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Equal Rights for Women in Kenya?

by AUDREY WIPPER*

DURING the early years of independence, a militant women's equal rights movement has developed in Kenya. Led by urban, educated women, the movement rejects what is now seen as the traditionally inferior role of women. It wants for them an equal share in the responsibilities and the opportunities of nationhood. This article will describe the message, tactics, and leadership of the early phase of the movement.

Women have been slower than men in emerging from traditional society. Certain factors have abruptly changed particular male roles. For instance, the colonial Government's gazetting of tribal boundaries and abolition of inter-tribal fighting made the warrior obsolete; but the woman's role as the maintainer of the domestic economy remained largely intact. Thus, shielded from direct contact with the forces of westernisation and modernisation, tied to time-consuming domestic tasks and the raising of large families, and held in line by custom, women have lagged behind men in acquiring formal education and in entering the modern sector.

However, within the last decade the 'modern woman' has made her appearance. During this period, women's voluntary associations and various co-operatives have been formed; conferences on the status of women have been held; and the first woman doctors and lawyers have begun to practise. A climate of ferment has developed concerning almost all aspects of the woman's role: polygamy, bride price, modern manners, and fashion are subjects of public controversy.

In spite of these achievements, there is deep-lying discontent, one manifestation of which is the women's movement. Loosely structured and many-faceted, this is propelled by individual and group efforts. It can be divided into two main parts.

(1) A core of militants actively crusade for equal rights. The militants speak out publicly on issues that affect women; they lead organisations

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which aim to raise women's status; and they campaign for political office on a platform of women's rights. Although they are still few in number, like the early nationalists, they are harbingers of future change.

(2) The movement, while spearheaded by the militants, is much broader and encompasses an amorphous aggregate of women, some employed in the modern sector of the economy as typists, social workers, teachers, nurses, and business women, but a far larger number still at work in the countryside. Of the former group, many are too busy with their families and jobs to give any time to women's organisations; but, though they may not actively crusade for women's rights, by being 'modern' they help to introduce new norms and establish new patterns. For example, like the men, some of these women travel overseas for their education. They seek monogamous marriages, have their babies in hospitals, and divorce their husbands through civil rather than customary law. The broad basis of the movement lies, however, with progressive rural women. They may be traders, leaders of community clubs, members of marketing co-operatives, or simply mothers saving for school fees in the hope that their children will obtain an education; but they have espoused certain modern values and are impatient for change.

It may well be that the activities of individual women will be more crucial than the work of the crusaders in bringing about the desired changes. Women who support themselves, choose their own mates, and assert themselves as individuals show through their daily lives that they have rejected traditional standards for women. Those who are integrated into the modern occupational structure are co-operating in the task of nation building by carrying out particular jobs. They are simply doing what the militants advocate. In the performance of their roles they are models of the 'new woman'.

Even though these two groups are interrelated, the members sometimes moving from one to the other, it is the crusaders, in terms of urban women who form what could be called the national leadership, who are of central interest to this article.¹ How do they perceive their goals? What is their education, training, socio-economic position? What motivates them to take such a deviant position in a society that is still largely governed by traditional norms?

The movement was given impetus by the gap between what the women expected and had been promised, and what they actually received, on the coming of independence in December 1963. The manifesto of the Kenya African National Union (K.A.N.U.) rejected

¹ Leadership at the rural community level will not be examined here.

the colonial pattern of subordination and domination, of social classes, and of traditional male-female relationships, and it extolled a classless society where all individuals could fully develop their potential. Later, the Government's sessional paper, *African Socialism*, stated that women's part in nation building was 'equal to men's in every respect'. There appeared to be little difference between what the Government wanted for women and what the women wanted for themselves. At this time their hopes were understandably high.

However, the women soon discovered that independence did not bring any noticeable changes in their lot. It failed to involve them equally with men in the functioning of the country's economic, political, and social institutions. Government by Africans was no more, indeed even less, responsive to women's rights than had been the colonial administration. The women's sections of political parties were conceived by the men as useful auxiliaries that would mobilise votes for selected male contestants.

