

GROOTS KENYA
BY AWINO OKECH

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EDITED BY SRILATHA BATLIWALA
SCHOLAR ASSOCIATE, AWID



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Author: Awino Okech

Editor: Srilatha Batliwala

Designer: Storm. Diseño + Comunicación



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Toronto Office

215 Spadina Ave,

Suite 150 Toronto, Ontario

M5T 2C7

Canada

contact@awid.org

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GROOTS Kenya

By Awino Okech¹

Introduction

This case study provides a rich description of GROOTS Kenya based on interviews conducted with the co-founder, Esther Mwaura, and Anne Muthia, a member of GROOTS Kenya through one of its regional groups, GROOTS Mathare Mothers Development Centre (GMMDC).² The case study gives precedence to the organizations' 'voice'; definitions of their work; and objectives, structures, activities, and successes. My analysis of GROOTS Kenya is presented at the end of the paper, where I touch briefly on the history of women's rights work in Kenya, and the national political dynamics that have shaped this work. I analyse GROOTS Kenya based on ongoing theoretical and activist debates around feminist organizations, movements and their functions. Using other initiatives that have emerged in Kenya, I will explore some of the inherent challenges of women's organizing and the impact this has had on solidarity building.³

Social Movements and Women's Movements in Kenya

There is no single definition of social movements. Resource mobilization theorists explain collective action in terms of structural opportunities, leadership, and ideological and organizational networks (see McClurg Mueller 1992: 12-16; Morris and McClurg Mueller 1992). New social movement theorists offer "collective identities" as a way of examining how people act in concert, often with the object of achieving a new, distinct, or semiautonomous kind of presence and cultural recognition. Those writing from a "new social movements"

perspective are interested in the construction, contestation, and negotiation of collective identities in the process of political activity. Collective identity refers to "the (often implicitly) agreed upon definition of membership, boundaries, and activities for the group" (Johnston, Laraña and Gusfield 1994:15).⁴

Ask the average Kenyan whether there is a women's movement in the country, and chances are, while the answers will differ, most respondents will strongly indicate that no such thing exists. If indeed there is no women's movement in Kenya, how do we qualify the numerous voices located around the country that organise sporadically around women's rights issues?

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1. Kenyan feminist researcher currently reading for her PhD in Gender Studies at the University of Cape Town's African Gender Institute.
 2. The interviews form the basis for this paper given the depth of information that the respondents provided. Both women have been with the organization since its inception. Brochures on some of GROOTS Kenya's programmes were also utilised to prepare this paper. I adopted a narrative approach to documentation. This means that I have not demarcated (in most instances) responses for particular questions.
 3. I tend to use the word solidarity building much more than the term movement. This is due to the fact that in my opinion movements in the way that they have manifested themselves in contexts such as Latin America or South Africa for example (I will examine some definitions below) have not really existed in Kenya. The histories of the contexts mentioned above have shaped the ways in which activism, action and collective enterprise is structured, a political history that Kenya does not share.
 4. The existence of collective identity, just like the notion of "collective consciousness" or "false consciousness," is difficult to substantiate. "First, it is predicated on a continual interpenetration of/and mutual influence between the individual identity of the participant and the collective identity of the group. Second, by the very nature of social movements, collective identity is a 'moving target,' with different definitions predominating at different points in a movement career. Third, distinct processes in identity creation and maintenance are operative in different phases of the movement" (Johnston, Laraña, and Gusfield 1994:16).

Groups of women who act together are often quite heterogeneous, and their ability to act comes from respecting difference while also forging a common argument through a shared set of questions. In the Kenyan context, the seemingly fragmented nature of organising often beguiles people into thinking a women's movement is non-existent (Oduol & Kabira, 2000: 102). However, the diversity that characterises the women's movement needs to be seen as a strength rather than a weakness. As one author notes,

In a context where tribal, class, educational and geographical differences make the identification and hence pursuit of common issues of concern difficult, it seems realistic to highlight this heterogeneity and strategise accordingly, rather than operate under an illusion of homogeneity, which cannot exist within a Kenyan context (Oduol & Kabira, 2000:103).

There are other factors that have contributed to 'parallel track' work and heterogeneity. One example is that of the Kenya Women's Political Caucus. The Caucus was formed in 1997 out of frustration with the throwing out of Phoebe Asiyo's motion⁵ on Affirmative Action. This excerpt from one of the dailies alludes to the power the caucus was envisioned to wield.

The Caucus grew into one of the finest examples of women lobbying and influencing legislation in their favour. On April 2000, the collective efforts of the membership saw Parliament pass the second Affirmative Action motion, moved by Dagoretti MP Beth Mugo. Finally, it seemed, Kenyan women were on the path to gaining the recognition they deserved (Daily Nation, April 20 2002).

This momentum was short-lived, for three years later, in 2000, the Caucus split into two, leaving organisations that were part of the movement

with the choice of joining the newly formed *Kenya Women Political Alliance* (The Alliance) or stay with the original Caucus.⁶ The cause for the split was attributed to the ad hoc nature of relations between members.

There were no clear and agreed guidelines on structures or even a simple set of rules and regulations. Interpretation of the aims of the Caucus and its mandate was left open to the personal understanding of members (Daily Nation, July 22 2000).

