

THE FEMINIZATION OF RURAL SPACE: EXPLORING DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGE, POWER AND THE STATE IN KENYA

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In many rural communities in Africa, particularly where patriarchal structures are strong, women often access and interact with the state through the men in their households. However, what happens when men leave the home and exit the community? How are these resources delivered and accessed? In the last twenty years, demographic changes influenced by the very gendered impacts of exogenous shocks—such as climate change and disease—have led to a feminization of rural space. Weather variability caused by climate change has made agricultural livelihoods difficult to maintain and, as such, many men have consequently moved to urban areas in search of alternative income sources. This has been especially true in western Kenya, where climate change has intensified a gendered demographic shift already underway due to the high prevalence of HIV/AIDS within the region. This feminization of rural villages has meant that women have had to adapt to new ways of engaging with the state and benefiting from state resources. Where the state fails to provide these services, the women of

these communities must develop their own strategies for accessing and developing their own means for collecting information, income, and protection.

This study explored this demographic change, and its political implications, based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Nyando, Kenya. The field research was conducted between March and June of 2015 as part of a broader dissertation study conducted over the course of fifteen months in Kenya (Nyando and Laikipia) and Morocco (Abda-Doukkala). The methodology relies upon the triangulation of life history interviews, key informant interviews with local officials, qualitative household surveys and focus group discussions.

Initial findings from this research demonstrate that, rather than engaging with the state for such services, they choose to opt into other means of informal political spaces to access resources such as security, food, and income. This engagement is seen in women's groups which are organically formed and maintained by women. Women's networks within the village and

their engagement with other ethnic groups outside of their community will be important in navigating this demographic and social change that is occurring. As one woman explained, "There is a big change. Women have a lot of freedom these days. The groups have helped a lot—the trainings have helped a lot. Women were just indoors, they didn't have freedom because there were no groups, so they were just in their homes." It is in these groups where women share ideas about how to solve real issues, largely pertaining to development in their community. At the most basic level, women are concerned with earning enough money to support their families and send their children to school. They want their families and their assets to remain safe in times of insecurity. When the state does not provide these services, women must find alternative ways of accessing them. Women's groups seem to be the avenue for doing so in Nyando.

While this has been an ethnographic case study for initial exploration of women's access to and utilization of state resources where men are absent, more research is needed in this area. Further research must rigorously explore how state services travel from source to end-user between households where men are present and those where men are absent. These gendered power dynamics are fluid, and the social structures that dictate the rules of civic participation may not reflect this fluidity. How they adjust and respond as women become more involved in women's groups, and more civically engaged in political issues of the village in the coming years will be interesting to see and understand.

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