In education, boys were still given preference over girls, only a small proportion of whom received secondary and university education, although their numbers are now increasing.¹ The National Youth Service was established to recruit boys only. When the Minister was asked to explain the absence of girls, he replied that there was no intention of keeping them out, but that they could not be admitted until 'the service is ready to cater for them'.² Since there are proportionately as many females as males in the population, they can hardly be said to constitute a small minority. From the women's perspective, the Government appears to be building institutions that cater for men, wherein women are treated as an adjunct to, rather than an integral part of, the modernising processes.

Nor has there been any eagerness on the part of the men to change the marriage and divorce laws, which definitely favour them. In fact, in June 1969 an all-male National Assembly abolished the Affiliation Act, the one law that gave unmarried mothers and their offspring some protection. The men who loudly espoused democratic, egalitarian principles in their indictment of the authoritarian colonial system were seen by the militants in their private lives to nurture authoritarian relationships with women. It became increasingly clear that men had not changed their traditional view of women.

¹ Figures from a study of school children in Kenya in 1965-6 provide some indication of differences in enrolment by sex. In 8 mixed primary schools, with 4,373 children, only 30% were girls. Angela Molnos, *Attitudes towards Family Planning in East Africa* (Munich, 1968), pp. 235-9.

² *East African Standard* (Nairobi), 8 August 1964.

Women had fought along with men for independence, even going into the forests with the Mau Mau bands; but they felt that they had reaped few rewards. The Government's failure to live up to its promises has been one factor that has caused women to examine their position in society. They have come to feel that they must act in their own interests, and from these common feelings the equal-rights movement has emerged, at the vanguard of which are the leaders of the voluntary associations.

THE MESSAGE AND TACTICS

Women's clubs form the backbone of the movement. *Maendeleo ya Wanawake* (Swahili for 'women's progress') is the largest association, with branches throughout the rural areas.¹ It is a self-help organisation concerned with change at the most fundamental level, the home. It aims to improve domestic standards by educating women in home making, child care, nutrition, and hygiene. *Maendeleo* was started by the colonial Government in the early 1950s because it was felt that women were uneducated and socially backward; the wives of administrators, missionaries, and settlers organised and led local groups. This is now the most important women's club and its leaders are among the most outspoken within the movement.

Other, more urban-based organisations include the Federation of University Women, the Kenya Women's Society, the Women's Seminar (actually a committee who come together every few years to organise a conference on the role of women), and the overall co-ordinating body, the Kenya National Council of Women. There are also church groups, welfare associations, auxiliaries to tribal associations, the Girl Guides, the Young Women's Christian Association, and the Red Cross.

Rural women responded quickly to the opportunity to form their own associations. Here they could come together, exchange experiences, and co-operate to promote their common interests. This was the beginning of a new assertiveness on the part of women. Their strong response may have been fostered by conditions that permitted uneven access for women and men to institutions and processes of change. Women saw men forming political associations, mutual-aid societies, and countless religious sects, and acquiring western education and prestigious jobs, while they themselves were held back by centuries-old norms.

¹ The figures in 1964 were 42,447 members and 1,120 clubs. The following year Jael Mboga, the president, stated that its membership was over 50,000; *ibid.* 15 June 1965.

If one had to pinpoint the origins of the women's movement, it would be the establishment of *Maendeleo ya Wanawake*. This was the first large-scale women's organisation – there had been small local church groups, earlier – and, although the sponsorship of the colonial Government initially caused it to be looked upon negatively by many Africans, it has by now become thoroughly indigenised. Indicative of its acceptance is the furore caused when one woman proposed that the name be changed because it had been chosen by 'colonial women'. The majority would have none of this; they were proud of the organisation, its history, and its achievements.

The movement has weathered the change from colonial to independent status with the Africanisation of its leadership. Now African women speak out forcibly for themselves. Ruth Habwe, *Maendeleo's* president, issued this call to action in 1964:

For quite some time, women in the world have been fighting to get equal treatment with men. This is because of the flagrant attitude which men have adopted towards women.

