



## **Locating Kenyan Media in Anti-Rape Discourse: A Feminist Critique**

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### **Abstract**

The tendency in most African media to sensationalise sexual and gender-based violence abstracts this issue from the reality of its prevalence, and at the same time averts critical engagement with the social, political and economic contexts within which sexual violence occurs in society. This paper applies a critical feminist analysis to media coverage of sexual violence that has been observed during key moments in Kenya's political history. The paper draws from representations of sexual violence reported in the media at various epochs during Kenya's transition from colonialism and authoritarianism towards democracy and elections, and through these narratives, attempts to construct a theoretical framework within which the relationship that exists between women in Kenya and the (democratising) state might be analysed. The paper shows that anti-rape discourses were produced in the media but served different purposes than that of pursuing a feminist agenda, depending on the imperatives of the time in Kenya's historical political development.

**Key Words:** rape, media, democracy, state, elections, violence.

### **Résumé**

La tendance dans la plupart des médias africains à faire du sensationnel sur la violence sexuelle et sexiste soustrait cette problématique à la réalité de sa prévalence, tout en évitant l'engagement critique avec les contextes sociaux, politiques et économiques dans lesquels la violence sexuelle est exercée dans la société. Le présent article applique une analyse féministe critique à la couverture médiatique de la violence sexuelle qui a été observée à des moments clés de l'histoire politique du Kenya. L'article s'appuie sur les représentations de la violence sexuelle qui ont été rapportées dans les médias à différentes époques de la transition kenyane

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du colonialisme et de l'autoritarisme à la démocratie et aux élections, et à travers ces récits, essaie de construire un cadre théorique dans lequel pourrait être analysée la relation qui existe entre les femmes kenyanes et l'État (en voie de démocratisation). L'article montre que les discours contre le viol ont été produits dans les médias, mais ont servi à des fins autres que celle de promouvoir un agenda féministe, en fonction des impératifs du moment dans l'évolution politique historique du Kenya.

**Mots clés :** viol, médias, démocratie, État, élections, violence.

## **Introduction**

The documentary by Jennifer Siebel Newsom titled *Miss Representation* exposes how American media erodes female self-worth. In the film, Newsom, Gloria Steinem, Katie Couric, and others lament the way today's TV, film and Web content (for example, dolled-up little girls strutting down pageant catwalks, gossip bloggers mocking a starlet's size) teach us that our worth is based on our desirability (Arnold-Ratliff 2011:56). Misogynist concerns remain central to the master narrative – in the economy, in the press, in film and popular culture. In most African media misogyny is visible in the pervasive coercion of women through the media into a 'way of being' that is rooted in sexist insinuations of women's sexuality and reproductive functions as wives, lovers, mothers, daughters, and care-givers. Not even powerful women in leadership are spared as media are awash with sexually nuanced 'lessons' regarding the culturally acceptable ways in which female politicians ought to behave in public. Such media discourses are firmly rooted in a certain form of cultural permissiveness that ought to be understood in a similar way to that which (bell hooks 1994:110) speaks of: cultures that condone and celebrate rape, where male pleasure is the focus of all relationships, and female desire comes second. In addition, the representation of sexual violence in mainstream media is steeped in a compulsory heterosexual discourse that utilizes female desire in the commoditization of pleasure. The valorisation of women's sexuality in the media enterprise is entertained as an object whose consumption normalizes the heterosexual domain of violence away from which female victims of rape desire to stand in order to articulate their abuse. In other words, the media acts as the mirror through which capitalist society sanitizes and absolves heterosexist complicity in the perpetuation of sexual violence against women. Lastly and related to the preceding point, political economy analysis of the media draws attention to the ways in which discourses of sexuality and sexual violence are used to arouse heterosexual desire

for commodity consumption, and to stoke ethnic and political loyalties among the public.

Critical scholars associated with theories of political economy provide a useful set of organising principles to guide such enquiries. The first is to remember that ownership and decision-making lie at the heart of what will circulate, be talked about, and ultimately be acted upon. The second principle, a corollary of the first, is that media content can never be adequately examined outside of its proper context, which has been determined largely by the structures, routines, and relations of power that produced it (Meehan and Riordan 2002:132). Feminist critical scholars concerned with the political economy of communications have expanded these tenets by factoring in gender. In the process, they provide a theoretical framework to question how men and women's political and economic relations in the larger society enter into both ownership and message-making patterns in the media (*ibid.*). The discussions detailed in this paper illustrate the ways in which media representations of rape allow consumers to preserve narratives of 'good' versus 'bad', through which viewers profile 'perpetrators' and 'victims' in foreclosed terms, and characterise rape in stereotypical terms that have the effect of delimiting the analytical domain within which sexual violence occurring on a daily basis in society or phenomenological rape may be understood (Hirsch 1994:1024).<sup>1</sup> Thus caught in this trap, rather than media representations of rape becoming the prism through which society can reflect upon the political, social and cultural factors that enable rape, the media has inadvertently succeeded in reverting the spotlight back onto itself, and representations of rape therein emerge as a reflection of the balance of power, influence and interests that determine both media content and reception.

Recent scholarship has been directed towards engaging critical unresolved questions in contemporary legal and feminist research, asking whether experiences of rape are essentially similar, and whether race, class and culture position rape victims and their assailant in significantly different ways (Hirsch 1994:1026). Indeed, some feminist analytical schools highlight the importance of engaging in critical media analysis in reference to social phenomena like sexual violence. For example, proponents argue that media analysis of rape that adopts a feminist historical materialist methodology must be thoroughly historical – it must eschew any explanations that claim to apply to societies across epochs. In practice this means that such an analysis must be suspicious of any

claims to universality regarding any aspect of women's situation. If there exists any circumstances common to the situation of all women, these must be discovered empirically, not pre-supposed (Young 1980). Others speak of the need to focus on analysing events of violence, and their construction, in a range of specific, rather than universalised, contexts and thereby prepare ourselves to combat the many manifestations of rape (Hirsch 1994). The centrality of media in this project is visible in the plea by some that feminists ought to regard rape 'not as a fact to be accepted or opposed, tried or avenged, but as a process to be analysed and undermined as it occurs' (Marcus 1992:388), an approach which suggests that politically important differences in the construction of rape and rape identities emerge through analysing representations of rape. This approach implicates the media as important contexts of investigating rape (Hirsch 1994). These scholars insist on developing, therefore, a [feminist media] theory that can articulate and appreciate the vast differences in the situation, structure and experience of gender relations in different times and places. I turn briefly to this possibility in relation to Kenyan media in the sections that follow.