Before its split, the original Caucus was instrumental to providing a strong lobby platform that ensured the application of the principle of affirmative action in regard to women's representation in the constitutional review process. It secured nearly one-third female membership in the district and national forums and in the drafting committee of the Constitutional Review Commission. This translated into seven female commissioners out of a total of twenty six members; and about one hundred women delegates out of six hundred, for the proposed Constitutional Conference planned for 2003 (Nzomo, 2003:4).

The potential for mobilisation that was exemplified with the formation of the Caucus, its achievements, and its subsequent split, are reflective of the chasms that bedevil solidarity building amongst women in Kenya. Numerous organizations that conduct gender work around the country were either not part of these discussions by virtue of geography, or did not see the value of being part of these structures that were viewed to be city oriented. GROOTS Kenya, for example, was not part of the Caucus or Alliance, yet its objectives and broader goals resonate with those of the two structures. The readings of the split along ethnic and class lines cannot be dismissed, especially in an ethnically polarised society such as Kenya.

5. Phoebe Asiyo is one of Kenya's pre-eminent women politicians, a former Member of Parliament who also chaired MYWO. She introduced the Affirmative Action motion in Parliament in 1997.

6. However, one of the most contentious issues was the draft constitution, which was suspended following disagreements over membership criteria. The group that later formed the Alliance argued that the original Caucus was designed to be a lobbying forum for national women's groups directly involved in the political empowerment of women, women parliamentarians and ex-parliamentarians. What became the splinter Caucus was more inclined to a national approach, which involved including not only NGO's but community-based organisations into its membership. The emphasis on 'national' organizations as members points to the geographical factors already mentioned. It also reflects an assumed notion of representation by virtue of being located in the capital.

Esther Mwaura also hints at these class issues when she speaks of the disregard for grassroots women's intellectual and leadership capacities within mainstream 'development' spaces.

Maria Nzomo, who has written substantially on women and political mobilisation in Kenya, asserts:

[T]he last ten years of gender activism in Kenya have clearly shown that mobilization of people is not enough. Social movements must also have sustaining ideas, shared goals and a unifying, ideologically inspired gender vision that transcends respective members' socio-cultural and economic diversities (Nzomo, 2003: 6).

The heterogeneity that characterises the Kenyan society and by extension women's organising needs to be embraced, and can be done in terms of acknowledging the various ways in which women's movements emerge, are subsequently built, or dissipate. However, if women's rights activism in Kenya is to move to the next level, then there is a need for concerted efforts towards building coalitions and national alliances around sustaining ideas.

GROOTS Kenya provides a lens through which we can examine the question of what a cohesive women's movement might be in Kenya. There are a plethora of structures in Kenya that could be referred to as women's movements, such as the League of Kenya Women Voters,⁷ the National Council of Women of Kenya (NCWK)⁸, or Maendeleo ya Wanawake,⁹ with most of them engaging with similar issues and claiming a national membership. However, what differentiates GROOTS Kenya from the others is that it names itself as a movement and not as a network or NGO, which other groups with similar approaches do.

GROOTS Kenya – A Brief History

GROOTS Kenya can perhaps be best described as a network of self-help groups. There are over 500 self-help groups who consistently move in and out of its operating space depending on their needs. These groups are not charged a membership fee and are not bound by a set of operating principles but by shared needs.¹⁰ GROOTS Kenya emerged from the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, China in 1995. Mwaura, who is the co-founder of GROOTS Kenya, notes that:

During the [Beijing] conference I had an opportunity to attend various satellite events. One of the things that really impressed me was a group of women who were always in a tent and there were lots of grassroots women amongst them. They were sharing their experiences and people were listening. This was something that struck me because one did not see this in Kenya [at the time]. Even within the Kenyan delegation to the Beijing conference, it was a matter of individuals being hand picked to speak on behalf of others. But here was a tent where you could see that these women had brought their own agenda. On my return to Kenya, I felt I wanted to contribute to the world by forming something like that. So I got in touch with GROOTS International, who was the organiser of this tent.¹¹

Organizing Model

GROOTS Kenya is a member network and not a branch of GROOTS International.¹² Mwaura emphasizes that this has created confusion in terms

7. Their website is <http://www.leaguekenya.org/>.

8. The National Council of Women of Kenya was formed in 1964 as an umbrella organization for women's organizations, with Margaret Kenyatta as its president from 1964 – 1966. It was seen as a counter effort to Maendeleo ya Wanawake that had historically been initiated by colonial officers wives. Nobel Peace price winner Professor Wangari Maathai served as chair from 1981 – 1987.

9. Maendeleo ya Wanawake (MYWO) is a women's organization formed in 1952 by the wives of colonial officers. Maendeleo ya Wanawake can interchangeably be translated as the Organization for Women's Progress or Organization for Women's Development.

10. I shall explore this in detail later in the paper.

11. Mwaura attended the conference as a Bilateral Gender officer in charge of community development seconded to the Ministry of Local Government from the Royal Netherlands Embassy.

