in Kenya

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ABSTRACT

Sub-Saharan Africa has become known for its growing number of women political decision makers, and its progressive policies and laws such as gender quotas. Yet we still do not know enough about how politically active women themselves perceive the challenges and opportunities of being women in politics, and how their experiences differ because of intersecting inequalities. Inspired by the intersectional approach and literature on women and politics in Africa, this article examines politically active women's perceptions and experiences of electoral politics in Kenya. Through their own stories, it describes how diverse Kenyan women experience political inclusion and exclusion not only as women, but also simultaneously through the complex combinations of such intersecting identities and structural social positionalities as ethnicity and class. Taking party nominations, political campaigning, and electoral violence as examples, the article illustrates how intersecting patterns cross-cut electoral processes. By identifying barriers to their political inclusion, politically active women explain how things should *not* be, and in doing so, they participate in imagining and outlining new ways of conducting politics in Kenya.

KEYWORDS Intersectionality; elections; ethnicity; inequality; Kenya

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Introduction

Sub-Saharan Africa has become known for its growing number of women political decision makers, and its progressive policies and laws such as gender quotas. Globally, Rwanda has the highest proportion of women in the national parliament, and South Africa, Senegal, Namibia, and Mozambique also rank among the top 20 countries in the world (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2023). This has sparked interest among feminist scholars

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of politics. Consequently, a diversity of factors, variables, barriers, and opportunities related to women's political inclusion in Africa have been increasingly investigated (Adams, Scherpereel, and Jacob 2016; Bauer and Britton 2006; Bauer and Burnet 2013; Stockemer 2011). Additionally, related studies concerning feminist activism and its connection to processes of democratization and electoral politics in Africa have looked at politics from the perspective of collective feminist organizing and mobilizations (Kaskinen and Mwaura forthcoming; Nyabola 2018; Tripp 2016). Yet we still do not know enough about how politically active women themselves perceive the challenges and opportunities of being women in politics, and how their experiences differ because of intersecting inequalities based on ethnicity, class, and other aspects. Women's own experiences in all of their diversity remain underexamined.

Inspired by literature on women and politics in Africa (see for example Berry, Bouka, and Muthoni Kamuru 2021; Bouka, Berry, and Muthoni Kamuru 2019; Tripp 2003, 2016) and the intersectional approach in electoral politics (see for example Smooth 2006), this article examines politically active women's perceptions and experiences of electoral politics in Kenya. It focuses on those women who have been able to enter the national forums of political decision making, as well as those who are still actively seeking political opportunities. Kenya is a relevant case study country because it is known for its vibrant feminist movements and hosting of international summits and conferences related to gender equality and women's rights, as well as its progressive rights-based constitution of 2010, which introduced two-thirds gender quotas, among other reforms. In terms of women's political inclusion, while the proportion of women in the National Assembly and the Senate more than doubled in the 2013 and 2017 elections due to gender quotas, in terms of the actual number of women in the national parliament it still ranks relatively poorly, ranked 98th in the world (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2023). In the latest election, in 2022, the Kenyan electorate chose 29 women members of parliament (MPs), up from 23 in the 2017 election, with seven women governors, up from three in 2017, and three women senators, the same number as before (National Gender and Equality Commission 2022). Together with the women chosen through women-only, youth, and disability quotas, women currently comprise 23 percent of parliamentarians and 31 percent of senators (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2023).

Through their own stories, this article describes how Kenyan women experience political inclusion and exclusion not only as women, but also simultaneously through the complex combinations of their intersecting identities and diverse structural social positionalities. While race – particularly the experiences and political activism of Black women in the United States (US) – has been foundational in the intersectional approach (Collins 2019; Crenshaw 1991), ethnicity is crucial in the context of Kenyan electoral politics, as the country's population is composed of more than 40 ethnic nationalities

(Odhiambo 2005), and political parties tend to organize largely on the basis of ethnic affiliation (Hulterström, Kamete, and Melber 2007; Kakai Wanyonyi and Gona 2010). However, race has historically played a foundational role in the colonial exploitation of Africa – including Kenya – as racism, resource extraction, and capitalist development were complexly intertwined during the colonial era (Mamdaani 2018). Stark inequalities and poverty still affect millions of people's lives today (World Bank 2020), and the gap between rich and poor has been widening (Odusola et al. 2017, 10), thus indicating the crucial importance of class relations for intersectional analysis in a lower-middle-income, postcolonial country such as Kenya. Consequently, the focus of this article is on gender, ethnicity, and class as the main intersectional characteristics, though age and marital status are also discussed.