### ***When Women's Bodies Matter: The State and Women's Sexual Propriety***

Kenya's colonial history demonstrates the centrality that (white) women's sexuality played in the construction of discourses in the colony as far as law, order and governance were concerned. This is more so in relation to the pervasive anxieties that were generated by 'black peril'. The term refers to the debates over sexual morality that were based on fear of sexual assaults upon white women and invoked defensive arguments of race and class. Whites were urged to guard against the polluting influence of black sexuality – African men were widely presented as a diseased and degenerate menace, African women as wanton, lustful symbols of uncontrolled sexual behaviour (Anderson 2010:48). This history also critically introduces the media as one of the avenues through which the colonial state controlled, manipulated and governed the local African and European populations at the time. The newspapers became an effective mouthpiece for settler views, with the *Daily Leader* urging its audience, in relation to the wave of alleged sexual assaults on children between March and May 1920 that 'it was time for Europeans to set aside their sensitivities and make a public outcry against the rising incidence of sexual crimes' (Anderson 2010:54). The language used to discuss sexual assaults became increasingly explicit: provoked by the horrors of child

assaults, the European community appears to have been jolted into confronting sexual matters more directly.

The *Daily Leader*, while apologising to its readers for the detailed discussion of sexual assaults, argued that a full public debate was now essential, if 'this hideous crime' was to be 'nipped in the bud' (ibid.). Readers were encouraged to communicate their views to the paper, and a stream of letters was published. Mothers were urged to put their duty to the community above their fear of scandal and stigma, and to bring to the courts all such cases. For its part, the government was urged to impose the death penalty upon convicted offenders. Soon thereafter, the *Daily Leader* was championing the suggestion that castration and branding was surely a more fitting punishment, holding greater terror for 'the native mind' than did death. European debate was fuelled as much by the demand for retribution as by the perceived need for a deterrent (ibid.). The colonial state effectively and explicitly vetoed sexual violence, and the imperative for maintaining law and order, which the government tacitly delivered via the media was done in explicitly racist terms. The spectre of 'black peril' revealed a complex psychology borne of an overriding concern with 'race mixing' or the fear of 'race defilement.' In other words, it is unlikely that sexual assault or rape by itself would have motivated the sort of concerted reactions or severe punishments that the Europeans at the time called for.

By contrast there have been periods when the state through its action or non-action (as perceived via the media) has sanctioned sexual assault and violence against women and girls. Worth discussing therefore is whether contemporary media in Kenya reflect the position of the state with regards to violations of a sexual nature, and act as a window into gauging the state's intrinsic relationship with women? In other words, to what extent do issues raised in media reports linking sexual violence to the state nuance the analysis and understanding of rape?

Susan Hirsch's (1994) analysis of an epochal incident that occurred during Kenya's recent post-colonial past offers just such a window. Hirsch recounts the time in mid-July 1991 when male students at St. Kizito, a Kenyan boarding school, raped more than 70 female students and caused the deaths of 19 others who suffocated in the crowded dormitory where the attack took place. In her analysis of the media coverage of the St. Kizito incident in Kenya and in the United States where it also received coverage from major newspapers, Hirsch explores the culturally specific images of rape victims and rapists represented in media accounts and the complex and divergent understandings of rape underlying these images.

The article demonstrates that these images and understandings shift in politically significant ways as media accounts cross cultural and national boundaries in a system of global communication (Hirsch 1994:1024).

The argument has been made that the uncritical assumption that rape 'experiences' are identical is precisely the means through which scripts of rape are re-inscribed and how they depict women as 'always already' victims (Hirsch 1994; Marcus 1992). Arriving at such a conclusion manifests in a number of ways that contribute to the invisibilizing nature of media representations of rape. Firstly, this argument normalises rape, foreclosing analysis of the ways in which factors other than gender conflate to produce media representations of women as being essentially *rapable* (MacKinnon 1987). That is, gender rarely acts alone in determining the conditions that enable sexual violence, but rather is one of many intersecting forms of oppression which both condition the reproduction in media of femininity as the object of rape, and in doing so, dim or completely erase attention to other forms of subjection like class, race, ethnicity, age or sexual orientation, which might similarly render individuals – both female and male – more vulnerable to sexual violence. The lack of attention to rape victims as acting subjects also decontextualises the act of violence and renders a one-sided story – often one that seeks to absolve the perpetrator at the same time as it silences the victim. We may thus be compelled to ask who it is that benefits from the suppression of certain categories that could shed more insight into the nature of rape, or which interests gain most protection from the reification in the media of certain essentialising discourses of sexual violence. Significant in this regard is the contention by classical political economists that control over the production and distribution of ideas ensures cultural and therefore ideological domination by those who own the means of production (Golding and Murdock 2000:76). To the extent that this process plays a key role in maintaining class inequalities (*ibid.*), it becomes obvious that the factor that enables this class reinforcement is the very silencing and subsequent erasure of class discourse from broader discourses of rape carried in the media. The discussion that follows illustrates the probability of generating on the one hand a foreclosed discourse of rape through media, or on the other hand, the desirable possibility of opening up the analysis of rape so that it takes into account the prevailing political and economic contexts and the extent to which these conditions facilitate rape discourses within the media.

