Gender discourse and the construction of women in the Kenya National Assembly

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Abstract: This study sought to interrogate the role of gender discourse in construction of women in the Kenyan National Assembly in the contemporary period. The study focuses on parliament as the other dimension of political participation with glaring unequal power relations between men and women. The study used gender approach and various approaches to critical discourse analysis to examine how unequal power relations have been historically reproduced, sustained and contested in the Kenyan parliament by female legislators. The study pays attention to the role of discourse in the empowerment and disempowerment of female actors through construction and discursive strategies. The study was limited to parliamentary debate sessions between, 2008 and 2020. The study employed qualitative technique that was critical and interpretive in nature. Gender discourse was treated as the independent variable while power was treated as the dependent variable. Stratified purposive sampling technique was used to select parliamentary debate sessions from 2008-2012; 2013-2017 and 2018-2022 parliamentary terms. Data collection methods entailed observation, document and critical discourse analysis of primary and secondary sources. The collected data was subjected to qualitative analysis guided by the study objectives. The study findings reveal that Language is not neutral and it has been used to reproduce and sustain unequal power relations by constructing women negatively. The research established that women are constructed by gender discourse in multiple ways that largely disempowers them as social actors.

Key Words: Gender, discourse, construction, power, women.

1. INTRODUCTION :

Although the presences of women political leaders continue to increase in parliaments globally, it has not translated in their exercise of power during decision-making processes (Tamale, 1999; Nzomo, 2003; Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2008; African Women and Child Features, 2010; IPU, 2013). Unequal power relations between men and women continue to be perpetuated in public verbal spaces through discourse (Atanga, 2010). Women have largely been muted in public decision-making spaces through systematic cultural construction (Tamale, 1999, Meena, 2002; Mwangi, 2008; Atanga, 2010, Mokebo, 2015).

There is concurrence among scholars on the centrality of parliaments as centres of popular interactive participation and distribution of public goods (Hague, Harrop, and Breslin, 1998; Dhār, 2008; Makhanu, 2015). West and Zimmerman (1987) and Atanga (2010) concur that one of the major impediments to gender equity in political leadership and decision-making is language. Women and men exhibit different linguistic practices in the course of their interaction resulting in unequal power relations between them (West and Zimmerman, 1987). Men are inclined to have more linguistic capital than women due to patriarchal ideology that accords them greater latitude in the domination of verbal space in the public spheres (Choti, 1998; Tamale, 1999; Mwangi, 2004, Choti, 2013). As a result, women's verbal space is significantly limited by cultural construction (Choti, 1998; Tamale, 1999; Mwangi, 2004, Atanga, 2010: Choti, 2013).

Existing studies contend that language acts as an invisible tool that perpetuates unequal power relations in institutional settings (Mazrui, 1998; Yieke, 2004). Consequently, linguistic practices can potentially lead to silencing of social actors through creating unequal power relations between men and women. Despite the increase in literature on language and politics, there is scanty information on the role of gender discourse in perpetuating unequal power relations in parliament (Atanga, 2010; AWS, 2010; Kamau, 2010). Kamau (2010), Atanga (2010) and Mokebo (2015) suggest on the need for a detailed scholarly analysis that looks beyond the numbers to the underlying structural practices that impede the realization of women's equitable participation in decision-making in public spaces. This study therefore, sought to interrogate the role of gender discourse in creating unequal power relations in parliament by specifically interrogation the portrayal of women through discourse in ways that empower and disempower them.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW:

2.1 Review of related literature

Literature that attempts to place women at the centre of their societies is growing daily. However in practice, women are underprivileged in their society's debates and decision- making arenas globally (Miranda, 1983; Zeleza, 1997; Mama; 2005; Asante, 2007; Mokebo, 2015). This silencing of women in public spaces has been a function of intersecting structural biases that create and sustain unequal power relations between men and women. A survey of existing literature reveals that there is a wide knowledge gap on gender, language and power at global, regional and national levels (Yieke, 2004; Atanga, 2010).