Intersectionality has been widely studied in various fields in Africa (Mupotsa 2020; Ramtohul 2015), and has recently been emphasized by well-known feminists such as Sylvia Tamale (2020), but has not featured much in the study of electoral politics. While recognizing and embracing the necessity for feminist solidarities and joint agendas, this article amplifies the calls for an "increasing attentiveness to the diversity of women participating in electoral politics" (Smooth 2006, 409). As intersecting identities and structural positionalities such as gender, ethnicity, and class blend to create or deny distinct political opportunities for women, the analytical focus on intersections is critical because it highlights the complexity of inequalities (Simien 2007). According to Naila Kabeer and Ricardo Santos (2017), intersecting inequalities can be conceptualized as a combination of vertical inequalities – which refer to individual or household-based incomes, material assets, and human capabilities – and horizontal inequalities or group-based social discrimination based on diverse identities. Applying these findings to the field of electoral politics, this article defines intersecting inequalities as a complex constellation of cultural, institutional, and material power asymmetries and barriers wherein women's experiences in politics differ from those of men, and also vary between women according to ethnicity, class, age, and other characteristics. Taking party nominations, political campaigning, and electoral violence as examples, the article illustrates how these intersecting patterns cross-cut electoral processes. What an intersectional approach reveals is that women's experiences emerge as products of sexism and patriarchy, but also of ethnic nationalism and the racism that it entails, as well as discrimination based on wealth, age, and marital status – a complexity that has not yet been sufficiently discussed in the scholarly literature or policy papers. Importantly, by identifying barriers to their political inclusion and problems in the political system, politically active women illustrate how things should *not* be, and, in so doing, they – consciously or unconsciously – participate in imagining and outlining new ways of exercising politics in Kenya.

Instead of clearly separating factors, variables, barriers, and opportunities into neat categories as is often done in the literature on political representation and participation, the intersectional approach is more holistic, nuanced, and "messy" (Smooth 2006). This blurriness is in tune with ethnographic accounts of people's dynamic lives, thus relating to this article's methodology. With the aim of providing an in-depth and nuanced contextual analysis, it combines the examination of women and politics in Africa with critical development studies' normative quest for global justice, and an ethnographically oriented qualitative approach that draws its inspiration from political anthropology. The primary data consists of 65 semi-structured qualitative interviews conducted in the Kenyan capital Nairobi among women politicians, young women aspiring to become politicians, politically active men, civil society leaders, political party members, and representatives of development agencies.[1] Three periods of ethnographically oriented fieldwork were conducted – in 2013, 2014, and 2015 – during which diverse political spaces and encounters were observed, including political party headquarters, the premises of the parliament, and donor-driven capacity-building sessions for women and youth politicians, among others. Further interviews were conducted online in 2017.

The article starts with a review of the existing literature on women, politics, and intersectionality in Africa before shedding light on the nuanced histories of women's political inclusion in Kenya. This is followed by three empirical sections – on party nominations, political campaigning, and electoral violence – that illustrate intersecting inequalities in electoral politics. In the last section, the implications of the article are discussed and conclusions drawn.

From descriptive and substantive representation to intersecting inequalities

Globally, research on women and politics indicates that women politicians tend to promote left-wing values and encourage public spending, social policies, and gender policies more than men (Dahlerup 2018; Diaz 2005; Wängnerud 2009). Consequently, it is anticipated that a higher number of women in elected positions will result in a stronger legislative and policy push toward gender equality, including on issues related to childbearing, sexual harassment, gendered violence, unequal division of labor, and exclusion from political and economic power (Phillips 1995, 67–68). According to Gretchen Bauer (2012, 376–377), this link between descriptive representation and substantive representation also manifests in African contexts, as shown in Rwanda, Uganda, Tanzania, and South Africa, where women parliamentarians have succeeded in introducing new laws or changing existing ones on themes important to women, including gender-based violence, female

genital cutting (FGC), children's rights, inheritance, and land. However, critics, such as Shireen Hassim (2009) in the context of South Africa, have noted that a large proportion of women parliamentarians does not necessarily lead to the redistributive politics necessary to benefit poor women. Meanwhile, we have seen that Latin American countries, such as Nicaragua and Bolivia, that are keen on promoting redistribution and have world-record numbers of women in their parliaments may still oppose feminism as "Western" or "colonial" and adopt measures that silence autonomous feminist organizing or engage in pink-washing tactics (Htun 2016; Larracoechea 2018). In Africa, it has also been noted that high numbers of women parliamentarians may ultimately legitimize the non-democratic conduct of authoritarian regimes whose policies are detrimental to poor women from non-dominant ethnic groups (Berry 2015).