In the home, in public, in job valuation and even in day-to-day activities, men have always regarded women as inferior to them. When according responsibilities women have been considered second. . .

It is time men started to change their thinking, for to-day's society can no longer be regarded as yesterday's. Women will no longer be subservient to men. . . May I remind you all that all women need recognition, respect, privileges, participation, and their voices to be heard in all walks of life.¹

The organisation's magazine, *Voice of Women*, had this to say five years later:

Although women have an important role to play in the development of the nation, yet the role which women have to play in Kenya in the nation building seems rather undetermined. Open though the opportunities are, the men appear to assume that the women have not as yet reached a level where they can effectively participate in the nation building.

According to the African man's view, a woman is only supposed to be in the house. Her role educated though she might be seems to be only to look after the home and the entire nursing of the young ones. This view has been taken to such extremes that the men appear to neglect or completely under-rate the part which our women folks can play in the nation.²

What is this 'inferior' status that the women reject? In Kenya, as in many developing countries, women are fighting to throw off a heritage that has allocated them a position subordinate to men in a number of areas. Although considerable differences exist among the agricultural and nomadic tribes in the allocation and implementation of power,

¹ *Ibid.* 4 August 1964.

² *Voice of Women* (Nairobi), June 1969, p. 1.

authority, and prestige, it is the men who clearly dominate the patrilineal, polygamous, kinship structure that generally characterises the Bantu, Nilotic, and Nilo-Hamitic tribes of Kenya. The traditional family unit was an authoritarian structure, in which husbands and fathers tended to be 'little kings'. Male dominance is seen in the two following aspects of the formal structure.

Deference rules and etiquette. Ideally women are supposed to show deference to men unless, because of their youth or some serious defect, they are regarded as inferior. The head of a household is seen as a man of superior *mana*, honoured by deference and family privileges. For example, the wife is expected to carry the produce to and from the market; she cooks and serves food for her husband and his friends, but is forbidden to join them. At social gatherings men sit on the chairs while women and children are expected to sit on the ground.

Power and authority. The wealth and power of the society is controlled by men. They own the land, cattle, and other livestock. Women may have user rights, but not legal ownership. Girls are subject first to their father's and/or brother's authority; on marriage, they are subordinated to their husband. Men clearly take the lead and make the decisions in the political, religious, and social spheres. They hold authority both inside and outside the family, women's primary concerns being the care of the children and the growing of food for her family. Men's dominance is also demonstrated by their legal and customary rights. Land and livestock in many tribes can be inherited only by them.

In all societies, women informally exercise varying and sometimes extensive degrees of power. In African societies, even the formal structure allocates considerable power to the senior wife. Nevertheless, studies of Kenyan tribes generally reveal male dominance in the matters mentioned above.¹ But what is more important is *how women in Kenya, or at least the militants, define their traditional role*. If they believe it was inferior, and act on that belief, whether in actual fact it was or was not is irrelevant.

The traditional role has come under attack on two counts in particular: (i) the physical labour involved, and (ii) the rules of deference. European women had for years condemned the everyday drudgery that they saw locally. African women begin to carry loads when they are still young, and continue into old age. Young girls transport buckets of water

¹ Cf. Robert A. and Barbara B. LeVine, *Nyansongo: a Gusii community in Kenya* (New York, 1966), pp. 17, 21-34, and 40-1; Michael Whisson, *Change and Challenge* (Nairobi, 1964), passim; G. N. Snell, *Nandi Customary Law* (London, 1954), pp. 19-61; D. J. Penwill, *Kamba Customary Law* (London, 1951), pp. 23-50; S. H. Ominde, *The Luo Gjol* (London, 1952), pp. 20-42; and Jomo Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya* (London, 1961 edn), pp. 20-69.

for long distances on their heads, and old women heave mammoth loads of firewood on their backs. Now African women themselves protest against the laborious aspects. In a letter to the *East African Standard*, a woman estimated that she had carried 8,000 water cans, or 4,000 gallons of water, in a period of 20 years. She asked plaintively, 'Could we exchange so that our menfolk can get the water for us?'¹ Important authorities like Margaret Koinange, the matron-in-chief at the Ministry of Health and former president of the National Council of Women, have denounced the practice – 'The tradition of women carrying heavy loads on their backs must be eradicated completely'² – on the grounds that the practice makes childbirth difficult, and causes skull deformity, especially among Kikuyu women who carry loads supported by head straps.