### ***When Women's Bodies Mediate: Democratic Transition and Rape Discourses***

Accounts of the St. Kizito incident linked the violence to aspects of modern life. Within Kenya, national newspapers diverged sharply in their assessment of the 'causes' of the crimes. Specifically, the rapes at St. Kizito were described by some Kenyan journalists as a manifestation of the sexism rampant in contemporary Kenyan society. A similar argument was also pursued by the U.S. media coverage, which interpreted the incident through a narrative of modernization that depicted the victims and their assailants as pawns of 'traditional culture', the source of men's violence against women (Hirsch 1994:1025). Others explained them as effects of the severe political repression of the postcolonial state. The explanations followed from media interests in the contexts of local, national and international politics, including the connections of the media to other institutions of power at those levels. These interests and how they were negotiated varied among publications within Kenya. In addition they varied cross-nationally. The Kenyan coverage of St. Kizito diverged from standard conventions for reporting and explaining rape (Smart and Smart 1978).<sup>2</sup> Rarely do media accounts direct attention to the structural problems of social life – such as sexism, racism, and class antagonism – that underpin how and in what ways sexual violence is perpetrated. In media reports of the St. Kizito incident, however, structural tensions were a part of the explanations offered in each national context (both U.S. and Kenya), yet in very different ways (Hirsch 1994:1038).

Kenyan media explanations reflected a tension between those who read the St. Kizito incident as evidence of the breakdown of the Kenyan education system and those who saw in it the severe but routine oppression of Kenyan women. The political stakes involved in discourses about education and gender relations in Kenya at the time made the struggle over interpreting the St. Kizito incident much more than a difference of opinion over how to account for sexual violence (Smart and Smart 1978).<sup>3</sup> One week after the attack, the feature section of the *Sunday Daily Nation* explored in detail how a flawed education system gave rise to the St. Kizito incident. The headline of a full-page article 'Why strikes and Kizito tragedy had to happen' firmly linked the St. Kizito violence to protests at other schools. The article interpreted instances of school unrest as reactions to the extreme academic competition fostered by the Kenyan education system in combination with poorly managed schools and limited opportunities for postgraduate employment and education (Hirsch 1994:1040). Explanations that linked the St. Kizito incident to a



history of violent protests in Kenyan schools also incorporated a model of pent-up pressure and release to account for the violence.<sup>4</sup>

Comments in subsequent editorials and articles in the *Daily Nation* extended the pressure-release model for political ends by implicating the Kenyan state as contributing to the pressure experienced by the schoolboys. A psychologist noted for radical critiques of the Kenyan government posited a connection between authoritarian rule and violent school uprisings:

We have created a culture of violence and domination in society which influences the youth towards violence rather than dialogue and tolerance... (politicians) burn effigies of their enemies and demand their detention.... They ridicule teachers thus undermining their authority and yet expect them to produce disciplined youths. Little do they realise that by such actions, they are encouraging the youth to do the same (Daily Nation, 16 July 1991 in Hirsch 1994:1040).

In Hirsch's argument, the above passage illustrates one way in which some journalists negotiated the Kenyan political climate over a decade of severe restriction on criticism of one-party rule. Oppositional journalists embedded their critique of government's role in social and political problems in discussions of seemingly unrelated issues. For some papers such as the *Daily Nation*, education was a frequent topic through which government authority and competence were covertly attacked. The *Daily Nation* accounts of St. Kizito located its cause in flawed structures of authority and thus encouraged public scrutiny of the Kenyan state and its education policy (Hirsch 1994:1041).

Not surprisingly then, newspapers like the *Weekly Review* and *Kenya Times* which were perceived to be affiliated with the government adopted a different and often diversionary tone in their analysis of the St. Kizito incident. The *Weekly Review*, like the *Kenya Times*, specifically located the explanation for St. Kizito in strained relations between Kenyan men and women rather than in the structure of schools or in the abuses of the government. In a front-page editorial, Hilary Ng'weno, the Editor-in-Chief, set the tone for the *Weekly Review's* approach to the event by noting,

there is more to the St. Kizito incident than a mere breakdown of discipline in our schools. More graphically than any other event in recent years, this tragedy has underscored the abominable male chauvinism that dominates Kenyan social life. (Weekly Review, 19 July 1991, in Hirsch 1994:1040)

In an editorial that contrasted sharply with those written by his counterparts at other publications, Ng'weno claimed that 'those so adept



at fulminating against the ills of society are generally silent about gender issues in this country' (ibid.). Ng'weno placed the blame for the St. Kizito violence firmly on the inherently sexist and abusive attitudes of Kenyan men toward women (Hirsch 1994:1041).

At the same time, members of the Kenyan public expressed a range of reactions to the divergent explanations offered in media accounts. Some public statements drew political battle lines: President Moi denounced comments linking school violence to state authority as politically motivated misrepresentations whilst government opponents demanded school reform and an end to state repression (Hirsch 1994:1042). However, women's groups applauded the media focus on St. Kizito as evidence of the problem of sexism in Kenya.

The media in post-colonial Kenya was opening up and evolving, although as had been the case during the massive colonial project, this development remained closely tied to the country's political history: the media did not make a significant break with the propaganda media machine through which the colonial administration set out the boundaries of legality, defined permissible sexuality and governed the public.<sup>5</sup> As became clear during the early 1990s when the St. Kizito incident played out, the 'threat of force' was gone. Whilst the media still presented issues within a framework that served the interests of the dominant institutions, the mechanisms it used had become more subtle.<sup>6</sup> The discursive space opened by the media coverage of the St. Kizito incident is an important window into understanding the overall shifts that were taking place in relation to Kenyan women's political activism during the 1990s. The push for democratic reforms gained greater urgency and women were at the time insisting that the definition of human rights be broadened to accommodate aspects that generally affect women alone. These gender-based human rights issues included freedom from all forms of physical and psychological violence against women, such as rape, sexual harassment, and wife battering, as well as the gender division of labour and various forms of sex discrimination in legal, employment, and ideological structure (Nzomo 1993:66).