Reasons for African countries having among the highest numbers of women parliamentarians in the world have been extensively examined. Women's mobilization as a collective feminist force started to gather strength during the 1990s and early 2000s when most sub-Saharan African countries were transitioning from authoritarian military regimes to representative democracy, often after violent conflict. According to Aili Mari Tripp (2016), those countries in Africa that experienced drastic conflicts and violence have tended to pass more constitutional reforms for the benefit of women's rights than other African countries. Indeed, conflicts have opened up forums for new kinds of political thinking and practice, including the active introduction of gender quotas into national politics. Consequently, sub-Saharan Africa has become a leading region for affirmative action and gender quota adoption (Berry, Bouka, and Muthoni Kamuru 2021, 644), whose positive impact has been emphasized in the considerable scholarly attention that they have received (Bauer 2008; Bauer and Britton 2006; on a global scale, see Dahlerup 2021).

The impacts of the electoral system, democracy, and development on the numbers of women in African parliaments have also been investigated. According to Manon Tremblay's (2007) comparative analysis of women's political inclusion and democracy on a global scale, factors influencing women's access to legislative arenas can be categorized as cultural, socio-economic, and political. She suggests that the presence of factors that most significantly enhance or impede women's political participation depends on how long representative democracy has been established in the country. According to her analysis, where democratization has been recent – which is the case in several African countries – democracy as such may not enhance women's descriptive representation, but the voting system is of the most crucial importance (Tremblay 2007, 548). Kenya has a first-past-the-post electoral system. Fewer women seem to be elected to office in such countries that use single-member districts because when "each district can elect only one

MP, parties are less likely to nominate women" (Adams, Scherpereel, and Jacob 2016, 153). In addition to gender quotas and the electoral system, corruption has a major – albeit negative – impact on women's political inclusion in Africa (Stockemer 2011), while democracy as such does not seem to lead automatically to better legislative representation for women. Comparing the cases of Botswana and Rwanda (the former an established representative democracy, and the latter increasingly authoritarian), Gretchen Bauer and Jennie Burnet (2013) confirm the puzzling ineffectiveness of democracy for improving women's political inclusion, yet also suggest that the importance of the number of women parliamentarians for democracy may become evident in surprising ways and beyond the realm of the national legislature.

Instead of focusing on the number of women politicians or the legislative and policy changes that their presence brings about (or not), an intersectional approach examines the diverse experiences of women in electoral politics, shedding light on the broader political-economic aspects that condition their position in the sphere. In addition to gender inequalities, it focuses on multiple other axes of difference – categories such as ethnicity, class, age, and marital status, which are "dynamic productions of individual and institutional factors" (Hancock 2007, 251) – and their simultaneous effects on women's political inclusion and exclusion. Investigating women's intersecting identities and structural social positionings through their own stories also sheds light on such institutional aspects of the political system in Kenya as political patronage, clientelism, and ethnic politics. The concept of political patronage relates to the idea that neopatrimonialism has been a foundational feature of postcolonial states in Africa (Chabal and Daloz 1999). It is the guiding principle in a clientelist political system in which a wealthy patron (a president, minister, parliamentarian, or local chief) distributes resources (such as money, contracts, jobs, and development projects) to clients through personalized, family-based, and/or ethnic networks in exchange for votes and political loyalty.

Ethnicity is often considered to play a major role in political patronage, even if it varies significantly between different African countries. In Zambia, for example, interethnic political parties are relatively common, whereas in Kenya many parties have "a highly ethnically cohesive voter support" (Hulterström, Kamete, and Melber 2007, 11). After independence, the ethnic groups who had received formal colonial education (the Kikuyu, the Luo, the Luhya, and to some extent the Kamba) benefited, but soon the largest ethnic group, the Kikuyu (21 percent of the population) – particularly from Kiambu, where the country's first and long-term president Jomo Kenyatta was from – began to dominate Kenyan politics and economic life, enjoying better access to civil service jobs and political power, among other benefits (Kakai Wanyonyi and Gona 2010, 46). During Daniel arap Moi's presidency (1978–2002), it was the Kalenjin who had disproportionately greater access to jobs, development projects, schooling, and other benefits –

an ethnicized pattern of resource allocation that continued during the presidencies of the Kikuyu men who followed him (Kakai Wanyonyi and Gona 2010, 46–47). Many minorities, and Indigenous peoples such as the Ogiek and the Maasai, have been excluded from politics (Odhiambo 2005).

While many Kenyans seem to prefer to self-identify through their national identity as Kenyans rather than through their ethnicity – which they often perceive as divisive, non-modern, and "tribalist" – they are also highly inclined to think that people of other ethnic groups will vote based on their ethnicity (Bratton and Kimenyi 2008). Thus, fear and distrust of other people's perceived ethnic bias often makes them vote for candidates from their own ethnic groups in order to secure access to resources (Bratton and Kimenyi 2008). Ethnically built patronage networks are mostly male led, and they tend to construct a barrier to women's political inclusion, as women often lack the resources "to buy themselves into these networks" (Stockemer 2011, 697). Even though it has been argued that women politicians tend to oppose political "tribalism" (Tripp 2006, 250), ethnic affiliations affect their careers in politics through intersecting inequalities. Many women tend to join a political party because of its association with their own ethnic affiliation (Carter Center 2018, 13), and while positive endorsements by community elders and powerful clan members may help women to win primaries and elections (National Democratic Institute 2018, 37–38), pressure from traditional leaders may also force them to withdraw from a political race because it is considered unsuitable for women (National Democratic Institute 2018, 41). The next section delves more deeply into Kenya's history of women's political inclusion, thereby paving the way for our interviewees' own stories of intersectionality.