According to Ake (1995), Beetham (2006) and Tumukwasibe (2011) existing scholarship on the democratization project has followed two main stream paradigms. The pessimistic paradigm has been used to analyse democratic process in developing countries as being cosmetic to the structures that perpetuate subjugation. The optism paradigm embraces a perspective that views African parliaments as epicentres of sustainable change. Although these paradigms are useful in guiding research, studies that focus on the centrality and concurrence of parliaments as centres of disempowerment and empowerment are scanty.

Majority of existing studies have been dedicated to institutional change. However, majority of these studies have not asked whether institutional change benefited all citizens women notwithstanding (Tripp, 2000). These institutions set up rules and yardsticks that govern the people within them on how they interact and compete with each other. However, when these rules and norms favour one section of the society and mute the other on the basis of gender or any other category, then questions arise on whether women equitable benefit from democracy and "good governance ' (Tripp, 2000; Tamale,1999; Choti,2013).

In the pre-colonial period, clan decision-making was done in some form of assemblies where elderly men sat with young men facing each other. In other communities women had their own assemblies such as the Igbo women in Nigeria while in other societies a dual sex system existed (Mwangi, 2004, Atanga, 2010). In contemporary African states, studies have revealed that African parliaments have alienated themselves from the citizenry. As a result, women continue to be treated as second class citizens in decision-making assemblies (Tamale, 1999; Kingham, 2003; Tumukwasibwe, 2011; Atanga, 2010; Choti, 2013). This is because parliaments continue to perpetuate male privilege and power (Tamale, 1999).

The exclusion of women from public decision-making has been rooted in patriarchal ideology that depict women as weak in their mental, moral and physical faculties (Ndumbu, 1985; Mwangi, 2004). Consequently, women have been treated as followers and listeners of their male counterparts. This perception of women as immature and "adulterous" in opinion has continued to limit their verbal space in public decision making. As result, "good women" are expected to be silent during public decision making including local gatherings-*barazas* (Choti, 2013). These constructed expectation on women results to unequal power relations between men and women.

A study done by Atanga (2010) on gender differences in parliamentary talk in the Cameroonian parliament established that there are gender differences in parliamentary debate sessions in both qualitative and quantitative terms. Atanga's study remarkably contributes to the understanding on how power is constructed and contested in contemporary African parliament and Cameroon in particular. She further establishes that women are constructed by discourse in ways that empower or disempower them.

A study by Kimenyi (1992) on gender and power revealed that the Rwandese women are placed at victim by language which in turn positions men as active actors. This study concurs with studies undertaken by Choti (1998) and Wood (2013) which reveal that certain grammatical structures and language use disempower women. These studies reveal that women have been given linguistic labels and positions that empower and disempower them. These arguments are relevant in interrogating how language has been used to construct female and male political leaders in ways that results in unequal power relations.

A study by Mukami (1994) on East Africa suggests that although women participate in decision-making, majority of them abstain or remain mute in parliamentary decision-making. Kabira and Wasamba (1998) observe that patriarchal ideology assumes that men represent women and as such women are treated as listeners. This gender blindness has been replicated in legal documents and language use leading to disempowerment of women (Anderson, 1997; Wood, 2010).

A study by Mazrui(1998) on political participation at national and local levels found out that in many African countries, parliamentary discussion are undertaken in ex-colonial languages. The study revealed that the ex- colonial languages reduce a pool of those who can participate in parliamentary debate to a tiny minority who monopolise the linguistic capital. A study by AWS (2010) analysed how gender issues are influenced by constitutional, structural and theoretical factors established that female legislators encounter numerous challenges that disempower them during debate sessions. However, the study does not pay serious attention on the role of gender discourse in perpetuating unequal power relations in parliamentary debates. Majority of existing studies on gender and politics in Kenya have paid attention to women's political progress as candidates and political office holders outside parliament. Studies interrogating gender dynamics or women' distinctive political activities inside parliament are scanty (Maina and Kabira,

1997; Wanyande, 2006; Kamau, 2010; Migowa, 2013). From the literature reviewed, it is clear that parliamentary discourse and power is hitherto un-researched area in contemporary African parliaments and Kenya in particular.