Feminists weighing in on the St. Kizito incident viewed it as the precursor to these demands for rights, arguing that the intense media spotlight on that [tragic] incident had greatly helped to sensitize women to the need to put pressure on the Kenyan government and society to address the issue of violence against women (ibid.). Over the next two decades, women in Kenya learned to take advantage of available spaces and opportunities to bring national and international attention to their

issues. All of this, Nzomo argues, was part of a larger lobbying strategy in the democratic transition period. Women were particularly adept at attracting the media to sensitize the public on gender issues, and to highlight their agenda, and in this way these issues and voices stayed alive throughout the time of the struggle for democratization (Nzomo 1993:68).

Yet as the competition for democratic space intensified within Kenya's highly ethnicized political environment, it became apparent that the opening up of democratic space in the media had not necessarily materialised in ways that could minimize the exposure of women to generalised violence and in particular to sexual violence. Women's vulnerability to rape and sexual harassment was repeatedly brought to the fore during each of the general elections after the 1992 elections that marked the return to multiparty politics in the country. Electioneering periods since then have been characterised by generalised violence and sexual violence. Indeed, the literature suggests an increase in cases of sexual violence observed during electioneering periods in Kenya since the onset of multiparty democracy. There is, however, paucity of comprehensive data on violence that occurred during elections in the early years of democratization (1992 and 1997) under President Daniel arap Moi. Some scholars have explained this lack of data as owing to the donor community's vested interest in the success of multipartyism. Stephen Brown (2001) for instance argues that after opposition parties were legalised, donors repeatedly discouraged measures that could have led to more comprehensive democratisation. They did this by knowingly endorsing unfair elections (including suppressing evidence of their illegitimacy) and subverting domestic efforts to secure far-reaching reforms. In the face of anti-regime popular mobilisation, donors' primary concern appeared to be the avoidance of any path that could lead to a breakdown of the political and economic order, even if this meant legitimising and prolonging the regime's authoritarian rule (Brown 2001:726). This point requires more empirically nuanced contextualisation within the broader democratisation processes that had engendered multiparty political competition in Kenya – media liberalisation itself being a part of this project. It nevertheless offers the possibility of thinking through the ways in which the media can be implicated in the political economy of violence. Thus, although the media has over the years since the onset of multiparty democracy carried stories placing violence, including sexual violence, within the context of elections, the argument may be made that broader political imperatives have always formed the parameters of media representations of violence, and discourses of violence produced therein.

More recent scholarship implicates the media in this way, demonstrating the fact that violence repeatedly witnessed during electioneering periods in Kenya is not epiphenomenal, but rather is indicative of the structural nature of violence already embedded within Kenyan society. Straight (2009), for instance, has argued in relation to violence observed in North Eastern Kenya in mid-2005, that media representations are implicated in cycles of violent conflict through erasure and misrecognition. Most crucially, she argues, media representations tend to focus on cultural stereotypes that tacitly legitimate ongoing violence by explaining it away as timeless and cultural. These uni-dimensional representations can distract from the culpability of political elites and from the role of economic and political disenfranchisement in sustaining violence. They can also mask the ways in which some elites benefit from the propagation of cultural stereotypes even while deliberately engaging in manipulation of ethnic fault lines (Straight 2009:21).

The question has been asked regarding whether democratisation processes can deliver a 'bundle of goods' that account for everyone, or whether the intractable problem of sexual/violence during elections will remain as one of democracy's foremost subjects: that recurrent question that justifies the need for (democratization's) constant reformulation. In feminist parlance, it could be argued that key concepts within democratization discourse – participation, equality, fairness, justice, freedom – have retained credibility as worthy objects through their reproduction within subjective texts such as sexual violence. The generalised violence and sexual violence observed during electioneering periods in Kenya thus broadened the media's space of speculative engagement with the topic of democracy, and as the discussion below demonstrates, the media continued to treat rape in variedly experimental ways up until the 2007/08 violent elections, during which a marked shift could be observed in the ways that the media treated the subject of rape.

### ***When Women's Bodies Serve: The Media and (S)Elective Democracy***

... [Large media outlets] like other corporations, have a product to sell and a market they want to sell it to: the product is audiences, and the market is advertisers (Mitchell and Schoeffel 2003:14).

Feminists argue that the mere presence of rape reports in the media is indicative of the fact that feminist discourses have successfully claimed subversive space in television and print media. This fact, however, belies the profound ways in which gender ideology continues to shape television production practices. In addition, it conceals the ways in

which representations of women are governed by genre conventions, competitive constraints, and audience familiarity with and presumed affinity for stereotypical codes of femininity (Watkins and Emerson 2000:155). A number of guiding questions are derived from these gaps: what discursive course have representations of sexual violence taken in Kenyan media? In the context of elections, who is the audience and who forms the biggest market? Still in the context of electoral democracy, to what extent is sex/sexuality/sexual violence acceptable in mainstream media discourses, and when?

I apply this reasoning in constructing a framework that can be usefully applied in understanding media representations of sexual violence against women that occurs in contexts of political contestations like elections in Kenya. In this construction, I ask to what extent the media has used ‘rape propaganda’<sup>7</sup> to capture audiences/and which audience; and the ways in which these stories are framed in order to attract audiences. Further, I affirm the argument made by Mitchell and Schoeffel (2003) that the media puts out points of view and political perspectives which satisfy the needs, the interests and perspectives of the buyers, the sellers and the market. In so doing I challenge the points of view that regard genre selection and representation in the media separately from the political contexts out of which such genre are reproduced. In fact I view attempts to do this with suspicion.