Transformations in women's political inclusion in Kenya

Despite multilayered patriarchies, women in Kenya have actively sought political agency and social transformation during both colonial and postcolonial times. However, both British colonizers and Kenyan independence leaders acted to demobilize autonomous women's movements and co-opt them into the prevailing power structures. Established by the British in 1952 for the purpose of economic empowerment, Maendeleo ya Wanawake (MYWO) is the oldest women's movement in Kenya. After Kenya's independence in 1963, when women gained suffrage, the Kenya African National Union (KANU) used MYWO to attract women's votes, but was hesitant to enhance women's own political inclusion (Macharia and Gona 2010, 132–133). From the late 1960s until the 1990s, the executive and legislative powers were practically concentrated in the KANU, thus turning Kenya into a de facto one-party state (Brown 2001, 726–728). During that time,

women's political participation was scarce, with the number of women MPs ranging from one to six (Maloiy 2018).

Globally, it was the 1990s democratization process that created the pressure for women's political inclusion, as the presence of women in parliaments became one of the criteria for measuring the quality of democracy (Tremblay 2007, 540). After the collapse of the Soviet bloc, rights discourses became prominent in international development agendas, with the Fourth United Nations (UN) World Conference on Women in Beijing being a prime example of this trend (see Tripp 2016, 83). Furthermore, while Western aid agencies had generously supported former dictators in their implementation of pro-market liberalization reforms, donors were now starting to demand greater accountability and respect for human rights and democracy from the Kenyan government (Brown 2001). Kenyan women actively participated in the struggles for multi-party democracy, human rights, and constitutional reform, resisting corruption and police violence. They had a strong presence in civil society organizations, church associations, and community-based organizations, while professionally based women's groups also started to emerge (Macharia and Gona 2010, 133–134). Many of these women leaders became well-known public figures and gradually moved on to vie for positions in national political forums (Macharia and Gona 2010, 134).

However, while women's collective organizing and activism was important for the democratization process, it did not translate into higher numbers of women in parliament, as Kenya was still among the bottom-ranked countries in Africa and worldwide in terms of the percentage of women elected to national office (Lawless and Fox 1999, 50–51). The 2002 general election, which was celebrated as a triumph of ethnic reconciliation and national reconstruction, only increased the number of women in parliament to 8 percent (Banerjee et al. 2010, 167). Though the number of women parliamentarians rose modestly to around 9 percent in the 2007 election, they remained largely underrepresented in both parliament and political parties (Banerjee et al. 2010, 167–168). Notably, however, while women's legislative success in Kenya was below average among sub-Saharan countries, the number of women in ministerial positions was above the regional average (Adams, Scherpereel, and Jacob 2016, 150).

The 2007 election was overshadowed by the post-electoral period, which spiraled into an ethnic massacre leading to more than 1,200 deaths and the displacement of more than 500,000 people (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights 2008, 5). Though the political violence of 2007 was extreme, it has occurred frequently in Kenya, including during the 1992 and 1997 elections. Indeed, there is a "persistence of violence within the political system" (Matfess, Kishi, and Berry 2023, 512). The 2010 constitutional process expanded women's rights significantly; hence, the 2008 post-electoral violence had "the unintended consequence of opening up new opportunity

structures for women's rights advocates" (Tripp 2016, 79). The constitution established the "two-thirds gender principle" (quotas) in all elective and appointive posts, meaning that it prohibits any one gender from holding more than two-thirds of the positions. At the national level, the constitution established a bicameral system of government, where the Senate represents 47 counties and certain "special groups," such as women, young people, and persons with disabilities, and the National Assembly has both elected representatives from 290 constituencies and nominated women's representatives from each county.

In the 2013 election, out of the 290 elected members of the National Assembly, only 16 (5.5 percent) were women (European Union Election Observation Mission to Kenya 2013, 64). Through affirmative action, however, 47 women county representatives were elected to the National Assembly in women-only elections. Furthermore, while not a single woman was elected as a senator, political parties appointed 16 women, two young people, and two persons with disabilities to the Senate through the quota system (Katsui et al. 2014, 71). In total, after the 2013 elections, women made up 21 percent of MPs, in addition to which 22 percent of ministers were women, which signified the largest representation of women among high-ranking political decision makers in Kenyan history. In the 2017 election, the quota system worked even better, resulting in 22 percent of women in the National Assembly and – for the first time – three elected women governors and three elected women senators.