12. GROOTS operates as a flexible network linking leaders and groups in poor rural and urban areas in the South and the North in order to nurture relationships of mutual support and solidarity among women engaged in re-developing their communities – see www.GROOTS.org.

of popular perceptions of its affiliation with the international body. GROOTS Kenya is, for legal purposes, registered as an association of grassroots organizations. Due to government interference in civil society organizations in Kenya, by the late eighties,¹³ all radical civic institutions had been deregistered and/or co-opted (Okello, 2004:15). It is therefore not surprising that in terms of strategic positioning, GROOTS Kenya chose registration as an association as a route out to 'legitimacy', which enabled it to operate in an environment that was already hostile to civil society initiatives of any sort, let alone those led by 'unofficial' women groups.

Mwaura argues that even though in their brochures GROOTS Kenya is described as a network, she believes they operate as a movement. In relation to this point, she notes the following:

As a network, you would have people who come to contribute and usually there is a database of members. We are not able to keep up with that because we feel we respond to needs, take in issues of those who are our members based on the fact that they feel we are important in terms of our service to them or their service to GROOTS Kenya. In that case we feel we are a movement, because people come in and we approach issues together.

GROOTS Kenya is structured around a secretariat located in Nairobi. This acts as a quasi - infrastructural base from which all the regions link through projects or support structures. There is also a Board, whose role is to give strategic direction to their work.

Even though the regions are geographically demarcated, Mwaura asserts this does not mean they work in the entire region: "When we say we work in Kitui then we are present in the entire district." The regions in question include Kitui, Mathare, Kakamega, Kirinyaga, Limuru, Kendu Bay and Tana River. Within each of these regional

focal points are various self help groups registered within the Ministry of Culture and Social Services. "However, there are also members who could be individually registered, so it keeps on branching out." The various groups within the regions link at different times through programmes or specific advocacy messages. These may be done jointly or through specific regions working together. For instance, Mwaura points out that, "Kakamega, Mathare, Gatundu, Kendu bay and Limuru work jointly within one of our active programmes, the Women Property Programme, which involves safeguarding the property inheritance rights of widows and orphans in the era of HIV/AIDS."

Mwaura describes the relationship between the regional members in the following passage:

Annually, all regional members come together at a retreat, where we reflect on what we achieved during the year. They share with each other their challenges, experiences and opportunities on the ground and what their vision is – in terms of what they want to do in the next year. This is precisely what forms the basis of our fund raising. We conduct yearly fundraising or two years occasionally, but basically we review our work every year.

Mwaura notes that, "Just as we are independent from GROOTS International, these groups are also independent. We mentor, support and link them with other partners." To reinforce her point, Mwaura highlights that the group in Kakamega is in the process of partnering with World Vision on a project where they would like the group to be their focal point. There is a constant process of capacity building, with groups exiting and entering. GROOTS Kenya also conducts peer-learning exchanges amongst the regional groups. These exchanges are aimed at opening up spaces for them to speak on their own behalf. This in turn facilitates their involvement in decision-making processes at the local and international level.

13. Some of the strategies adopted by the Moi regime to demobilise civil society involved the conscription of self-help groups into administrative and political structures. This meant they could not undertake any development projects without the knowledge of local State agents (Okello, 2004:14). The state, in an effort to create viable avenues to the grassroots, co-opted Maendeleo ya Wanawake – see Okello, D. 2004. See also Audrey Wipper, *African Studies Review*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (Dec., 1971), pp. 463-482. The government made similar advances on labour unions, cooperatives and self-help Harambee Groups (harambee means collective effort in Kiswahili) (Okello, 2004:14).

A conversation with Anne Wanjiru Muthia, a member of GROOTS Kenya through the GROOTS Mathare Mothers Development Centre (GMMDC), further reveals how this operational structure has facilitated the growth of what is named as a centre but which has over twenty-six women's groups as constituent members. Muthia was born, and continues to live and work, in the second largest slum in Nairobi, Mathare. She came into contact with GROOTS Kenya twelve years ago, as this was one of the regions where the organization began movement-building activities during its inception.¹⁴

Activities and Strategies

The idea of a Mothers Development Centre was borrowed from Germany as a result of a peer learning exchange in 1997 facilitated by GROOTS Kenya. The exchange involved women from Papua New Guinea, Canada, Kenya and the USA. Through the support of GROOTS Kenya, upon their return from Germany, the women found a space for regular meetings in Mathare. They subsequently developed a day care centre for children to address the childcare needs of their members as well as other women in the community who are unable to afford child care support in the home.

In addition, upon realising that some of their members were unable to attend meetings regularly due to the responsibility of providing home based care to family members who were ailing largely due to HIV/AIDS opportunistic infections, the group, through GROOTS Kenya, received training on home-based care. Over the past six years they have supported 500 friends, the term used to refer to HIV positive women or women living with AIDS. As a result of the work around home-based care, there was a natural transition to working with orphans and vulnerable children (OVC's). There are over 300

OVC's that are currently benefiting from the Centre owing to capacity built through GROOTS Kenya. Of these, over 45 girls have undergone training in knitting as a means of income generation.

GROOTS Kenya works within four thematic areas.¹⁵ The first thematic area is Community Responses to HIV/AIDS. The advocacy and programmatic activities involve supporting communities through training and capacity building of women. This has invariably led to supporting orphans. As Mwaura notes, "This is now a big programme we are partnering with US Aid called Giving Hope."