2.2 Theoretical framework

This study employed gender and strands of critical discourse analysis frameworks. These frameworks employed an integrative and interpretive approach in the analysis of the study problem.

2.2.1 Gender

The origin of gender as an analytical category can be traced to the second wave feminist movement (Mwangi, 2004; Mokebo, 2015). Feminism is founded on believe that unequal power relations between men and women exist and that women are a dominated lot (Morghadan, 2005). Although feminists have divergent standpoints over the origin of the unequal power relations between men and women, they concur that women have been muted and exploited by virtue of being women (Nzomo, 2015). Consequently, feminists view gender relations as relations of inequality in which women are disempowered (Mwangi, 2004).

The gender framework has been applied as an analytical tool in explaining the unequal power relations between men and women (Waylen, 1996; Tamale, 1999, Kamau, 2010; Choti, 2013). Davis, (1991), Morghadan (2005) and Nyakwaka (2012) view gender as the process of social construction that structures aspects of femininity and masculinity that lead to unequal power relations between men and women. As a result women are differently situated and affected by the social process through language, culture and state institutions (Davis, 1991; Lorber, 1994; Morghadan, 2005, Risman, 2011).

According to Risman (2011) gender as a structure differentiates opportunities and constraints based on sex category with three dimensional consequences namely at individual, interaction and institutional levels. At the individual level, gender structure constraints both sexes in constructing their identities. At the interaction level both men and women "do gender "in the process of interaction. Scholars agree that men dominate conversations in public spaces and that women have limited access to symbolic capital to make them visible in parliamentary debates (West And Zimmerman, 1975; Lafrance, 2001; Crawfield and Unger, 2004, Yieke, 2004; Atanga 2010; Tichenor, 2011; Choti, 2013).

At institutional level gender exists in terms of symbolic orders and organizational practices that reinforce our ideas on masculinity and femininity (Tamale, 1999; Tichenor, 2011). The gender ideology as a structure is reproduced in a society's institutions and social practices that establish the patterns of expectations and the behaviour of men and women in social organisation levels (Lazer, 2007; Atanga, 2010). Lazer (2007) argue that gender ideology and unequal power relations between men and women are assuming more varied and dynamic forms in contemporary period depending on institutional settings. In this way, different discursive structures and strategies arise in different cultural contexts (ibid).

2.2.1 Critical discourse analysis theories

This study integrated critical discourse framework based on political discourse analysis (PDA), discourse-historical approach to critical discourse analysis (DH-CDA) and the feminist critical discourse analysis. Critical discourse analysis theory view discourse as linguistic practices that create power inequalities in relation to gender (Fairclough, 2001; Wodak, 2003; Atanga, 2010). It particularly highlights how power is reproduced, legitimated and contested through discursive practices such as talk and text by dominant groups or institutions (Van Dijk 1996; Fairclough & Wodak, 1997; Walsh, 2001).

In the narrow context discourse refers to both written and oral text. However, in the wider conceptualization, it refers to the way in which social power abuse, dominance and inequality are enacted, reproduced and contested by use of discursive strategies (Wodak,1995; Caldas-Coulhard, 1996; Van Dijk, 2001; Walsh,2001). This study employs both the narrow and wider conceptualizations to analyse how power inequality between men and women is reproduced, legitimated and contested in the Kenyan parliament.

Discourse has been termed as critical because it goes beyond language to social problem by attempting to establish structures and practices that constitute and perpetuate inequality (Van Dijk, 1996; Gatitu, 2014). According to Yieke (2004) critical discourse analysis is advantageous as a tool of analysis of unequal power relations between men and women because CDA views institutions as social collectives where meaning is produced and social reality contested by groups in favour of their interests through discursive strategies (Lazer, 2005). This is an important aspect in interrogating how female legislators have been constructed in the Kenyan parliament and how they use discursive strategies to contest for power**.** Scholars concur that social power can be analysed by examining aspects of dominance, social construction and interaction (Van Dijk, 1996).