Despite the progress, however, neither the Senate nor the National Assembly fully comply with the constitutional gender principle yet, and most women have held women-only rather than competitive seats (Bouka, Berry, and Muthoni Kamuru 2019, 314, 321). It has been suggested that the quota system has created new kinds of inequalities, in this case between elected and nominated women MPs, thus impeding their mutual solidarities as women. Fundamentally, legislative and policy changes have not altered "the power of political parties, the way campaigns are financed, cultural ideas about women's leadership, and the pervasiveness of (often gendered) violence in Kenyan elections" (Bouka, Berry, and Muthoni Kamuru 2019, 314). Unfortunately, it is not only that there has been no major change in these matters, but also that progressive equality policies seem to have given rise to an active opposition seeking to preserve male privileges and the patriarchal status quo (Matfess, Kishi, and Berry 2023).

Intersectional inequalities in political elections

In this section, women's own stories about intersecting inequalities in electoral politics are introduced through three election-related themes, highlighting their perceptions of women's political inclusion and exclusion, as well as

examining their diverse structural positionings vis-à-vis male politicians and fellow women. In identifying the challenges in party nominations, political campaigning, and electoral violence, the interviewees also provide hints about the kinds of changes and alternatives that would be needed to foster their intersectional inclusion.

Party nominations

Party nominations were frequently mentioned by the interviewees as undermining gender equality and causing hardship, particularly for poor women and politically active youth – both men and women. Ethnic loyalties and alliances also play a role. In Kenya, a party primary is a process during which the political party selects its candidates for the forthcoming elections and submits its nomination list to the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC). It is a crucial moment in the execution of the two-thirds gender rule, and parties should pay close attention to the equal nomination of men and women.

In practice, however, a low number of women are nominated as candidates, and few women beyond the special interest groups (women, youth, persons living with disability, marginalized groups, and workers) are actually elected. In the 2022 elections, for example, only 11 percent of the total number of candidates were women (UN Women Kenya 2022). Of the current 394 MPs, only 29 women were elected from the constituencies, while 47 women county representatives were elected in women-only county elections, and five women directly through party nominations in the special groups category, the latter two comprising the existing quota options at the National Assembly elections. Of the 67 current senators, 21 are women: three elected, 16 nominated by political parties, one youth representative, and one person with disability. A woman senator from the Orange Democratic Movement (ODM), a party particularly convening the Luo and other western Kenyan ethnic groups, who was nominated by her party and served until 2022, analyzed the difficulties in nominations:

> [Within the party], we have not been able to get to the two-thirds constitution mandate. It is a result of women within political parties not being allowed into that particular space … if your party does not have a gender principle that can be adhered to. That is where political parties should start. Within the nominations, a particular proportion should be given to women, and probably [an] even higher proportion, so that some of the women would be voted in. But you know the dynamics of political parties – they are trying to see who will get in and who will represent the party, and therefore the key driving factor is not gender but the political party's agenda.

For her part, a woman parliamentarian from the ODM, who was elected as the woman representative of her county at the 2013 and 2017 parliamentary

elections, described the party primaries as "a very mucky and very, very bad process." She recalled her first electoral experience:

> I did not know that people steal [party nomination] certificates. My certificate was taken and given to the person who was the second [in the party list]. But the people, and especially women, were fighting. They told the [party] people: "Mama has won; we want her certificate!" When they realized that these women were not relenting, they finally released it. If we had been intimidated and become fearful, we would have lost the opportunity. Our women were very strong, and we stuck together and stayed there until we got the certificate.

Despite party officials' attempts to sabotage her in the nomination process, she described with pride the strong common front that she and her women supporters had put up in fighting and resisting the abuses and malpractices. As a result, she eventually found her way into parliament.

The abuse of women's candidatures is a common occurrence, as political parties tend to run for elections as frequently changing coalitions, based on ethnic and regional loyalties as well as "big man" calculations. Party nominations appear to be very expensive affairs. Among the interviewees, some felt that nominations were given to the highest bidder. As many women and youth suffer from unemployment and have fewer economic resources than senior male candidates (Carter Center 2018, 11), party nominations complicate their political careers. Though equal property rights have been incorporated into the constitution, women rarely inherit property, which has a further impact on their wealth. According to a report on the 2007 election, while some parties lowered the nomination fees for women, they were still unable to compete with the very high sums expended by men in the nominations (Kanyinga 2014, 175). Furthermore, men dominated the nomination organs, and mobilized militias to intimidate fellow candidates, a tactic that also requires resources that women lack (Kanyinga 2014, 175).