The second area is Community Resources and Livelihood. Through this program, communities are led through processes of analysing and mobilising local resources. Mwaura asserts,

*Most NGOs come in and position communities as those who require resources – ask us for this and the community does not get a chance to ask what do we already have? So, we try to support communities to identify their existing resources by conducting an in depth assessment of existing local capacities to fulfil their needs. After which they can approach other partners to organize additional resources. Well-to-do members of respectful communities have been mobilised to rally and support worthy causes.*¹⁶

The third area of work is the Women and Property Programme, which is GROOTS Kenya's flagship programme. The emphasis in this programme is on safeguarding property rights of women and orphans.

The fourth area is Women Leadership and Governance. As Mwaura explains,

Our biggest push is that [grassroots] women's leadership hasn't been acknowledged. Grassroots women provide leadership that is invisible and we are unable to expose their talents even at the local

14. Muthia's entry into community organizing, specifically women's organizing, predates this encounter. Through sporadic women's groups that were largely structured around choirs formed to entertain former President Moi or as merry-go-rounds, Muthia was introduced to solidarity building.

15. Mwaura noted that, "Initially, we kept on saying we are not thematically driven but we decided to actually note the areas we were working on."

16. Mwaura indicates that local philanthropy has grown in areas such as Kakamega, Gatunudu and Limuru, where locals have been motivated to fund local causes.

level. We look at the devolved funding through the Constituency Development Fund¹⁷ (CDF) and see how many of these agencies actually work with women. So that is one area that we feel we have been able to contribute to, by building women's capacity to negotiate and navigate community and national decision making processes. It is also important that they share their skills and hold those in governance accountable.

Strategic Contribution of Groups Affiliated to the Organization

The regional groups consistently inform the strategic direction of the organization, and their involvement is multi-faceted. For instance, at the annual retreat, the representatives of the various regions determine the annual fund raising plan of the secretariat. In addition, through the regional focal point leaders, mentorship and direction is provided to the sub groups, so that there is regular consultation and inflow of information from focal point leaders, to the secretariat and back to the various groups in the region. Even at donor meetings, the regional representatives at times negotiate grants on behalf of their regions, while at other times fundraising is done for GROOTS Kenya.¹⁸

In relation to the above-mentioned organizational structure, Mwaura expressed the following:

When we talk about human resource within the organization, we don't refer to the secretariat but to the resource in the field; focal point leaders and their teams. We don't have field staff and that has been a strategic choice.

GROOTS Kenya has recently received an institutional strengthening grant that four of the active regional groups will benefit from. The grant will help develop administrative and managerial capacity within these groups.

Contributions and Key Moments

The capacity building process, particularly within this programme, seems to have yielded fruit. Muthia of the GMMDC asserts that their connection with GROOTS Kenya has developed the ability of their members to play critical roles within local leadership structures. Some of their members sit on the Constituency Development Fund (CDF) local committees, with Muthia being the Vice Chair of the local Bursary committee, as well as sitting on the Local Authority Trust Fund (LATF)¹⁹ committee. Another of their members is a treasurer on the

17. The Constituency Development Fund (CDF) was established in 2003 through the CDF Act in The Kenya Gazette Supplement No. 107 (Act No. 11) of 9th January 2004. The fund aims to control imbalances in regional development brought about by partisan politics. It targets all constituency-level development projects, particularly those aiming to combat poverty at the grassroots. The fund comprises an annual budgetary allocation equivalent to 2.5% of the government's ordinary revenue. A motion seeking to increase this allocation to 7.5% of government's revenue was recently passed in parliament. 75% of the fund is allocated equally amongst all 210 constituencies. The remaining 25% is allocated as per constituency poverty levels. A maximum 10% of each constituency's annual allocation may be used for an education bursary scheme. CDF is managed through 4 committees 2 of which are at the national level, and 2 at the grassroots level. According to the CDF Act, expenses for running constituency project offices should not exceed 3% of annual constituency allocations. Each constituency is required to keep aside 5% as an emergency reserve (Source: KIPPPRA).

18. Mwaura notes that these are talented women whose previously suppressed intellectual capacity has come to the fore through exposure to the dynamic activism they are involved in.

19. The Local Authority Transfer Fund (LATF) was established in 1999 through the LATF Act No. 8 of 1998, with the objective of improving service delivery, improving financial management, and reducing the outstanding debt of local authorities (LAs). LATF, which comprises 5% of the national income tax collection in any year, currently makes up approximately 24% of local authority revenues. At least 7% of the total fund is shared equally among the country's 175 local authorities; 60% of the fund is disbursed according to the relative population size of the local authorities. The balance is shared out based on the relative urban population densities. LATF monies are combined with local authority revenues to implement local priorities. An advisory committee comprising the private sector, the Ministry of Finance, the Permanent Secretary Ministry of Local Government, and the Kenya Local Government Reform Programme's secretariat, guides LATF operations. LATF annual reports and other

Starehe constituency CDF committee and has influenced the construction of extra classrooms and kitchens in underprivileged schools. Yet there are ways in which women continue to be excluded. Muthia noted that most meetings are purposely held at night and in bars to ensure that women do not attend.