Interestingly, it is not the onus of physical labour that evokes the greatest outcry but the norms of deference. Much of the criticism of work is made not on medical grounds but for its symbolic importance – women being treated as 'beasts of burden'. An exhibitor at a *Maendeleo* handicrafts show commented, 'The days when we used to spend all our time carrying firewood are over. Our husbands have got to realize that they can either have an intelligent, modern wife with a nice clean home and well-dressed children, or they can have a beast of burden.'³

Women are developing a new conception of themselves and laying claim to new roles. Indicative of the changes that have already taken place in their thinking about themselves is the demand that, instead of doing all the housework, they should have time to cultivate their own interests and their own personality.

We do most of the work in the home. We are expected to do all the work on our land-holdings. We do all the cooking and look after the children and our husbands. *But we need sufficient time to acquaint ourselves with what is taking place around us. It is up to us to convince our husbands that, like themselves, we need time to attend public meetings, to read books and newspapers so that we too may be educated* [italics added].⁴

Priscilla Abwao introduced the novel and audacious idea that the Swahili term of respect for a European woman, 'memsahib', should be extended in its use: 'We African women can never expect to be respected by women of other races until our men change their attitude towards us. The time has come when we also should be referred to as *memsahib*.'⁵ In the colonial period, when any African addressed a European woman politely, the status hierarchy was quite clear. Today,

¹ *East African Standard*, 10 August 1963.

² *Ibid.* 13 January 1964.

³ *Reporter* (Nairobi), 1 September 1962.

⁴ *East African Standard*, 25 September 1961.

⁵ *Ibid.*

women have not only rejected the traditional rules of deference, but they have reversed the status hierarchy – men must show deference to women. These claims are the subject of strident debate, and the issues are clouded by strong emotions; but it is through controversy, rhetoric, and confusion that new norms and roles are apt to be worked out.

In the attack on male superiority, men are accused of not performing their roles adequately. The writer Grace Ogot said, ‘If men spent more time in their *shambas* [farms] instead of one hour as at present, things would improve and everyone would have enough money to pay their rates and school fees.’¹ Other accusations were drunkenness, adultery, and brutality. (Customarily, it was – and, often, still is – acceptable for husbands to beat their wives for misdemeanours.)

These accusations, and the assertion that women work harder than men, are generally acknowledged to be fairly accurate. A possible explanation for male apathy and irresponsibility is that the traditional man’s role has suffered far severer dislocations than the woman’s. Jobless men have drifted into the pattern of sporadic work, drunkenness, and broken marriages. The woman, left on her own to support her family, works hard to eke out a meagre living by cultivating the family *shamba* and trading at the local market. In caring for her family, she develops a toughness and an ability to cope often lacking in her male counterpart.

Customs harmful to women have been criticised and new ways promoted. Margaret Koinange – whose father, the late Senior Chief Koinange, had torn up his coffee trees when the colonial Government refused to let the peasants plant them – defiantly castigated an important tribal custom, female circumcision. The operation of clitoridectomy, she said, ‘serves no useful purpose at all in spite of the old traditions. And it can be extremely dangerous not only at the time of the operation but in the woman’s future life.’² Even though the harmful consequences of this practice are well known to the educated, politicians have never opposed it, well aware of the passions it arouses.

Infant mortality is high in Kenya, as in most developing countries, and many women are only just beginning to use modern medical facilities. Mrs Koinange censured those who discourage their wives from going to hospital:

I know some men have declared that women should continue having babies unattended as our mothers did, but then they know nothing about babies. As

¹ *Daily Nation* (Nairobi), 15 December 1962.