In the context of elections, the views that influence media perspectives are concomitant with the dominant liberal view of democracy within which multiparty politics is justified. For instance, viewed separately, liberal notions of freedom and fairness are considered as being distinct from the broad structures in society that enable sexualised forms of violence, thus constraining the freedom and ability of victims to participate in elections. A recent baseline study in Kenya found such constraining factors to include ethnicity, class and gender.<sup>8</sup> So while historically it has been within acceptable limits for mainstream media to perpetuate the link between generalised electioneering violence and ethnicity, reaching a similar conclusion with regards to the sexual violation of women of low economic status would require that such analysis be extended to include gender and class analysis. Historically too, class analysis has not been in the interest of the post-colonial/colonial state, and much less so the mainstream Kenyan media which George Ogola (2011: 91) argues ‘are implicated in political, social and economic dynamics from which it cannot be disaggregated.’ Analysis of sexual violence against women during electioneering periods ought therefore to extend its framework far

beyond the mere dissection of questions of masculinities and power (the social roots of sexual violence) as is the norm within gender studies by introducing a structural dimension to rape that compels analysis towards interrogating the political and economic triggers of rape. Such an analysis is broader than the scope of this paper. However, Leslie Steeves' (1997) argument, that media discourse may allow space for feminist interests within the dominant patriarchal ideology, is demonstrable in the case of the 2007/08 post-election violence in Kenya. In this instance the appearance of resistant views would have been significant in making alternative meanings available and in supporting women's growing anti-violence activism. For instance, a useful comparison can be drawn between the ways in which rape that occurred during the 2007/08 post-election violence was treated in feminist writings appearing in reports from local and international non-governmental organisations and writings by human rights activists, and the ways in which the same was represented in Kenyan media. Three significant facts emerged out of the feminist writings. One was the fact that the reported cases of sexual violence primarily involved girls and women from the low-income areas (Wanyeki 2008:94). Another progressive indication was the fact that initial reports claiming that the cases of sexual violence against women had been largely opportunistic were later rebuffed by evidence of the instrumental nature of the attacks – that many women were targeted on account of their ethnicity or based on their political party loyalties (*ibid.*). Thirdly, the fact that the sexual violence included not just the rape of women, but also the forced circumcision (and in some instances, castration) of Luo men who, traditionally, are not circumcised (*ibid.*). These three factors – touching on elements of class, gender, ethnicity, and masculinities – highlighted crucial points of interrogation which media ought to have, yet failed, to take up. These were issues that on the whole were silenced within media discourses on rapes occurring over this period. The latter point concerning masculinities is particularly interesting. The overwhelming tendency in most feminist anti-rape literature is to construct women as being the obvious subjects of sexual violence. Often as a result, men's experience of sexual violence is ignored or hardly reported by the media. Of relevance here is the idea of cultural intelligibility, which Judith Butler deploys in reference to the production of a normative framework that conditions who can be recognised as a legitimate subject. In the context of Kenya, the underlying myth perpetuated by the dominant culture of the violators is that uncircumcised men are not 'real' men. A highly gendered power relationship constructed between masculinities,

sexuality and violence runs through this narrative, a critical analysis of which would enrich rather than negate understanding of the nature of sexual violence experienced by women in the course of Kenya's democratisation (Ossome 2011:6).

Kenya has had a long history of violent political contestation, from the time of the *Mau Mau*<sup>9</sup> struggle in the 1950s before Independence<sup>10</sup> up until the 1990s when it ushered in multiparty democracy. Its democratization process has been consistently marked by violence, particularly occurring during electioneering periods. 'Ethnic' clashes in Kenya erupted for the first time in October 1991 in Nandi District on the border of the Rift Valley, Nyanza and Western Provinces. At their peak, the clashes affected three out of eight provinces and nearly 20 out of Kenya's then 62 districts. In 1992, prior to the first multi-party general elections, clashes again erupted that distorted the prevailing voter distribution pattern in the affected regions and, in the process, disenfranchised thousands of voters, mostly opposition supporters due to large-scale internal displacement. The struggle for constitutional reform, spearheaded by NGOs, faith-based organizations, professional associations and political parties gained momentum in the period leading up to the second multiparty elections in 1997, when nation-wide violence again erupted. The context of the violence was complex, and reasons diverse.<sup>11</sup> On December 27, 2007, Kenya held its General Elections – the fourth since the return of multiparty democracy to Kenya in 1992. Given that the General Elections of 2002 had finally seen the removal of the Kenya African National Union (KANU) from power by the National Rainbow Coalition (NARC), largely without incident, there was little expectation that anything could or would go wrong. In some ways, that optimism was not misplaced. The 2007 General Elections were the most contested in Kenya's history, at all three levels – civil, parliamentary and presidential (Wanyeki 2008:91). Violence erupted across the country as soon as the disputed presidential results were announced – in total 1,113 people lost their lives and an estimated 663,921 were internally displaced (Kenya Human Rights Commission 2008:14).

As Wanyeki argues, the ground was fertile for what ensued. Campaigning, particularly through local language radio stations, took an ugly bent, with ethnically prejudiced and stereotyped coverage of both the incumbent Party of National Unity (PNU) and the opposition Orange Democratic Movement (ODM). The Kenyan blogs and online sites, populated primarily by a younger generation of Kenyans, many of whom lived abroad, did the same. Text messages circulated around the country,

playing on angers and resentments arising from the material reality of historical and contemporary inequalities and injustices, but once again articulated and promoted as being ethnically based, and experienced as such. Given the ethnicities of the two presidential contenders – Gikuyu in the case of the incumbent, and Mwai Kibaki and Luo in the case of the main opposition candidate Raila Odinga – perhaps insufficient attention was paid to similar angers and resentments in other ethnic communities, particularly among the Kalenjin, whose leading politicians had cast their lot with Odinga's ODM.<sup>12</sup> Pre-election violence had already been taking place in Kuresoi, a constituency in the predominantly Kalenjin Rift Valley. This violence was similar in form and outcome to that experienced under Moi during the politically-instigated clashes that occurred during the lead-up to the General Elections of 1992, 1997 and 2002. During those clashes, smallholding farmers who were not of Kalenjin origin had been forcibly and violently displaced by Kalenjin militia as part of a deliberate strategy to alter the presumed voting patterns of constituencies in the Rift Valley in favour of the incumbent KANU. Clashes also took place in coastal constituencies of the coast for the same reason – the rationale being that those 'indigenous' to both the coast and the Rift Valley would support KANU, while those who were not non-coastal and non-Kalenjin would support the opposition (Wanyeki 2008:92).