Mwaura notes that one of their biggest strategic alliances has been membership in the global network of GROOTS International. This has created space for their entry into the international world. They often partner with GROOTS International to conduct international advocacy.

In 1996, through GROOTS International, we took two grassroots women to a UN conference on Human Settlement in Istanbul. Our anchor became mainstreaming grassroots women's voices. At an international level, we are known as an organization that takes grassroots women abroad. Right now, we have two orphans who have come through the care giving work who are currently in Washington sharing their experiences of being in a network of orphans within GROOTS Kenya that is aimed at bridging the generational gap. We are mentoring young girls to become active participants within the grassroots women's movement. We believe in women's leadership and governance.

GROOTS Kenya has been one of the lead organizations pushing for a change in Africa from traditional NGO organizing towards having grassroots women at the forefront/lead of advocacy, with NGOs providing back up support. The GROOTS International link was useful to opening the space for international networking almost immediately.

I can radically organise, I do not protest – says Esther Mwaura recounting key moments for GROOTS Kenya.

Organising in GROOTS Kenya is largely centred on select strategic interventions at larger advocacy settings, although most of their work is done at

the grassroots level. The grassroots work has not adopted protest-oriented action as a key mechanism to achieving their goals but rather, emphasis has been laid on lobbying and advocacy. By looking at these moments, one gains a rich insight into what are considered key events/points within the movement, as well as a detailed account of strategies they adopted and what those yielded.

Mwaura recounted the following regarding her strategic lobbying and activism at the 1997 International Forum on Urban Poverty, held in Nairobi:

In 1997, the UN Habitat was holding the International Forum on Urban Poverty. I was part of the steering committee. During several UN Habitat meetings, I had tried to persuade the UN to include Grassroots women who lived in urban poverty; slum dwellers to come and share their experiences. I would always be asked about their C.V's and their ability to communicate in one of the UN languages. In 1997, there was an opportunity to hold a meeting in Kenya. I can radically organise, I do not protest. So, when I couldn't get money to get grassroots women from the slums to an international meeting focusing on their issues, I wrote to women who I had met internationally. I told them that you are coming here [Nairobi] to attend this meeting and are being paid international per diem. We welcome you to Kenya and ask you to give a day of your per diem to get grassroots women into the meeting. We had over 100 women go to the UN but it was a really hard time because they [UN staff] didn't know how to deal with people from the slums.

We knew we needed to make ourselves heard in the conference and make our presence known. They had refused to give us per diem to get the women from the slums and then invited one of us to participate in a luncheon with the rest of the delegates. So to protest against the hand-picking of leaders and because we needed to eat, we decided to get large sufurias²⁰. We made rice, meat, mokimo²¹ and sat at the stairs of the

disbursement information are disseminated through newspaper advertisements. 60% of LATF allocations are released based on LAs meeting set requirements. The remaining 40% is released based on LAs performance measured through LASDAP and other indicators. Budgeted LATF allocations are gazetted but no disbursement is made unless LAs meet the requirements (Source: KIPPRRA).

20. Cooking pots made out of stainless steel typically used in peri-urban areas, which have been blackened on the outside to enhance heat preservation.
21. Traditional vegetarian dish.



CONTRIBUTIONS AND KEY MOMENTS

UN Habitat conference area. Walin Diaw of UN Habitat was walking out with the delegates and saw us sitting along both ends of the staircase. He knew me and called on me asking what the point was. I said, we have been asking you for a long time to ensure the participation of grassroots women at your conferences; we needed to make sure that you know we are here listening to the proceedings and that we are disappointed that we were not given a chance to participate. When the plenary returned he made a formal recognition, but we knew this would happen so we made our demands known. At this point we argued that it was impossible to have an international forum on urban poverty where the urban poor were excluded. We demanded a clear inclusion of the poor people in international forums. It opened up the involvement of slum dwellers, including the urban poor with a 30% mandatory inclusion that is currently designated. We believe our action was critical to fostering this.

In 2003, at the International Conference on AIDS in Africa (ICASA), GROOTS Kenya mobilised 50 grassroots women from Africa to participate. Mwaura recounts:

We had a tent located within the conference. We were very visible. We even invited the Global Fund on AIDS and grilled them on how much of their resources were being directed to grassroots women who they were purporting to support. The Global Fund acknowledged that grassroots women were doing a substantial amount of the work on a voluntary basis. One of the problems that they highlighted was that these efforts were uncoordinated; their work was not known and hence unaccounted for. We began to have a campaign around the unaccounted contribution of grassroots women, something that has gained ground globally. We are in the process of creating a home-based care alliance in Africa.

We are connecting caregivers in Africa to build a big movement of home-based caregivers whose work is unrecognised and unaccounted for. We are entering into partnership with UNDP and GROOTS International, to conduct accounting for contribution, to ensure that the contribution of grassroots women is accounted for financially – put a dollar to the volunteer work. We feel that we are providing leadership to the world though not so loudly. I was in Japan the other day and the Japanese government is interested in supporting this work in Africa. We have been talking to the World Bank about why the work of volun-

teers should be accounted for and recognised. This has made it possible for people like the Stephen Lewis foundation to know where to put their money.