A young male interviewee, who was a youth activist for the National Alliance (TNA), a mostly Kikuyu party set up to support the presidency of Uhuru Kenyatta, the son of Jomo Kenyatta, put it succinctly when he commented that "the main ideologies of political parties in Kenya are, one, money, and, two, tribe and ethnicity." According to Nanjala Nyabola (2018, 55), "all of the large ethnic groups in Kenya are headed by men-only councils of elders whose endorsement is required to secure support for a candidate by their respective ethnic community." Many interviewees, such as Alicia,[2] a well-known human rights activist who had run for electoral seats in 2007 and 2013 for two different small political parties, felt that in such situations "patriarchy [was] fighting back against feminism." Both young men and young women tended to suggest in the interviews that "old people are tribal," and this accusation was not directed solely against older men but also more experienced women politicians. There was a general view that older Kenyans expect

young people to obey the rules of traditional ethnic leaders rather than aligning with other young people within and beyond ethnic groups. If we look only at the two key attributes – money and mobilization along ethnic lines – it becomes apparent that young people find it very difficult to get nominated against older politicians, who have stronger ethnic networks. However, in some places, such as Garissa, the criterion of a minimum education level for aspiring candidates placed young women above non-educated older women, and only younger women were interested in running (Carter Center 2018, 16).

If, despite difficulties, young women were nominated, they quickly faced accusations of having slept with party leaders or being their girlfriends, a concern that came up frequently in the interviews. Thus, gender, class, and age as axes of difference operate simultaneously to disadvantage young women, particularly non-elites, while ethnic politics – even if often opposed, especially by the youth – makes it difficult for persons from non-dominant groups to be nominated. The next step after nominations is political campaigning, discussed in the following section.

Political campaigning

The lack of funding to run effective campaigns was identified as one of the biggest gender barriers. Both elected politicians and young women trying to enter parliament believed that the lack of economic resources affected women more than men. One interviewee, a woman senator elected through the party quota, stated that "the financial bit always gets [women] down." A women's county representative at the National Assembly commented:

> The reason why most women were not able to run, or why those who ran did not manage to make it, is the issue of finance. You need resources to finance your campaign. Most women don't have the capital. They don't have the money to invest in politics.

Campaigning was seen as expensive because one has to be able to afford to travel and to produce campaign material – leaflets, posters, T-shirts, baseball caps, and so on – as well as commercials for television and radio. Transport, vehicles, security, water, food, and gifts for the electorate are also needed. Describing her desperation when struggling through campaign times, one of the women MPs said: "I almost cried because the money ran out." Globally, the cost of electoral campaigns has long been considered one of the main impediments to women's political inclusion (Tremblay 2007, 539). In the Kenyan context, it has been suggested that political campaigns have become even more expensive during recent elections because of the decentralization of the administration and the resulting increase in competition (Bouka, Berry, and Muthoni Kamuru 2019, 323).

Many young women aspiring to become politicians felt that there was a huge power asymmetry between the elderly male nominees who, through ethnic patronage networks, had all of the resources needed to invest in their campaigns, and those young women – and young men – who had radical ideas of social transformation but lacked the resources to reach the electorate with their messages of change. For example, Alicia commented on the economic difficulties that she had faced in running campaigns against elderly men in her region:

> [T]hey have resources that you don't have. First, they're able to buy votes. Of course, aside from the integrity aspect, even if I had the money, I couldn't really buy votes. Sometimes even the logistics is missing [and that is] something that will give the men more mileage than you. And you find yourself in a self-made prison because you have no resources, but people still think that you're the person who should solve their problems.

During the 2013 campaign, for example, established politicians and their allies reportedly went from house to house, "giving tokens to citizens" (National Gender and Equality Commission 2013, 44). Even if the candidate does not distribute actual cash to potential voters, it is, however, often expected that they will provide the people with food, drink, and gifts, and implement some sort of development projects in the community. In the absence of institutionalized public services and state-led social security networks, many voters tend to rely on wealthy individuals to provide for their welfare (Ranta 2017). Unemployed youth have often been the most heavily targeted in vote buying due to their precarious position (Carter Center 2018, 12). Those with the most wealth and property are most often men; consequently, unequal class relations and gender relations intersect in electoral politics. Furthermore, due to the ethnicized nature of resource allocation, affluent men within the political elite tend to originate from certain ethnic groups that have historically dominated in the distribution of political positions, jobs, and funds for projects (Kakai Wanyonyi and Gona 2010), thus demonstrating the intersections between ethnicity and class in accessing political power. While many politicians – including women – tend to participate in this clientelist system, they may perceive it as wrong and, by criticizing it, activists such as Alicia take part in outlining new ways of conducting politics in Kenya.