For various reasons, the nature and forms of violence occurring after the 2007 elections received the most attention and was most widely reported. The violence initially took three forms, with sexual violence cutting across all three. First, in the low-income areas of Nairobi as well as the coast and Nyanza provinces, there were spontaneous protests, which turned violent. Second, the Kenya Police Force and the General Service Unit (GSU), a paramilitary unit, responded with extraordinary use of force in the said areas. And third, there was organised violence in the Rift Valley, involving forced displacements and the destruction of property. All three forms soon mutated. As the spontaneous protests in the form of attempted demonstrations involving the destruction of property died down – or rather were violently suppressed, also by militia informally allied to the PNU – the protests took the form of economic sabotage (Wanyeki 2008:95).

The sexual violence included not just the rape of women, but also the forced circumcision (and in some instances, castration) of Luo men who, traditionally, are not circumcised. The Commission of Inquiry into the Post-Election Violence (CIPEV) found that men too had experienced horrid types of sexual violence after the election, which included sodomy,



forced circumcision, and even mutilation of their penises (CIPEV 2008:238-39). The outbreak of sexual violence seems to have been facilitated by the general breakdown of law and order, but the forced circumcisions of women and men seems more specific. Similar acts were perpetrated during the counter-offensive of the Gikuyu militia moving from Nairobi into the south Rift. This militia claimed the name of *Mungiki* (the masses), a Gikuyu militia that has been active in Kenya since the politically-instigated clashes of the 1990s. *Mungiki's* leaders deny being involved, although they admit that they had been approached by PNU politicians interested in the 'self-defence' effort. Indeed, at *Mungiki's* formation, it had urged a return to culture and tradition (as defined by the predominantly young Gikuyu men of the group), including for women, a return to female genital mutilation and a prohibition on wearing trousers. The Gikuyu militia that moved into the south Rift, although not *Mungiki* as such, but under the leadership of a former *Mungiki* leader, enforced the ban on women wearing trousers in Naivasha and Nakuru towns and 'punished' – through gang rape and other violence – Gikuyu women found to be involved with men from other communities or sheltering those from other communities (Wanyeki 2008:96).

Kenya's democratization process has been consistently marked by violence, particularly occurring during electioneering periods; however, no other election period had garnered as much attention as the 2007/08 electioneering violence, which got widespread coverage both in local and international media. Framing the generalised violence and sexual violence occurring during these last elections as something of an aberration could be viewed as an attempt by media to brush over the recurrent violence that has marked every election since 1992. By depoliticizing the issue, media also managed to pass the moral burden of rape on to audiences. It was an effective whitewashing of the broader debates that inflamed the Kenyan public at the time, yet which so clearly threatened complete disintegration of the country.

A 2009 study of media coverage by some of the mainstream media during the post-election violence found that the tone of the stories covering gender-based violence was highly passive, for example, writing that a woman reported that a soldier told her that 'women are not supposed to be beaten but disciplined sexually'. Such were the case in the headlines when male reporters profiled gender-based violence. When comparing the distribution of tone between the genders, both male (87%) and female (82%) respectively had a neutral tone, while female journalists had twice as many articles (10%) compared to 5 per cent for

male journalists with a positive tone (African Women and Child Feature Service 2009:26). The same study analysed the presence of ‘female issues’<sup>13</sup> covered in the articles containing internally displaced persons (IDP)-related stories. It established that when a print media did not include any female issues, 41 per cent of the articles had a length of 450-599 words (the second smallest grouping of the article lengths). When an article discussed one female issue, most of the print articles (29%) fell in the largest word count category of 750+ words. Articles that contained two female issues overwhelmingly occurred between the 600-749 word category and the 750+ word category with 46 per cent in each. The study confirmed violence against women got far less media coverage than other forms of violence during the post-election violence and that women affected by post-election violence received less favourable coverage than male issues (African Women and Child Feature Service 2007:26). The analyses revealed that female issues were not usually the first to be discussed and thus only featured in the longer articles, most likely when the reporters had more time to get around to including them. Whereas issues related to internally displaced persons dominated the headlines of the mainstream newspapers in Kenya and internationally, there were hardly any issues on gender-based violence placed on the front pages of the leading dailies. The *Daily Nation* placed four (5.2%) stories on gender-based violence in the headlines compared to *The Standard*, which placed two (2%) and the *Kenya Times* seven (7%). These are significant statistics: during the electioneering period preceding the elections, the *Daily Nation* newspaper was notoriously accused by politicians, research groups and opinion pollsters alike of being pro the Kibaki government and anti-Raila, allegedly because the paper was being managed by a clique of Gikuyu barons, the same ethnic group as Kibaki.<sup>14</sup> *The People* and *Nairobi Star* – both independent tabloid papers – did not place any such stories in their headline during the period.

Overall, stories on violence against women were reported as summaries and in the inner pages by the mainstream print media in Kenya. This could have been necessitated by the media houses’ editorial policies and pressure to sell newspapers based on the more ‘catchy’ stories on the National Accord and negotiating team deliberations that dominated the headlines (African Women and Child Feature Service 2007:27). The study cited here also found that the media often lacked access to the victims of gender-based violence and as a result, the majority of the articles published by local media focused on the perpetrators as women who had been sexually abused were usually reluctant to face the camera

or journalists to re-tell their stories. The police and hospitals were the other main sources of stories of gender-based violence. Going by the revelation that the state security forces had been highly implicated in acts of sexual violence against women (Commission of Inquiry into the Post-Election Violence report), the police ought not to have been treated as a reliable primary source of information on rape and other forms of sexual violence.