In addition, during the World Urban Forum, which took place in Vancouver in 2006, GROOTS Canada mobilised the participation of over 200 grassroots women.

We have really sharpened our skill. We don't just go to conferences and listen. We run concrete workshops and partner with other development agencies. By the time we leave conferences we have critical impact.

In 2005, Church World Services, who serves as our conduit for receiving US Aid funds, were interested in our replicating Giving Hope a project from Rwanda. The emphasis of the project lay in foregrounding the role of orphans in reconstructing and taking charge of the future of their communities. We insisted that we had to visit Rwanda to see how the project works on the ground before replicating it. When we returned to Kenya, one of the things we emphasized to Church World Services was the fact that Kenya had not experienced genocide. Communities in Kenya are still intact to some extent, although they have lost the social networks.

At GROOTS Kenya, we have been mentoring organizations that provide support to orphans and here is a programme that suggests that orphans should take the lead. This is important and good but there are certain social structures that are still intact within this context. The women in the community are still there. There was a drawn out conflict between Church World Services and us but now they appreciate our stand on the matter. Now, groups are being sent from Uganda to learn about the GROOTS Kenya approach.

For International Women's Day in 2006, we were able to convince Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) to fund us and use our own theme – Celebrating Care Givers. We have been able to negotiate with donors by shaping and helping them rethink their strategies.

The CIDA funded Watchdog Groups, which are currently being implemented in Kendu Bay, Kakamega, Limuru and Gatundu are community led groups who ensure that people are not being disinherited. They also become intermediaries that resolve conflict before people go to court or before the disinheritance occurs. One of the groups that we realised was fostering the

disinheritance were the Assistant Chiefs²² who were getting compromised [corrupted]. We approached the Office of President through the Ministry of Internal Security requesting that we provide training to their security officers and incorporate them into the watchdog groups. This has transformed the way Assistant Chiefs in these regions see their role and their accountability to their communities. The formation of Watchdog Groups is now being replicated in Cameroon, Ghana and Nigeria, selected because they are former British colonies that inherited a similar bureaucratic administrative structure.

Muthia of GMMDC speaks of key moments when she talks about how caregivers in Mathare have reduced bed occupancy in hospitals due to their work in the home and follow up on Anti-Retrovirals (ARV's). GMMDC is part of an initiative that seeks to recognise caregivers through the formation of the National Home Based Care Alliance, involving over 400 caregivers. In 2006, GMMDC received a Red Ribbon award from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) at the 2006 International AIDS conference in Toronto. In addition, in 2007, a member of GMMDC, Rose Auma, won an award during the *Changing Lives, Changing Communities: Women's Leadership Making a Difference on HIV/AIDS*, YWCA conference in Nairobi. The award, which was given by the current Kenyan President, was in recognition of her work around HIV/AIDS in Mathare.

Summing up their key achievement, the following comment from Mwaura is indicative: "The fact that we have been able to send grassroots women to international conferences – UN meetings in New York and Geneva to speak has changed the perceptions around grassroots women and their capacities to contribute to local, national and global debates."

A Feminist Movement - or Not?

The vast debates around feminism, *womanism* or other terms that have been adopted to avoid the

use of the term feminist have their roots in a range of historical factors including but not limited to a history of colonialism that is closely linked to the rise of feminism in the West. The scope of this debate cannot be effectively problematised within this paper. However, one must take into account how such histories have been strategically deployed by national regimes and used at various points to immobilise and divide various levels of solidarity initiatives by women.

The co-option of MYWO and the defunct National Council of Women of Kenya (NCWK), mentioned earlier, speak to how these visible and publicly acknowledged institutions were employed to articulate specific messages around what legitimate women's organizing could be. That legitimacy led to defining what an authentically Kenyan women's rights discourse was, which was essentially a discourse that would not disrupt the status quo. Their nationalistic outlook, in terms of vast membership across the country, only made this easier. The constant derision of women's rights activists as 'Beijing women', or references to the trouble she was brought to the shores of Kenya after the Beijing Conference, are in response to an emergence of a fairly radical crop of activists located within various structures around the country who begun to challenge and shift the dominant discourse on women's rights that was hitherto shaped by MYWO and NCW.

The oft conflation between gender and feminism in most settings is fairly erroneous. The de-politicisation of gender that has arisen with the packaging of gender as a development tool results in most gender oriented organizations being acutely unaware of the political and ideological influences of the broader feminist ideology and movement to their work. Most activists would rather adopt gender activist as a safer label, for it is seen to reflect certain levels of inclusion that feminism as an ideology and a movement is seen to disregard. Those that name themselves as feminist are seen as too radical and considered pariahs at best.

22. Assistant chiefs form part of a bloated bureaucratic provincial administrative structure inherited from the British. The Provincial commissioner is at the top of the food chain, down to a District officer, Division officer, Chief, Assistant chief. There are various assistants and smaller sub divisions within each category. Chiefs, their assistants and local headmen wield a lot of power at the local level. The proposed new constitution for the country aims to disband these structures.

CONCLUSIONS

It is interesting to view GROOTS Kenya leadership's to this dynamic, and their response to the label feminist:

"Would you define GROOTS Kenya as a feminist organization?"

