

Reimagining the Gendered Nation: Citizenship and Human Rights in Postcolonial Kenya

By Christina Kenny, Rochester, NY: Boydell and Brewer, 2022,
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Reimagining the Gendered Nation purports to be a book about Kenyan women's experiences of citizenship and human rights in colonial and postcolonial times. However, each page is filled with rich, detailed, provocative, and incisive commentary that is evocative of the condition of many women across Africa. There are striking parallels in the rampant, underreported sexual abuse, among other indignities suffered by Kenyan women, and the apparent failure of human rights and other development interventions to improve their situation. There are also commonalities in the diverse ways in which women exercise their agency. Indeed, Kenny conscientiously counters the stereotyping of women as victims, demonstrating how they navigate the gender power hierarchies of the often contentious structures of the masculinised nation-state.

Based on extensive fieldwork in urban and rural Kenya, Kenny's critical insights are enlightening for everyone who seeks and needs to better understand how the situation of many a Kenyan woman today is the culmination of decades of exploitation, and of being seen, imagined and treated as everything but who she is: a human being with thoughts, needs and desires. In the book, Kenny skillfully demonstrates this through the figure of Wanjiku, the folkloric Kenyan rhetorical female figure who embodies the concept of everywoman, to illustrate how the concepts of woman and womanhood have been historically instrumentalised by diverse actors to suit every purpose but the true emancipation of Kenyan women.

Drawing on Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí's influential work on the discordance between Western and African gender logics, Kenny describes how the 'bio-logic' that underlies much of Kenyan gender and sociopolitics today was produced by the

‘colonial project’. As a result, the human rights project is at war with itself: instead of dismantling the systems and structures that oppress the women it aims to ‘save’, it is effectively reinforcing them by perpetuating worn and distorted gender stereotypes and overlooking local histories and conditions.

One such stereotype is embodied in the underlying assumptions of singular subjectivities, such as the predominant victimhood of women, which Kenny says are a contributing factor to the limited gains of the human rights project. A second factor relates to the homogenisation of Kenyan women which, combined with the masculinised imaginary of the nation, has narrowed the identities open to women in human rights frameworks and human imaginaries.

Kenny unsettles this homogenisation by alternately exploring various aspects of Kenyan women’s lived experiences, first as victims and objects of cultural violence (Chapter Two) and political and state violence (Chapter Four). She then nuances this narrative by troubling myths surrounding women’s sorority (Chapter Three) and situating them as active agents in national political processes (Chapter Five).

Chapter Two examines how women’s bodies functioned as sites of colonial control, regulation and resistance through conflicts over cultural practices like female genital cutting. Here, Kenny highlights the complex character of women’s actions and agency — sometimes resisting, sometimes conforming with patriarchal expectations and norms — and emphasises how these experiences shaped women’s identities in both oppressive and empowering ways. As illuminating as this discourse is, pegging her analysis in the late colonial period denies readers critical insights into precolonial gender logics and practices, how colonialism inflected these, and to what extent the former has contributed to the state of gender inequality in Kenya today.

In Chapter Three, Kenny challenges the oversimplified assumption that African women are unified by a common sisterhood. She reveals the in-fighting within women's organisations, notably between elite and community women and activists, and the different ways that women conceptualise and perform solidarity. Kenny challenges readers to reflect on the contradictions and messiness in women's community work and urges us not to homogenise their struggles nor assume unity among diverse groups.

In Chapter Four, Kenny discusses women's subjection to state-sponsored as well as everyday violence, particularly during elections. The book sheds light on the social, political, and institutional conditions that allow women's susceptibility to such violence. Kenny illustrates the limits of legal and social interventions, showing how patriarchal norms have a tendency to persist in spite of attempts to resolve the issue.

The final chapter examines the complexities of women's political participation in light of how cultural and structural barriers impede their input into civil and political life. Despite international human rights efforts to empower women, Kenny illustrates that such interventions often neglect to factor in underlying cultural and historical forces, emphasising the need for more locally targeted approaches.

Beyond this expansion of typologies of Kenyan women and its informed critique of the human rights project, the rigorous historical approach employed in *Reimagining the Gendered Nation* is a highlight of the book. Kenny's skillful situation of the gendered lives of Kenyan women in the country's broader colonial and postcolonial histories offers a rich backdrop to their current struggles and achievements, enabling readers to visualise how and why gender roles have evolved over time. Further, the book highlights the limits of human rights regimes and the disjunctures between these kinds of interventions and the daily lives of Kenyan women. By offering alternative frames, Kenny challenges us to reconsider how human rights can be more meaningfully translated into

local contexts from the viewpoints of those most affected and involved.

Although *Reimagining the Gendered Nation* calls for reconsideration of how we ‘do’ gender equality and human rights in the Global South, it does not offer much by way of substantive policy or practical recommendations. This may be just as well, given the author’s admittedly complex positionality and the extensive foreign imposition of developmental solutions that has contributed to the quagmire of women’s human rights in Kenya today. Kenny does, however, make two thoughtful observations. First, that the failure and/or reluctance to confront how colonialism constructed masculinity and femininity makes it difficult to understand the barriers Kenyan women face in accessing justice, social services and political power—all basic rights of citizenship that have accrued more easily to men. Second, deriving from this, she underlines the importance of establishing a more nuanced understanding of how local histories and gender power hierarchies create, recreate and sustain gender inequities, looking from local women’s intersectional standpoints. In this light, her book offers critical commentary that is apposite, in light of both a continuing culture of gendered violence in Kenya, and across Africa, and emerging critiques of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda as it approaches its 25th anniversary. It is an essential read for gender, human rights, and African Studies scholars, but also for policymakers and activists across the globe.

Future research could explore practical suggestions for mitigating the growing problem of gender-based violence and improving access to justice in culturally relevant ways that prioritise survivors’ identified needs. Further thought should also be given to policy recommendations on how to manage hybrid (traditional and formal) justice systems and practices or create new forms of political participation that are sensitive to local values and traditions.

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