Discourse- historical approach to Critical Discourse Analysis (DH-CDA) was used to a great extent throughout this study is associated with the works of Wodak (1999), Wodak and Meyer (2001) and Atanga (2010). This approach

integrates the representation of social actors and historical sources in relation to social and political settings where discursive events are embedded. DH-CDA embraces the concept of triangulation at four different levels namely; the intermediate language and text; the intertextual and inter discursive relationship between utterances, texts and discourse; the extra–linguistic sociological variables; and, the broader socio-political and historical context in which the discursive practices occur (Wodak, 2001; Atanga, 2010).

This study employed different strategies advanced by Reisigil and Wodak (2001) in the analysis of texts. These discursive strategies include: such referential and argumentation, strategies. DH-CDA's notion is that discursive strategies in parliamentary speech patterns perpetuate gender imbalance and are used in the contestation for power (Atanga, 2010). The study also embraces feminist critical discourse analysis to a greater extent. This is because the major limitation of critical discourse analysis is that it assumes a general political standpoint that examines all forms of social inequality and unequal power relations (Lazer, 2005). Feminist critical discourse analysis is preoccupied with critiquing discourse which sustains male dominance by creating unequal power relations that systematically disempower women as a social category while sustaining male privilege (Lazer, 2005).

The main aim of feminist critical discourse analysis is to show that social practices are not neutral but gendered in ways that favour male dominance. The concern of the feminist critical discourse analysis is to transform the status quo through advancing a feminist humanistic prism leading to a fair society (Lazer, 2005). In such a society, gender is not used unfairly to perpetuate unfair group privilege over another. Feminist critical discourse analysts argue that power relations are characterized by the struggle over interests which are exercised, maintained and contested through a variety of ways. These unequal power relations are manifested through gate-keeping, abuse, interruptions and limitation of discourse access. The feminist critical discourse analysts observe that in contemporary societies, power is acted in texts and talk. Thus, they focus on how power is enacted and discursively contested in ways that empower by facilitating their greater participation in public spaces. Feminist critical discourse analysts focus on sentences, utterances, conversation turns, structure arguments, genres and interaction between discourses (Lazer, 2005).

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

This study employed a qualitative research design. The study was mainly descriptive, interpretive and critical in nature. As argued by Wood (2013) the study endeavoured to understand the nature and meaning of parliamentary debates. Gender discourse was treated as the independent variable while power was treated as the dependent variable. Power between male and female legislators was measured by the interpretation of social construction of political agents through naming and labelling and identification of legitimating strategies through argumentation. The study targeted parliamentary debate sessions between 2008 and 2020. Parliamentary Hansards and debate sessions were subjected to stratified purposive sampling covering 2008-2012; 2013-2017; 2018-2022 parliamentary terms.

The forms of data collected in this study comprised of audio-visual recordings of parliamentary debates, texts and numeric data. These forms of data were collected through multiple data collection methods namely direct observation, document and critical discourse analysis. Primary data was obtained through the observation of audio-visual records and Mansard records. Secondary data was obtained from articles, journals, government documents, newspapers, theses and credible online resources.

The qualitative data obtained was compared and interpreted guided by gender theory's comparative approach and CDA. These procedures involved description, interpretation, comparison and explanation. Selected parliamentary debate sessions were analyzed by identifying discursive strategies that empower or disempower the actors. This involved analysis of the impacts of construction of political actors through discourse. Data reduction involved writing summaries and generating themes. The analysed data was thematically presented in respect to the study objectives.

4. DISCUSSION AND RESULTS:
4.1 How women have been construction in the Kenya National Assembly:
Women have been constructed as children

The study established that women have been constructed as children or categorised alongside children. As a result, women are disempowered as a social category through infantalisation. In supporting the Constitutional of Kenya (Amendment) Bill moved by Hon. Aden Bare Duala, Hon. Tanah Algal Ali; member of the National Assembly for Isiolo (Women's Representative) contends that majority of patriarchal community's subordinate women by excluding them from leadership positions and decision-making processes. Hon. Tanah Algal Ali opines as follows

"As I grew up in my community, the Northern communities of Kenya believed that women are children with big feet," (National Assembly Official Report, 22 nd March, 2016).