We are shy to bring in international concepts into our organizations that are not well internalised within our local society... [but] I think so because we are such a women-focused organization. But unlike other sharply focused feminist oriented organizations, we have more of a community-based approach. So when we talk about feminist, the grassroots women do not understand because the groups respond not only to women's issues. If we find a young boy who has been disinherited, we take that up. When working with orphans, we find that while we forefront young girls we end up taking more boys to school than girls, so do we still remain a feminist organization? I don't know. I think it's because we don't understand what a feminist organization is all about."

"Are you a feminist?"

Personally I am but I don't think the organization has been such a strong feminist organization. This has a lot to do with what we are addressing on the ground. I'm not sure we have been able to stay on women's rights holistically in isolation to other things. I don't think the organization has a strong feminist approach. We are also shy to bring in international concepts into our organizations that are not well internalised within our local society. This is one thing we have been deliberately careful of."

Perhaps Charmaine Pereira²³ best explains the anxiety that one witnesses in most people's reaction to the label feminist. Pereira argues that

The dominant view of feminism was [is] that it was [is] 'un-African' and 'alien'. It is clear, however, that the epithet of 'alien' is quite selectively applied in the domain of knowledge production, practice and politics. The generalised acceptance (until relatively recently) of other 'alien' phenomena, such as 'modernisation', raises the question of what lies behind the widespread resistance to feminism. (Pereira, 2002:9).

It is therefore easy to comprehend GROOTS Kenya's hesitance in naming themselves as feminist

as well as contradictions that emerge in Mwaura's responses, cited above. There exists no definitive definition of feminism, as feminist agendas are diverse and extensive. Nonetheless, most feminists would concur that their activism, research and praxis is driven by the general insight that the nature of women's experiences as individuals and as social beings, their contributions to work, culture and knowledge, have been systematically ignored or misrepresented by mainstream discourses in different areas (Narayan, 1989: 256). If this was to be taken as a broad working definition, there are ways in which the agenda, strategies and ethos adopted by GROOTS Kenya in its approach to grassroots solidarity building could be considered feminist.

Conclusions

1. GROOTS Kenya – A Grassroots Women's Movement?

In reframing GROOTS Kenya within the context of a movement, it is clear that it initially emerged as an NGO. Its inception was not based on collective thinking amongst the groups that now form part of its 'membership'. Rather, it was spearheaded by an individual who subsequently co-opted a substantial number of grassroots organisations into its operational framework. Its structure and operations have clearly undergone a metamorphosis over the years. There has been a focus on a central capacity building mobilisation unit, which is the secretariat, with a strong emphasis on retaining the individual identities and autonomy of the groups, a distinct feature of movements. If we use the New Movements theory as a way of understanding GROOTS Kenya, then yes, collectively, GROOTS Kenya has contributed to achieving a new cultural identity for 'grassroots' women, whether it is through access to hitherto non-existent leadership opportunities, or visibility at local and international forums where these voices were few, if not non-existent. In certain sectors, they have successfully changed the perceptions of grassroots women, but the question is, have they radically contributed to challenging or shifting the structures that perpetuate the issues

23. An independent Feminist scholar and researcher based in Nigeria

they take up? I argue that they have not, and feel that this can be attributed to a number of factors.

Even though Mwaura insists that the regional groups are critical to decision making, fundraising and strategising, there seems to be a reliance on the secretariat as opposed to other constituent members for 'strategic' support. Efforts at institutional strengthening are a step in remedying this situation. Nonetheless, it epitomises one of the weaknesses of women's movements,²⁴ where the masses that are a critical power base are fairly disengaged from active strategy development and resource mobilisation across the 'ranks' and not along it²⁵. This structural relationship also filters down into how the regional self-help groups are organised.

2. Strategic vs. Practical Needs: The Politics of the label 'Feminist'

It is clear that GROOTS Kenya sees itself first and foremost as a community development organization, with this as its core approach. Mwaura emphasised this continuously throughout the interview. This position is also reinforced by the fact that most of the organizations they have worked with closely are not institutions that would be viewed in Kenya as gender oriented or feminist in nature. Rather, they are organizations with a community, rural or urban development bias, such as Shelter Forum and Undugu Society, to mention a few. This relates to Molyneux's (1985) arguments around the strategic and practical needs approach. According to Molyneux's distinction between "strategic" and "practical" needs, practical interests are those focused on attending the immediate needs of most of the women (in the country) living in poverty. Strategic interests are those focused on changing the gender inequalities in society that facilitate women's subordination.

It is important to note that Women in Development (WID), Women and Development (WAD) and

Gender and Development (GAD) discourses have framed a significant portion of women's rights work in Kenya. Some of these frameworks have laid emphasis on practical needs, an approach that has been occasioned by the de-politicisation of gender by its transformation into a development package by many of the mainstream 'development shaping' institutions such as The World Bank and The United Nations. There are few organizations that see strategic intervention as central to their work. Those that do, find themselves having to re-focus their efforts to practical needs for survival. Here, I am referring to programming driven by donor interests and the push to do work that is fund-able. The result is that most organizations emphasize women's practical, rather than strategic, needs, which is significant because an emphasis on the latter would result in structural overhauls. There are a few organizations that have spearheaded this type of work (strategic work), particularly in the area of legal reform, but this is done by individual organizations, some of which name themselves as feminist or gender oriented, with others viewing their work as Human Rights based.

