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## Let gender balance provisions evolve gradually Opinion Leaders on August 29, 2011

By MWANGI WANJUMBI



Whereas culture is said to be dynamic, the same appears to follow an evolution process. Rarely does it happen just at once like an activity. Perhaps our women, whose progression into leadership has seemingly been fast-tracked by the new Constitution, need to wait a little longer.

Apparently, they may not enjoy the desired aspirations of the architects of the new constitutional order, as yet. That could be understandable if we can reason together.

But first, it may be necessary to appreciate some dynamism in culture which may be of interest. One of the greatest social cultural evolutions of our times relates to some developments in Nyanza province. In response to adopting measures of reducing HIV Aids infection, males from the lakeside have in the recent past embraced a culture of circumcision almost to the man. Notably, mere mention of the same rite of passage in 2006 could send cold shivers in my change management classes, which lasted about one and a half months in Kisumu City. Surprisingly, the same region experienced a shortage of circumcision surgeons by mid 2009 due to surging demand.

On the other hand, we were treated to a dramatic court case regarding funeral rites when one of the prominent sons from the same region passed on. Whereas the bitter case was decided against the wishes of the widow, and body buried in Nyanza, one wonders why the situation has radically changed, since that time. It is not just a matter of burying the dead in Nairobi or elsewhere, but in fact having the bodies undergo extreme last rites of cremation. One can only imagine that the dynamic changes are a response to new realizations that will yield invaluable benefits to the society.

Additionally, those of us, who were around in 1985, may easily recall the International Women's Congress, Nairobi Chapter. Thousands of women from all over the world congregated in Nairobi aiming to discuss ways and means of getting empowered especially in masculine societies, where men naturally call the shots. This was followed 10 years later by the Beijing Women's conference (where our lady minister representative was accompanied by her hairdresser).

Ever since, there have been numerous notable developments with regard to rights and privileges of women. Female genital mutilation for example has since become a crime against women. Conducting the same attracts heavy punishment as now prescribed by the statutes. Sexual harassment has also been criminalized through the same statutes.

Further, empowerment of the girl child has also been radically entrenched almost to the extent of threatening that of the boy child. Earlier, women could not even acquire personal identification cards until sometimes in 1979. This means that no woman could buy property or invest in her own name. The married ones were recognized through their husbands whereas those that were single clung to their fathers' identities.

Without doubt the same rules must have applied to Grace Onyango, the first woman to have been elected a Kenyan MP (Kisumu Town) in 1969. Needless, to emphasize, women empowerment has come a long way in Kenya. Why then should we allow conflicts arising out of statutory fast-tracking of a culture that has slowly but surely been taking shape in the right direction? Do we or did we really have a crises demanding immediate attention?

Notably, the Constitution prescribes a mandatory gender balance of at least a third in all public offices. That is not bad for our mothers, sisters, daughters and aunts. However, the same people do not want to be seen as the weaker sex in many facets of the society. Incidentally, most men have a lot of respect for their feminine counterparts who earn their positions and entitlements through merit, especially in a competitive world. Why then should we have societal conflicts emanating from a good idea, which has been rushed rather than allowed to evolve over time?

Perhaps we need to learn a few lessons from the Scandinavian Countries. These include The Netherlands and Norway amongst others. The society in those countries is associated with what is referred to as feminine or nurturing cultures.

They are nurturing cultures because they recognize the women's caring role. Just like the women care for their infants, they are entrusted with extending the same trait to the society in its entirety. Probably, this explains why women easily and naturally ascend to positions of leadership authority in those countries.

It is no wonder then that there are more women than men occupying the roles of prime ministers, ambassadors and other prominent offices. Obviously, the men are expected to support the women as a natural occurrence. Is it not interesting then that the paternity leave that recently became part of our labour laws, could have originated from the Scandinavian countries? Yes indeed – men proceed on leave to assist their wives during maternity.

Consequently, it may be wise for the feminine members of our society to allow natural progression into a nurturing culture (if we can get there). This may be better for all of us instead of unknowingly or otherwise encouraging societal conflicts on matters that are gradually taking shape.

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