² *Sunday Post* (Nairobi), 1 November 1964.

a mother of three I know it is imperative that we have adequate maternity hospitals to cope with midwifery emergencies, and that we train enough midwives to ensure live infants and healthy deliveries for mothers.¹

Turning to the political scene, the lack of representation at the national level has irked women ever since the coming to power of an African Government. Under the colonial administration, women had held one or two of the specially elected seats, but when the Opposition introduced a motion to preserve this practice in July 1963, it was defeated in the National Assembly. Of the 12 special seats filled by appointment in 1965, not one was allocated to a woman. In November 1969 the first woman was elected to the National Assembly. To date, women have occupied the post of mayor in two of the country's largest cities. Still there are no women cabinet ministers or high-ranking civil servants, with the exception of a few in posts whose primary functions concern women.

Women maintain that their interests cannot be adequately represented by male delegates. Even prior to independence in 1962, Jael Mboga, then of the Luo United Movement, called for women's representation in the Legislative Council: 'We are tired of being told to sit in the kitchen. We have girls who are educated and can represent us better than men.'² This argument resembles that used by men during the colonial period, when they rejected representation by European missionaries and other colonially picked delegates.

Since Kenya is a one-party state, women need the support of K.A.N.U. if they are to win a seat; or they may be allotted one of the appointed seats. Efforts to get a woman elected have been marked by a singular lack of success. For instance, in a 1966 by-election a woman candidate backed by K.A.N.U. was placed in a constituency against two strong male opponents and subsequently lost. Had K.A.N.U. had any real interest in this candidate, the women felt that she would have been placed more favourably elsewhere.

Unlike President Sékou Touré, who early in his career incorporated women into the *Parti démocratique guinéen*, giving them not only representation but influential positions, Kenya's ministers and party leaders publicly affirm women's political rights while simultaneously ignoring them as serious contestants.³ In Guinea women occupy positions of

¹ *East African Standard*, 17 August 1962.

² *Ibid.* 10 October 1962.

³ An exception to this has been Grace Onyango, a strong supporter of the former opposition party, the Kenya People's Union. For years she was active in the Luo Union, and served as secretary of the Kisumu branch. She led the Luo Women's Wing of K.A.N.U. for a time and made history in 1963, as the first woman elected to the city council, and again two years

authority throughout the country, in central government and administration, as presidents of local councils, and many challenge men for positions of leadership within the party itself. They 'constitute one of the most dynamic social forces in present day Guinea'.¹

Through the mass media, the public platform, pamphlets, conferences, and debates, the militants spread their ideas. The feminist campaign extends all the way from university classrooms to informal gatherings of a few tribesmen at the district commissioner's compound. Even members of the Masai tribe, who have long shown a profound disdain for European civilisation and have persevered in trying to maintain their traditional ways, have not escaped the women's ire. Ruth Habwe lectured a gathering of Masai thus:

'The time has come for you men to start taking better care of your wives. Just because we wear skirts, you tend to regard us as your slaves. But no more. The women are on the march.'

A row of rather sheepish looking Masai tribesmen rattled their earrings and uttered confused 'aahs' and 'ees' . . . as Mrs Ruth Habwe stood up before them at a meeting at Ngong and gave them hell. . . Most of the Masai men who were hanging around went back to their *manyattas* [homes] with an air of having finally decided that this civilization is definitely something which is an affair of God and in which they should not interfere.²

The protest covers a wider range of topics than those discussed here, but they may suffice to show the general purport of the movement. The women's efforts to better their economic position have so far had little overall effect, but may, in the future, have a larger impact. Another issue likely to become even more contentious as women become educated is polygamy and the traditional male right of sexual access to a plurality of women.

At present, the women are exploring lines of attack, developing skills in organisation and in argument, and generally laying the groundwork for later action. The militants need the support of the masses of women, and also of men who could eventually provide them with an effective power base. The movement has been more effective at this stage in propounding its cause than in fighting institutional discrimination, getting women elected, or obtaining more resources. A number of conferences have been held and the countless resolutions passed have

later, on her election as mayor of Kisumu. By profession a teacher, Mrs Onyango was an Assistant Guide Commissioner and a branch chairman of the Child Welfare Society. In 1969 she became the first woman elected member of the National Assembly.