The assertions by Hon. Tanah Algal Ali are a clear evidence of how patriarchal ideology trains women in self-doubt and limitation premised on cultural underpinning among Kenyan communities. The study establishes that cultural

practices among Kenyan communities systematically treat women as toddlers despite the existence of clear distinction between children and adults. The referencing of women as children with big feet is a blatant cultural bias that undermines women's mental abilities and decision-making through categorization and association with toddlers. Hon. Tanah Algal Ali further notes that, she belongs to a Muslim community in which men are allowed to marry many wives. These wives are in turn entrusted with management of property and homes, yet they refer to them as infants with big feet (National Assembly Official Report, 22 nd March, 2016). Hon. Tanah Algal contests this patriarchal ideology that disempowers women by levelling their rationality with infants, despite their achievements as home and property managers.

Another level of disempowerment of women is through grading and categorization. Remarks by Hon. (Mos.) Gathoni Wamuchomba illustrates that generally women are graded alongside infants.
"Women are … always graded like children,…...when you talk about special groups, they are women and children" (The Hansard, 16th October 2019).

According to Hon. Gathoni Wamuchomba, political interventions in rural areas particularly distribution of relief food stuffs; women are grouped alongside children while the men folk are categorised as a single group. The simultaneous association of women with children wraps together as being uniformly immature in all faculties except the physical aspect. This infantalisation of women recreates and reflects unequal power relations between men and women. The study establishes that social ordering of actors that treats a section of adults in society as immature is not a neutral practice. This nature of ordering social actors results in disempowerment of women as social actors in relation to men. The social ordering of women and children as a single category is deeply embedded in cultures and contemporary state intervention mechanisms. The study established that infantalisation of women can be redressed through re-engineering both the cultural and political arena (The Hansard, 16th October 2019).

Construction of women as male appendages
In the public spaces, women have been constructed as male accessories regardless of their social positions and achievements. What is said, written or presented in images portray women negatively thus perpetuating unequal power relations between men and women. Hon: Cecily Mbarire poses:
"Do lady Members of Parliament have a right to participate in national matters, including accompanying the Head of State, the Deputy President or ….? Does our accompanying them mean other things?" (National Assembly Official Report, 22nd May, 2013).

Hon. Cecily Mbarire contends that while it was in the public domain that certain female Members of Parliament had accompanied the Deputy President for a diplomatic trip abroad, a local newspaper carried a cartoon that depicted the said female legislators massaging the Deputy President. Hon: Ceciry Mbarire observes that this negative representation of women in a section of the media was demeaning to women parliamentarians. The impression created by the "cartoon of a male deputy president" lying while being massaged by female legislators, empowers the male recipient by giving him more social status while disempowering the implied female legislators. A demand by Hon: Millie Grace Odhiambo Maboma, to have a photo of her being massaged by male members of parliament for equality purposes was a satire meant to illustrate how society continues to demean women's role in public sphere by persistently linking them to activities restricted to the private domain (National Assembly Official Report, 22nd May, 2013).
The study establishes that the societal mind-set largely views women's engagement in public spaces subjectively (National Assembly Official Report, 22nd May, 2013). They are not treated as independent political agents but as appendages to their male colleagues. Thus, their public role if any is to nurse the male decision-makers and male state delegations as perpetuated in some gender insensitive media. According to Hon. Cecily Mbarire such gender insensitive media look at women from the waist downwards instead of looking at them from the neck upwards. This kind of social construction of female legislators does not only limit their verbal spaces but also their equitable function as independent political representatives. This cultural perception cast doubt on the mental abilities of female legislators in state functions and thus creating unequal power relations within parliament.

Construction of women as great mothers
In the Kenyan parliament women are portrayed as great mothers due to their dedication in the family. Hon Sabina Chege further observes that, some women chose to not to go to work by remaining at home to concurrently bring up their husbands and children at the same time. They sacrifice to ensure that they remain elegant all the time (National Assembly Official Report, 24th March, 2016). These assertions construct women positively as cares of homes and the society as a whole. Additionally, women are constructed as human beings with great abilities and welfare minded.
However, Hon: Sabina Wanjiru Chege observes that despite these engagements and immense trust bestowed on the great mothers, they are excluded from leadership roles in African countries. These great mothers are disadvantaged

in the electoral terrain by the male gatekeepers and their domesticity due to reproductive and productive functions. The desire by women to empower their husbands and children, ironically results in their disempowerment as domestic wives (National Assembly Official Report, 11th August, 2011).