A woman politician who was an elected official at the National Assembly from the United Republican Party (URP), a grouping set around William Ruto, of Kalenjin background and Kenya's current president, believed that the impact of her gender was the most notable element during her electoral campaign:

> [The] challenge was just the fact that I was a woman. Just being a woman is a cultural barrier. The community I come from … believe[s] in male leadership. A

> woman's place is basically in the home … taking care of the children, bearing children; that has been the belief. I mean, a woman cannot lead: "How can a woman lead?" [they say].

Camille,[3] a young woman who had campaigned as a candidate for the Wiper Democratic Movement, a party led by Kalonzo Musyoka of the Kamba nation, shared the experience that traditional assumptions concerning a woman's role, primarily as a wife and a mother, had a negative impact on her campaign success. She noted: "In my county, women aren't encouraged to take up leadership positions because they're seen as housewives; they can only go to work, come back, and be with the children." When campaigning (and later in their political careers), women were often accused of being bad wives or bad mothers because of their public roles outside the private sphere. However, some women politicians seemed to capitalize on these cultural beliefs and social norms, using marriage and motherhood as resources in portraying themselves as good, nurturing, and caring women (see also Tripp 2003, 250). Apparently, this strategy also worked; a woman MP from a rural area far from Nairobi recounted excitedly that, since her election,

> [e]verybody in the county is now looking up to women. They call us "Mama": "Where's Mama?" "What, Mama?" We have to show them that we're together and this is what we have for them. We're empowering lives; we repeat the names of children, work with widows and orphans.

For the previously mentioned woman MP from the URP, however, making a political career more acceptable by performing it through the culturally accepted notions of motherhood was not an option as she was not married. She anxiously recalled how her community members pointed that out: "'This woman isn't even married, she doesn't know how to bring up a family. How can we trust her with leadership when we haven't seen a family that she has been able to bring up?'" The literature has discussed a gender double bind (Costa 2021; Teele, Kalla, and Rosenbluth 2018), noting that women who behave in gender-stereotypical ways may not be rewarded for the conduct that is expected from them in the first place; however, those who do not perform as expected may be punished for not acting as women are supposed to do (Costa 2021).

To overcome the fact that she was not married, the MP mentioned above emphasized that her main task in the political campaign was to convince the electorate that "women are capable and have the ability to do exactly what the men can do." In addition to drawing on her strengths as an educated woman and a professional in the judiciary, and on having work experience in different parts of Kenya, she also focused on what she called "a personal touch." This meant

> talking to people, going out there personally, talking to people one on one, meeting the elders and opinion leaders, and you just talk to them and tell them about yourself and your achievements so far as a woman: what you have done, what you are capable of doing, and assuring them that you are able.

While the gender double bind related to marriage and "proper" womanhood affects all women, intersecting inequalities explain why young women face the greatest challenges in acceding to political office. Marriage is also intimately tied to ethnic loyalties and cultural customs, thus connecting it with intersectional concerns. One of the women MPs described her own struggle:

> You need to be in a party that is perceived as politically correct in the area where you'll be running. The challenge was that my community believes in the X party, in the Y coalition. I was forced by circumstances to run for a Z party … So, you can imagine that you're going against the tide. I had to work extra hard to convince my people. I remember the words I used to convince them. "This is just a bicycle; this is like a motorcycle or a vehicle to take me to the destination I want to get to in order for me to be able to deliver on my promises. So, let's forget about parties! Look at me as an individual; look at me as a person!"

In the 2013 elections, for example, cases were reported from Kwale where non-native residents were threatened if they did not vote for native candidates, and negative political campaigning was also widespread in such places as Uriri, Naivasha, and Kiambu (National Gender and Equality Commission 2013, 36). One of the politically active young women, who belonged to a small political party and was aspiring to become a politician, explained:

> Something seriously affecting women in Kenya is that if you marry into a different tribe and if you're asking people to vote for you, they see you as a foreigner – you're a visitor. In your community of origin, they say: "You left this village, you no longer belong here." That was the reality for me. I married into a different tribe. That affected me a lot.

Thus, in the context of Kenyan politics, marital status could be considered an important axis of intersectionality. While some of the abovementioned politically active women were able to portray marriage as a valuable resource in politics, and some of the unmarried women were able to capitalize on their educational levels or professionalism, there are several communities in Kenya where early and child marriage leads to school dropout for girls, thus excluding them from political opportunities (Carter Center 2018, 16). A study produced by UNICEF (2017, 91) indicates that 28 percent of Maasai girls, 38 percent of Somali girls, 17 percent of Samburu girls, 54 percent of Rendille girls, and 64 percent of Pokot girls were married by the age of 18. The prevalence of early and child marriage varies between ethnic groups and social classes, being most prevalent in poor households and impoverished communities.