¹ Victor D. DuBois, 'The Problems of Independence', American Universities Field Staff Reports Service (Washington), West African Series, v, 8, p. 13.

² *Reporter*, 22 December 1962.

been forwarded to a Government that has consistently ignored them. Because the movement has so far failed to achieve its goals, it has been written off by some critics as of little consequence.

We believe that this proselytising is important in mobilising women, since it prepares them and the society at large for basic structural change which will strike at the core of long established male-female relationships. In western societies people have lived with the idea of female emancipation for several centuries; but in Kenya it is the newest and perhaps the most radical concept of all.

THE LEADERSHIP

The movement's major leaders are urban women, who form a small, interlocking group, many of whom have attended the same schools, known each other for years, and are related through birth or marriage to the political and professional élite. They include Margaret Kenyatta, daughter of the President; Hannah Rubia, wife of the former mayor of Nairobi; Grace Ogot, wife of the former dean of social sciences at the University and Kenya's best-known historian; and Muthoni Likimani, the former wife of the chief medical officer of the Ministry of Health and Housing. Several are descended from important chiefs or belong to prominent families.

There is a tendency among the club leaders to rotate the executive positions among themselves. This is mainly because the number of educated women is so small that the demand exceeds the supply. For example, Margaret Mugo was the general secretary of the Y.W.C.A. in 1964, was on the executive of the Navaisha branch of *Maendeleo* from 1956 to 1958, served on the executive committee of the Women's Seminar in 1964, was vice-president of the Kenya National Council in 1962, and on its executive again in 1964. Similarly, Jael Mboga was president of the Kenya Woman's Society from 1961-2, vice-president of the National Council from 1961 to 1962, and president of *Maendeleo* from 1963 to 1965.

A definite pattern of training marks the careers of the first-generation leaders. A typical one will have attended mission-run primary and secondary schools – almost the only education available during the colonial period – which means that she knows the Bible and is probably a Christian convert (several are daughters of pastors). She has had between eight and ten years of school, during which she was introduced to the Girl Guides and the Y.W.C.A., and later was a member of the executive of one or other of these organisations, the Girl Guides being an especially important training ground.

From secondary school the typical leader will have gone on to a teacher training course or to the former Jeanes School, which was designed to give training in leadership, social work, and the technical specialities, and played an important part in training Kenya's social and technical workers. Courses in domestic science, adult literacy, agriculture, and nursery-school teaching were offered. Jael Mboga, Ruth Habwe, Muthoni Likimani, Margaret Koinange, and Phoebe Asiyo, all prominent crusaders, attended the Jeanes School at the same time. Similarly, Jemima Gechago, Priscilla Abwao, and Hannah Rubia were teachers during the same period and their pupils, such as Grace John and Emma Njonjo, have gone on to continue their work.

Mission schools, the Girl Guides, the Y.W.C.A., and the Jeanes School are the institutions that have shaped the leaders' perspective of their work and social role. Their education has involved a strong element of Christian ethics, citizenship training, and character building. The qualities of self-respect and self-reliance were stressed, as they were introduced to the rudiments of western-style organisation, the norms of punctuality and efficiency, and the social skills required.

The women who initially led these organisations were from the English upper and upper-middle classes. Lady Mary Baring, the Governor's wife, Lady Worley, Lady Eleanor Cole, Mrs A. J. Beecher, wife of the Anglican bishop, Mrs C. H. Williams, wife of the District Commissioner, the wives of the executives of Rosterman Mines, and some members of the East African Women's League (a European women's association) were among those who gave their patronage and time to *Maendeleo*. As a group, they cultivated an aristocratic style of life that even in the early twentieth century was outdated in Europe.¹ Freed from housework by servants, motivated by Christian values and the spirit of *noblesse oblige*, these women unstintingly gave their time to organisations they considered important. Dynamic, forceful, and self-confident, they instilled in their protégées similar qualities, and some of them quietly supported African women leaders even into the period of independence.

On leaving the Jeanes School the usual practice was to gain field experience in teaching or in some form of social work. Many went overseas on scholarships for further training in courses of varying duration that concentrated on teaching, social work, and nursing.