Mwaura concluding remarks echoes this, when she states that:

We are not able to detach ourselves from being a service delivery institution. We have been forced to bring in a service delivery component to our work, something we were reluctant to do. So the question is how do we maintain the capacity building aspect of our work? One of the strategies we have adopted is to build the capacity of the grassroots groups to deliver these services. However, we are still called upon to offer technical support. So we keep on outsourcing technical support, in areas where we are not equipped. So if people want water then that is what we work on and if they find a partner through our linkages to support such a project, we are still expected to provide technical support. We don't have limitations on what we work on. We are now talking about women, property rights and inheritance and the grassroots groups are always seeking legal advice from us.

24. This is the case both within the Kenyan context and in other countries the author has observed elsewhere in Africa as well.

25. Referring to acquiescence to a hierarchical leadership model where answers and strategies come from the top.

So we have been forced to hire a lawyer. We are bringing in components of service delivery due to circumstances.

It is clear from the above that GROOTS Kenya's practical needs approach is in response to its constituency – groups in rural and peri-urban settings who have not benefited from the gains of development and who suffer from a lack of access to resources. The focus on responding to the HIV/AIDS pandemic on a practical level by providing bursaries to orphans, income-generating activities, and home-based care is in recognition of the urgent needs on the ground. Nonetheless, GROOTS Kenya has also intervened strategically, such as the involvement of women in key local committees such as CDF and LATF, thereby ensuring that they are critical to shaping and influencing change in these areas. These committees are critical to the efforts at devolved funding and governance in Kenya, and the presence of 'gender responsive' women is critical. It is also a vital strategy, for it moves away from an emphasis on women accessing national power (parliamentary) without adequate attention paid to building women's capacity over the years and across the ranks.

3. Disconnections

Nonetheless, it is unfortunate that there is an apparent lack of strategic connections with gender or feminist organizations in Kenya. Mwaura hints at earlier connections with UNIFEM and MYWO, but these are more in an individual capacity rather than as strategic partners for the organization. In speaking about what Mwaura would define as a feminist organization, she referred to the Federation of Women Lawyers Kenya (FIDA),²⁶ and the Coalition on Violence against Women (COVAW),²⁷ organisations that are viewed nationally as being overtly feminist, given their strong focus on women (FIDA with a focus on legal support and COVAW

well known for its work around violence against women).²⁸ A connection between GROOTS Kenya and these organizations seems plausible, yet it has not been actively pursued.

The disconnection between GROOTS Kenya and more overtly feminist organizations can equally be attributed to the efficacy of the Moi regime's civil society demobilisation strategies. It can also be credited to funding limitations, with competition for seemingly minimal resources as a factor, in addition to ethnicity, class and geographical factors. Geography has resulted in a Nairobi-centric tendency, with very little effort made to engage organizations that are not based in the capital consistently in solidarity building (even amongst those organizations that claim a national membership). If you asked staff of a women's rights organization in Kisumu²⁹ whether there existed a women's movement in Kenya they would say no. Ask the same question to a Nairobi based activist and the answer would be yes.

The politics of exclusion and inclusion generally, but due to geography specifically, continues to be a problem that causes major rifts in what could be named as a potential women's movement in Kenya or what exists under that label currently. For this reason, there are many ways in which the work that GROOTS Kenya is doing is laudable, in terms of its efforts at building a grassroots based movement that spans the geographical hence ethnic divide that is Kenya. However, with the seeming disengagement from mainstream women's rights organizations (whether at a regional or national level), the result is parallel work that could easily benefit from ideological as well as strategic input from other organizations. The numbers currently mobilised under GROOTS Kenya would also be useful to greater strategic work that up to now has occurred under the auspices of individual organizations or groups of organizations across the country and largely in the Capital.

26. Their website is <http://www.fidakenya.org/>.

27. COWAW is one of the few organizations that I know of in Kenya that at inception named itself as a feminist organization. Their website is <http://www.covaw.or.ke/>.

28. Even these organizations have had to taper their 'politics' over the years, largely as a result of funding demands as well as conservative leadership.

29. The third largest city in Kenya.

4. What is a Feminist Organisation?

Finally, I believe that there is need for deeper problematisation of what a feminist organisation is. Case studies regarding what are their characteristics, as well as the inherent challenges and successes of alternative modes of organising, would be useful. Documented examples such as Sistren – Jamaican women's theatre collective by Honor Ford Smith, as well as fairly undocumented examples such as *Mothertongue* in Cape Town, *Gender Aids Forum*

in Durban, and COVAW in Nairobi, would be useful to such problematisation, as would others. Engaging with organizational trajectories, particularly those that identify themselves as feminist, is critical to expanding our ideas of what feminist organizations really are (beyond the popular connection to the issues they advocate for). By understanding organizations, we are therefore better positioned to comprehend the layers of organizing that inform women's movements, or deter them, in situations such as that which exists in Kenya.

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