Participation and the Cultural Politics of Power: the case of Kenya’s Maasai Women

Abstract

Globally, women are under-represented in governance structures, resulting not from conscious discrimination, but due to various forms of bias in civil society institutions and the political sphere. In Kenya, political structures and processes have been recognized as the main reason for reduced spaces for women to voice their knowledge, opinions and concerns, providing no room for alternative interpretations of needs and policy solutions. Despite being a voting majority, traditional customs and societal attitudes have limited women’s political space in Kenya. Gender stereotypes, male resistance to women’s participation, limited resources and political structures and processes have significantly contributed to the under-representation of women in decision making positions.

Among the Maasai, gendered separation has resulted in women’s absence from the political spheres and a lack of involvement in politics, prolonging struggles over power and property in the community.

This research project seeks to explore how a new constitutional dispensation that enforces women’s public participation affects the position of women in the political economy. Informed by an assessment of the political realities of localised understanding and meanings of gender roles and poverty among the Maasai, it will investigate engagement mechanisms in designing, planning and executing development efforts within the new governance structure.