Construction of women as leaders

Women are also portrayed as great leaders in the family, formal and informal groups. Hon: Sabina Wanjiru chege describes women as great leaders who play crucial role in church movements and other organisations-*Chama.* In seconding the Political Parties (Amendment) Bill, Hon. Sabina Wanjiru Chege appeals to the male legislators to make their decision based the critical roles played by women as their mothers and family managers rather than treating them as competitors (National Assembly Official Report, 21st April, 2016). Hon. Peter Njuguna Gitau concurs by asserting that women have led and excelled in families leadership. He singles out the role of women during the emergency period in 1952, Athletics competitions, schools and university management (National Assembly Official Report, 11th August, 2011). These assertions on achievements of women in specific fields both in the domestic and public portrays women as leaders with great abilities.

Construction of women as followers and listeners

In the Kenyan parliament women are expected to be followers and listeners of the male leaders. According to Hon: Faith Wairimu Gitau, women are expected to be followers and listeners in public spaces. This perception is reflected in her turn talking in the house as follows:

"Yesterday we listened to them. We were silent as women. Today we are asking them to give us their ears," (National Assembly Official Report, 21st November 2018**).**

The statement, "we were silent as women," does not say silent as women legislators but simply women. This is direct reference to the traditional cultures in most communities in Kenya that expect women to be silent in debates and public decision- making arenas. She challenges their being mute by asserting that it is their turn to be seen and heard. In her opinion men cannot have the monopoly linguistic capital to dominate although. According to Hon. Ms. Gathoni Wamuchomba, women are not supposed to know anything in politics as set out by cultural standards and so they are expected to remain mute (The Hansard, 16th October 2019). They are further not expected to contradict their male counterparts. Hon. Odhiambo-Mabona, Hon. Member for Mbita observes that she received threats of being stripped because she had a differing opinion on political issues with some people," (National Assembly Official Report, 18th November, 2014).

Construction of women as nationalists

Women have been positively portrayed as nationalist in the Kenyan parliament. Hon: Peters Njuguna Gitau observes that despite the fact that women have been victims of unequal power relations in society they have been instrumental in the liberation struggle. He notes that during the liberation struggle in Kenya, women provided essential supplies to freedom fighters and endured numerous hardships. Yet, women continue to suffer in post-independent Kenya. Hon: Peter Njuguna Gitau further asserts that women have been systematically disempowered over time through inequalities and wrongs committed against them. He advocates for intervention of women's disempowerment through formation of a Commission that would address the exclusion of women in political, economic and political spheres (National Assembly Official Report, 11th August, 2011).

Construction of women as the base of the social strata

Women have been constructed as a low class mass. Hon. (Ms.) Halima Mucheke observes that despite the fact that women are the majority of the population in the society; they are located at the lowest strata in the social hierarchy. Women form the majority of the population at the base of the pyramid and their positions of authority shrinks as one move upwards the societal pyramid. Hon: Halima quotes the late Hon. Wangari Mathai who once said' "The higher you go, the fewer the women there are." In referencing Wangari Mathai, she resorts to authority figure and lobbies her fellow legislators to reconfigure the pyramid by supporting women not only at higher positions of authority but also their inclusion in decision-making process. This observation constructs women as powerful due to their numeric strength at the base of the pyramid. However, in the social strata they are underrepresented as one ascends the societal hierarchy. This minimal or absence of women as one moves up the social strata contributes to their disempowerment as a social group.

Construction of women as objects

Power inequality between male and female parliamentarians is sustained through objectification of women in society. The study established that certain cultural practices treat women as part of male property. According to Hon:

Gathoni Wamuchomba, dowry has been used to objectify women. The study establishes that marriage is not union of two equal partners because dowry transfers ownership of a human being to another. The study reveals that married women are treated with a high degree of respect and status compared to unmarried women. Hon. Wamuchomba further observes that women are valued according to how much dowry was paid or will be paid (The Hansard, 16th October 2019).