A number of issues here deserve closer attention: the under-reporting of stories relating to rape; the placement of rape stories in the inner pages and not as headline issues; press over-reliance on third party accounts of rape, including from possible perpetrators; and the passive language used in reporting accounts of rape. These facts suggest that an imperative existed in the aftermath of the 2007/08 elections to push gender-based stories into the media in a way that had not been witnessed during previous elections since 1992. This 'push' was driven in large part by the overwhelming international interest in the post-election violence and the subsequent peace process. However, the argument has also been made elsewhere that the 2007 conflict's relatively short duration was important in ensuring that it could be seen as a catalyst instead of a consolidation of women's traditional roles (Antje, accessed 2012:14-15). The conflict was a kind of turning point for civil society organisations (which include the media). It highlighted the destructive nature of ethnic conflicts and forced women's organisations to re-focus on their goals and their need for a collective female identity. Thus, hardened identity constructions became once more fragile during the post-conflict situation, endorsing the linkage and plurality of ethnic and female identity. These expanding areas of action gave civil society organisations greater relevancy in dealing with the conflict-ridden past. Consequently, Kenya saw more initiatives targeting gender-based violence and an increasing commitment to a stronger shared female identity (*ibid.*). There is no reason to believe that women's issues of themselves suddenly warranted worthy media attention in 2007/08, or that the carrying of women's issues in the media was a sign of progressive changes taking place in the democratization landscape. Rather, it appears that gender discourses were forcefully (albeit half-heartedly) inserted into the public discourse at the exact moment of violent implosion – at the peak of the post-election violence – when it became imperative for the incumbent state, through the media, to erase ethnic questions from the public discourse. Women's bodies served this role of erasure, in the passive ways in which stories of their sexual victimization were presented in the media without ever really allowing

for the possibility of discussion in the public domain regarding which women were targeted; where they were located, and why they became victims. In essence these are questions of ethnicity, class and gender that lie at the very core of female sexuality.

Within the Kenyan political discourse, questions of generalised violence and sexual violence maintained significant and complex connection with those of ethnicity. Drawing upon such parallels, for instance, was Ogola's (2011) indictment of media in reference to an editorial titled 'Save Our Beloved Country', published jointly on 3 January 2008 by the leading newspapers and featured on the main TV stations, which he argued, seems to have signalled a curious shift in the Kenyan news media. Written at the height of the post-election violence, it attempted to restore faltering faith in the nation and called for an end to the violence to ensure political stability. It raised concerns about the loss of life and property, the negative impact of the crisis on the economy, and the futility of debating who won the elections. But there were some curious omissions. Not once did it mention ethnicity as a factor in the conflict. This was a deliberate omission that merely reified the framing of the conflict as unambiguously ethnic, even though most victims of the violence, including women who were raped, had been profiled and targeted by their attackers on the basis of their ethnic affiliations. Further, this editorial was framed as a narrative of peace, against the backdrop of an artificial reinvention of a nationalistic agenda to temper the ethnic dimensions of the conflict. It did not acknowledge the legitimacy of ethnic political identities and addressed the public as a homogeneous group, with shared affinity to a larger construct, the nation-state. But it set the parameters of inclusion. Patriotism was qualified on the de-legitimization of ethnic political affinities. This patriotic pitch underlined several key issues. First, it gestured toward the reintroduction of an 'ideology of order' similar to those constructed by the Moi (1978-2002) and Kenyatta (1963-1978) administrations. Second, it demonstrated the shared cosmology of power between the news media and the state: it was in the interest of both the state and the media that the nation should survive. Emphasizing chaos, anarchy, destruction, and a collapsing economy and not attempting to examine their causes – indeed, suggesting this was not the right time for such analysis – was a narrative that seems to have been legitimizing an emerging broader political script: the reinvention of the nation and the nation-building project, with the state and the media enjoined as partners (Ogola 2011:89-90). Women, as 'markers of national boundaries', as 'mothers of the nation', and as 'pacifist bearers of peace', have long been

used in the service of promoting such gender-conservative nationalist discourses in post-Independence Kenya, and therefore the obscuring of the violations they were experiencing in 2007 ought to be read as having been paramount to this wider nationalist project.

The scale of rape reporting in media during the 2007/08 post-election period was also unprecedented compared to any other time in Kenya's election history. This spike could be attributed to the intense media exposure that the violence in general received. For complex political reasons that included overt pressure from the international community and massive humanitarian response, human rights violations occurring during this period received broad media coverage and there was comprehensive documentation of sexual violence both within the country and internationally. Yet the discursive line adopted in the media reports stuck neatly to a liberal discourse of (civil and political) rights, while eschewing any sustained discussion of the structural demands (encompassed by social and economic rights) that fuelled the post-election chaos. In other words, in a context such as Kenya where there was fear that privileging the discussion of ethnicity might have opened a can of worms, sexual violence could be packaged separately as a serious violation of the rights of women that deserved attention of state and media – the same state and media that throughout electioneering periods had been complicit in undermining and abusing the rights of women, including those who aspire for political office (African Women and Child Feature Service 2009:12), or who participate in politics as part of the electorate.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has sought to expose, through analysis of three distinct political periods in Kenya's history carried out within three broad narratives, the ways in which media representations of sexual violence against women have worked in the interest of the various forms of 'market' that the media in Kenya pursue. The first narrative, which was grounded upon the materiality of women's bodies, sought to highlight the ways in which Kenyan media historically pursued an agenda that was dictated in part by the state. Through this narrative, the colonial state sought ostensibly to exercise control over women's sexual propriety, although as the paper illustrates, it largely was one of the mechanisms used for exercising control over the colony using women's bodies as markers. The second narrative explored questions regarding the democratic transition of the state, and the ways in which a substantially suppressed media at the time

projected questions that were considered to be urgent political questions into the public domain. This narrative looked extensively at the ways in which the St. Kizito rape case which occurred in 1991 was treated in both local and international media, and in particular the ways in which the story mediated democratisation discourses within the public domain via the then repressed media. The final narrative through which the paper discussed questions of anti-rape discourses in Kenyan media provided an analysis of the media coverage of sexual violence that took place during the 2007/08 post-election violence. In this case the paper has argued that media coverage of rape was partial to the demands both of the state and of the international community that invested heavily in the subsequent peace process.