Electoral violence

The third and final example illustrating intersecting inequalities in electoral politics concerns abuse and violence related to electoral politics. Violence seems to be such a common issue in electoral politics in Kenya that some of the interviewed women politicians and aspirant candidates started the interviews by recalling whether they had faced it or not. Likewise, ethnic rivalry, hate speech, and intimidation often take place during elections, sometimes leading to outright conflict, as exemplified by the 2007–2008 post-electoral massacre. Different ethnic militias and youth groups, supported by incumbent political leaders, attacked each other brutally, an episode that has been examined at the International Criminal Court as a crime against humanity (Branch 2011). Both men and women face electoral violence in Kenya, but women encounter more sexual violence; thousands of women were raped during the 2007–2008 upheavals (Branch 2011, 271).

In regular elections, gendered and sexual violence takes various forms, including verbal harassment, shaming, threats, and physical violence. According to the interviewees, single or divorced women can rarely participate in politics without facing a great deal of prejudice and harassment. Camille had the experience that "every boss comes to you and tells you that they want to sleep with you. They only recruit you if you satisfy their interests." She concluded that "[i]f the woman doesn't comply with male politicians' propositions, they'll block their political career and try to cause other harm," including threatening violence. Another young woman, a member of the ODM who later became a county assembly official, agreed with the perceptions and experiences shared by Camille, with whom she was participating in a capacity-building project for young politicians in Nairobi. She commented:

> People feel that if you go into politics, especially if you're a woman, you ruin your name. People believe that if you're in politics, you're just a prostitute. You hang around with men. They can use you. [For these reasons,] they don't give you the credit you deserve in the community.

Alicia, for her part, described incidents of verbal abuse by male politicians from the same region: "In 2007, my former MP brought stained panties [to the rally] and told the crowds: 'You can't listen to her because I've been sleeping with her; she's my wife. You shouldn't take her seriously.'" Shockingly, Alicia's harassment did not end with verbal abuse; a series of other forms of violence followed. She recalled:

> I faced a lot of violence: physical, mental, psychological; all forms of violence directed at me. I was being attacked, followed, I mean, being stalked all the time. I faced constant physical insecurity. It affected me psychologically. I was physically slapped sometimes and harassed at other times.

One aspect of the harassment and violence that Alicia experienced was related to FGC, which was the norm for "proper" womanhood in the region to which she had moved due to marrying a local man. She was constantly under pressure to prove herself and her womanhood, with community members insisting that if she wanted to represent the community politically, she should be "a complete woman." In communities that practice FGC, those who are not cut are considered to be children, and hence are not eligible for political leadership positions. While gendered violence was a shared experience among all of the interviewees in electoral politics, FGC was a specific concern for some of the women, particularly those originating from the north-eastern region or the Kisii community, once again indicating intersecting inequalities, with gender and ethnicity impacting women's political opportunities simultaneously. Among adult women from such ethnic groups as the Rendille, the Somali, the Samburu, and the Pokot, the prevalence of FGC is nearly universal (UNICEF 2017, 29).

Conclusion

This article has investigated politically active women's perceptions and experiences of electoral politics in Kenya. By presenting women's own stories about their diverse structural positionings at the intersections of gender, ethnicity, class, age, and marital status, the article has made a case for the nuanced and context-based examination of intersecting inequalities in women's political inclusion. While Kenyan politics has most often been discussed through the lens of ethnicity and political patronage, such studies have failed to capture the specific challenges and barriers faced by women. Likewise, a generalized feminist analysis of women's political inclusion may not highlight issues that are of crucial importance for young women, ethnic-minority women, and women from non-elite backgrounds. While the experiences of politically active women attest to the prevalence of sexism and patriarchy, the ways in which wealthy ethnic elites leverage their privilege for political gain point to the ethnic nationalism and racism that women also face in their everyday lives. Efforts to fight electoral violence, build capacity around elections, and support women's roles in political parties would be constructive. However, women from diverse backgrounds would also benefit from a wide variety of measures to facilitate their political inclusion – some related to broad political-economic issues, such as poverty reduction, and others related to socio-cultural issues, such as combating child marriage and FGC.

Women themselves are the best experts at identifying barriers to their political inclusion and problems in the political system. When women talk about the complexly intersecting challenges to their political participation, they also engage in thinking and acting differently. By identifying

what is wrong, they participate in imagining and delineating alternatives to corruption, patronage, and misogyny, and implicitly reveal their expectations of a desirable future in terms of how the political system and electoral politics could and should work. Through active individual and collective political agency, they strive toward intersectional inclusion and equality.

Notes

1. The interview material was collected during several research projects related to human rights, political participation, and civil society, as well as international donor engagement around these topics. Oral informed consent was obtained from each interviewee. Due to the sensitive nature of the data, interviewees have been anonymized, even in the case of public figures. In terms of ethical clearance, the research was conducted under a research clearance permit from the Kenyan National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI/P/15/8060/4669). Furthermore, the author held an associate researcher position at the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Nairobi.
2. This is a pseudonym.
3. This is a pseudonym.

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