The leaders now range in age between the mid-twenties and the late

¹ Cf. M. P. K. Sorrenson, *Origins of European Settlement in Kenya* (Nairobi, 1968), pp. 230-2; E. Huxley, *Settlers of Kenya* (London, 1948), p. 20; and Lord Cranworth, *A Colony in the Making, or Sport and Profit in British East Africa* (London, 1912), pp. 184-6.

forties. Most are mothers of large families, which still include some young children. Many are employed full time, even the wives of senior government officials. Because of both their husband's and their own positions, some have a heavy round of social events which they are expected to attend. Unlike the middle-aged women of western countries, who have grown families and sufficient free time, these women do not form a leisured group. The first generation of modern Kenyans is busy buying farms, paying for houses, and investing their money. Perhaps succeeding generations, endowed with inherited wealth, will produce a leisured class.

Some of the most militant women, unaided by family position, have achieved an education on their own through hard work and determination. They are employed professionally, either by women's organisations or in some other full-time job. These women tend not to be related to the political and professional élite. Their husbands may, in fact, occupy relatively unimportant jobs and be much less known publicly than they are. They often attend social functions alone. Although this may appear to reveal the liberated woman, it is a far more deeply rooted practice. The traditional pattern was for men and women to lead independent lives. Outside their common interest in home and children, they went their separate ways.¹

When interviewing the leaders, I asked them why they participate in volunteer work. Jael Mboga, a full-time social worker, was then *Maendeleo's* president; she had to take unpaid leave of absence from her job, and in addition, to use her own holiday time in order to visit the branches. She declared:

I don't care what money I lose. I feel that it is worth it. I have two weeks' leave now, which I will spend visiting the groups, and I use most week-ends. But we have been put in the position where we have to compete with the world that is 30 years ahead of us. If I wait until I'm 50 – you know some people suggest that I shouldn't travel when I have [four] young children. The whole country won't progress if we don't do something now... We can't help it. There are so few of us with a little education; we take it as our responsibility.²

Such an attitude may seem somewhat idealistic and altruistic, and some may even question the wisdom of sacrificing so much when one has a young family. But such women exude a sense of mission, coupled with a sense of urgency. This is understandable, in that they are products of institutions that have emphasised dedication and duty to the larger

¹ E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *The Position of Women in Primitive Societies and Other Essays in Social Anthropology* (New York, 1965), p. 49.

² Interview on 30 November 1964.

society. Their training has stressed their role as leaders and they see themselves as endowed with a special task. They share a deep commitment to their society and are willing to make extraordinary sacrifices for it.

While these institutions and values have lost their impact upon much of present-day western society, they remain very much alive in certain spheres of contemporary Kenya. A heritage of communal values and Christian ethics has been reinforced by African socialism. The spirit of *harambee*, of working together to push their country ahead in modernisation, has coincided with and reinforced prior values.

This group of women exercises considerable influence as models to others. Occupying positions of leadership, speaking out on women's rights, and related to men in prestigious and powerful positions, they are highly respected and highly visible. Because they are a small, well-publicised group, they are the pace-setters in all spheres from private to public life. One Kenyan woman expressed it this way:

They [women, in particular the young] imitate what we do, whether it is wearing make-up, straightening our hair, wearing stockings, and they imitate our social behaviour. If we sit in bars, many will think it is alright, and they also will do it. We must be worthy of other women's trust and respect and set an example, not only in public life, but private life as well.¹



This article has described the aims, methods, and leadership of an early stage of a reform movement. Many questions remain to be asked and answered. Will the movement continue towards its reformist goals or will it become more militant? This is closely linked with the response from the authorities. Will the establishment fulfil its pledges to women or will it, in the face of other political pressures and a shortage of resources, continue to give low priority to women's rights? So far the women have made amazingly rapid strides. Will they, as their economic position improves, like women in many western countries, rest upon their laurels and fail to exercise the rights won by a former generation? Only time can provide some of these answers.

¹ Celina Oloo and Virginia Cone, *Kenya Women Look Ahead* (Nairobi, 1965), p. 56.