The paper has demonstrated the ways in which women's bodies tacitly serve a partisan and ethnic agenda, thus exposing the partiality of mainstream media. The central argument being made is with respect to the structural nature of violence observed as against passive media representations of rape that seek to separate rape discourses from the political economy of media. The discussions point to the fact that context, and therefore historicity, in the analysis of rape matters. The paper has highlighted also the breath of subjectivities, including ethnicity, sexuality, gender and class that intersect with rape in complex ways not supported by the liberal application of rights as the primary recourse for violations of this nature. This suggested framework of analysing rape within contexts of structural violence and democratic contestations is a radical shift from the predominant literature. Yet it is a challenge that feminist scholars ought to take on in order not only to understand the nature of sexual violence that persists in locking women out of political spaces, but which could also be a critical tool for articulating exactly what women mean when they demand free and fair elections.

The media is endowed with a very specific role in this regard, that of providing a voice to those marginalised because of poverty, gender, or ethnic or religious affiliation. By giving these groups a place in the media, their views – and their afflictions – become part of mainstream public debate and hopefully contribute to a social consensus that the injustices against them ought to be redressed. By providing information and acting as a forum for public debate, the media play a catalytic role, making reforms possible through the democratic process and in the end strengthening democratic institutions and making possible public participation without which democracy is a mere sham. The space for expression in media is, however, powerfully mediated by dominant

ideologies around gender, class and ethnicity. It is only in acknowledging the ways in which these factors intersect to produce specific discourses, and adopting a critical approach towards the dissemination of reports on sexual violence, that the media can fulfil a more progressive role with the possibility of engendering truly anti-rape discourses.

## Notes

1. Hirsch similarly argued that scholarly explanations of rape and feminist efforts to stop rape through legal and extra-legal means have created identities of ‘rapist’ and ‘raped’ that ‘pre-exist the rape itself’ and repeatedly construct women as ‘sexually vulnerable objects’ always either already raped or already rapable. Vulnerable female victims and unstoppable male perpetrators are standard rape identities inscribed in and through culturally specific ‘scripts of rape’, in which the end of the scripted drama is most often the rape of a woman.
2. Smart and Smart argue that media explanations of rape generally focus on the psychological motivation of the perpetrator and on aspects of the context that facilitated commission of the crime (e.g. an unlocked door, previous conflict between the parties involved).
3. The U.S. media coverage indicted consciousness of this divergence yet took a firm position that the cause of the violence was directly linked to Kenyan women’s subordinate position in relation to men. By so doing, they reflected important understandings about women’s rights and the application and significance of those rights outside the United States.
4. The pressure-release model emphasized the inevitability of the boys’ explosive reaction given the growing tension in the poorly run institution.
5. Other scholars make a similar point based on the fact that by using state institutions and other instruments within the public and private sphere, such as the media, the administration ensured that opposition to [Jomo] Kenyatta’s rule was contained and delegitimized on the grounds that such disunity was inconsistent with the needs of the state. In the early post-independence period, therefore, the media were seen by the state as a partner in the nation-building political project (see Ogola, George, ‘The Political Economy of the Media in Kenya’, *Africa Today*, Vol. 57(3), p. 80).
6. An example of such subtlety is to be found in Noam Chomsky’s argument that there exists a complex system of filters in the media and educational institutions that ends up ensuring that dissident perspectives are weeded out, or marginalized in one way or another. The end result is that what are called opinions ‘on the left’ and ‘on the right’ in the media represent only a limited spectrum of debate, which reflects the range of needs of private power – but there is essentially nothing beyond those ‘acceptable’ positions (see this discussion in Mitchell, R.P. and J. Schoeffel (2003), *Understanding Power: The Indispensable Chomsky*, London: Vintage Books, pp. 12-14).



7. I adopt this line of reasoning from Noam Chomsky's 'Propaganda Model' (see Mitchell, R.P. and J. Schoeffel, 2003: 15-18).
8. An unpublished baseline study conducted by the author in between June 2009 – January 2010 among women that had experienced sexual violence during the 2007/08 post-election violence period in Kenya revealed a nexus between women's economic location, ethnicity, and sexual violence. This preliminary work sought to investigate the increase in reported cases of sexual violence and also to examine state responses to women that were affected.
9. Mau Mau is the colloquial term for the 1950s armed uprising by poor and landless Kikuyu against the British settler regime in Kenya and its more prosperous Kikuyu allies.
10. Elkins, C. (2005), *Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story of Britain's Gulag in Kenya*. New York: W.W. Norton, and Anderson, D. (2005), *Histories of the Hanged: The Dirty War in Kenya and the End of Empire*. New York: Henry Holt, are the most recent contributions to the substantial historiography of Mau Mau.
11. Some opinions suggest that the intention was to provide Kenya African National Union (KANU) leaders with an excuse to impose a State of Emergency, suspend democracy and the rule of law by decree until they recaptured initiative over the political space.
12. According to Kenya's latest population census (2010) ranking of the country's ethnic groups with more than one million people, the Gikuyu form the largest ethnic group in Kenya (6,622,576), followed by the Luhya (5,338,666), Kalenjin (4,987,328), Luo (4,044,440), Kamba (3,893,137), Kenyans of Somali origin (2,385,572), Kisii (2,385,572), Mijikenda (1,960,574) and Meru (1,658,108) – see *The Standard* online newspaper at <http://www.standardmedia.co.ke/InsidePage.php?id=2000017245&cid=4>. Ethnic rivalry has marked the relationships between the Gikuyu, Luo and Kalenjin ethnic groups since independence. A historical analysis of this hegemonic contestation of political, cultural, ethnic and economic spaces is however beyond the scope of this proposal.
13. Where 'female issues' were taken to include: women's rights violations, healthcare, sanitation, malnutrition, lactating children, gang and individual rapes, horrendous female and genital mutilation, sexual assault or experiences and other injuries including loss of family members, their houses, animals, property, etc.
14. See Kenya Stockholm Blog, 'The Daily Nation' and 'Raila's Stolen Presidency', available at <http://kenyastockholm.com/2009/03/23/the-daily-nation-and-stolen-presidency/> (accessed 10/09/2012) for a detailed political economy critique of media during the 2007 electioneering period.

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