The study establishes that the concept of dowry places a married woman at the receiving end in marital affairs. Marriage in the African settings empowers a woman and at the same time it disempowers her in relation to the husband. Wamuchomba contends that the objectivation of women does not only exist within societal contexts but also extends to the political arena (The Hansard, 16th October 2019).

Construction of women as victims

The study establishes that women are portrayed as victims of their own making or circumstances. Hon. (Ms.) Gathoni Wamuchomba asserts that women who defy male expectation of them to remain mute are victimized.

"When you speak loudly and boldly …we are called names,"

(The Hansard, 16th October 2019)

This name calling in regard to female legislators who assert their verbal space amounts to intimidation. Labelling creates negative perception towards women and forces them to remain mute. Labelling is also aimed at making women retreat and disengage in political processes. Another form of victimization of women arises out of selective application of perceived decency by the male folk or lack of it. Hon: Susan Mbinya Musyoka observes that women are also not treated with decency in public spaces and at work stations. According to her women encounter multiple forms of victimization ranging from verbal or non-verbal. One such non-verbal victimization is by looking popularly referred to as " *kula kwa macho"* in Kiswahili . According to her "*Kula kwa macho,* refers to the act of looking at a woman lustfully, undressing her and even engaging in the act without her getting involved." The act of undressing a woman and engaging in an act without her knowledge connotes that women are powerless and in disadvantaged position even when they are not physically or mentally involved. She contends that even in admiring someone it should not involve undressing them.

The portrayal of women as indecently dressed has been a source of their victimization. It appears that there is unwritten code at play that selectively applies to women's dressing style. As a result women who violate the "unwritten dressing code" are expected to bear the consequence as observed by Hon. Kathuri Murungi.

"When you go to the streets of Nairobi, you will see some women exposing their bodies and that provokes the opposite sex because it is natural. I encourage our women to respect our culture and dress properly…. so that we do not get into these problems… (National Assembly Official Report, 8th February, 2017).

Although Hon: Kathuri Murungi's observations are well intended towards ending abuses against women. His statement reflects that culture expects women to dress decently and that the sexual abuse of women who are dressed indecently is a natural process (National Assembly Official Report, 8th February, 2017). The study establishes that culture seems to be silent on men's dressing code and technically absolves them from the violation of women who are indecently dressed. Naturalisation of sexual abuse of women considered to be indecently dressed by culture place the burden of blame on the women victims rather than the male perpetrators. The treatment of women as victims is highlighted in the following statements:

i. **"**There is a case in my constituency where somebody has defiled a girl and he keeps defiling girls," Hon: Abdul Rahim Dawood.
ii. "In Kayole, a girl was stripped naked, assaulted; unfortunately, she did not make it," Hon: Rachael Wambui Shebesh

(National Assembly Official Report, 18th November, 2014).

In these statements it is clear that women are portrayed as victims of recurring and deadly violations. The study further establishes that there is no legal basis that is cited to compel women's mode of dressing in public or in private spheres. The observations by female legislators give a clear indication that there are no set standards for either men or women dressing code. Consequently, the excuse that women are indecently dressed has no justification in violating them as asserted by Hon: Rachael Wambui Shebesh and Hon: Millie Grace Akoth Odhiambo Maboma (National Assembly Official Report, 18th November, 2014).

5. CONCLUSION:

This study established that language use is not neutral when used in the construction of social and political actors based on gender. The study findings reveal that gender discourse has constructed women in the Kenyan National Assembly in ways that create unequal power relations between men and women. In the contemporary period, women have been constructed by discourse in multiple forms that result largely in their disempowerment than empowerment. The key study findings reveal that women have been constructed as: children, male appendages, great mothers, leaders, followers and listeners. They have also been constructed as nationalists, the base of the social strata, objects and victims.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS:

Based on the study findings, there is need to undertake detailed studies on the construction of women in the Kenyan period within the traditional and modern discourse; examination of gender discourse in legitimation inequality between male and female parliamentarians; and, how power is contested through discourse in the Kenyan parliament.

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