



1.0 INTRODUCTION

Woman to woman marriage is one of the traditional marriages commonly practiced in many patriarchal societies across the Sub-Saharan Africa. In this form of marriage a woman marries a wife by paying bride price just as a man does in heterosexual marriage. Such woman is referred to as a female husband while the woman she marries is known as female wife. A woman would marry another woman for two main reasons; barrenness, or lack of a male child inheritor. From the African perspective, a woman without a son may be considered as 'childless'. The status of childlessness forces a woman to marry another woman to bear children for her. Woman to woman marriage institution has always existed and will continue to exist in many African cultures mainly for the purpose of procreation and companionship as well as acquiring economic status especially for the female husbands. This African cultural practice has since been wrongly likened with same-sex marriages.

This paper will highlight the differences between woman to woman marriages and same as same sex marriages by defining the concept, the purpose of the marriage from an African perspective, benefits, challenges and implications of the marriage. The main aim of the paper is to demonstrate that woman to woman marriage institution is prevalent and recognized in many African societies. This paper focuses on female wives. These are women who can be categorized as: women with children both boys and girls; single mothers; or women who returned with children to their natal homes after failed marriages. From these categories, some women have accepted to be married by barren

or sonless women. The paper mainly focuses on the female wives in the Akamba community where woman to woman marriage is still practised.

By analysing the experiences of the female wives, the paper, seeks to answer the following questions: What is the reason for the persistence of woman to woman marriage in contemporary society? What are the gains accrued from woman to woman marriage? What kind of challenges do those involved in woman to woman marriages face? What are the perspectives of female wives concerning their children and male lovers in woman to woman marriage? What are the implications of this form of marriage?

2.0 OBJECTIVES

Objectives of the study were to:

1. Examine reasons for the persistence of woman to woman marriage among the Akamba people.
2. Establish benefits of engaging in woman to woman marriage
3. Analyze the challenges faced in woman to woman marriage.
4. Discuss the implications of woman to woman marriage

3.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 Introduction

Woman to woman marriage also known as woman marriage is a form of marriage involving two women. This is a customary practice which was and is still prevalent in some African societies. Usually, in woman to woman marriages, a barren or sonless woman marries another woman and assumes control over her children because she is the one who initiates and pays dowry for the marriage. She is referred to as a female husband while the woman she marries is commonly referred to as a female wife. (Oboler, 1980; Amadiume 2015).

In most cases, the female wife is customarily allowed to enter into sexual relationships with male lovers (of her choice or as advised by the female husband) to help her sire children for the continuity of the female husband's lineage. This form of marriage is common among many African societies such the Nandi, Gusii, Kamba, Kuria, Taita, Luo, Kipsigis, and Gikuyu of Kenya; Igbo Yoruba, and Nnobi of Nigeria, Kalabari and Igbo of the Niger Delta, Twana, Zulu, Lovedu of North Eastern South Africa, Fon of Benin, among others (Kareithi & Vijloen, 2019; Lubanga, 2016; Sitati, 2016, Nyamongo, 2012; Uchendu, 2000; Valen, 2008; Greene, 1998; Amadiume, 2015).

Various communities have different titles which are associated with the woman to woman unions. A few examples are cited in this paper. In the Kamba community woman to woman, marriage is known as *Iweto* marriage. In this community, a woman who marries another woman is known as an *Iweto* (*Maweto pl.*) while the woman she marries is called *kaweto*.

Among the Kuria, the marriage has different titles depending on the reason for engaging in the marriage. For example, when a barren woman marries another woman to bear for her children the marriage is known as *nyumba mboke*. Where a woman has only female children and decides to marry another woman to bear male heirs for her the marriage is known as *nyumba ntobhu*. While *nyumba ntune* is where a Kuria woman whose only male child died at infancy decides to marry another woman to bear for her male heirs (Oboler 1980). However, the concept of a daughter-in-law arises in the woman marriage where a female wife is called *mokamoona* which literally means daughter-in-law (Kjerland, 1997). In this case, a woman marries an imaginary son of a female husband and therefore becomes her daughter-in-law.

In the Gikuyu community of central Kenya, a woman to woman marriage is known as *uhiki* which literary means a marriage between a wealthy woman also referred to as *muhikania* and a female wife '*muhiki*' (Njambi & O' Brien (2000). Among the Nandi, woman to woman marriage is called '*kitum*'. Where *Kitum* literary means celebration. The term is commonly used to refer to the celebration when a sonless woman marries

another woman for the purpose of childbearing children (Lubanga, 2016; Sitati, 2016). Kareithi and Vijleon (2019) found that the Luo of western Kenya referred to a female wife *aschi-mwandu* which literary means 'wife of the property'. This means that she was married to be the custodian of the female wife's property.

The Lovedu of Southern African of Northern Sotho, a female husband is referred to as *rakhadi* which literary means 'grandmother' (Kareithi and Vijleon, 2019). In the Nnobi community of Nigeria, woman to woman marriages are known as *Igba Ohu* and *Ekwe* is a wealthy female husband who takes wives to bear children in her name (Amadiume, 2015). The fact that there were traditional terminologies used with this form of marriage illustrates its existence in the communities where it was practised.

3.2 Reasons For the Persistence of Woman - Woman Marriages

Lack of sons /male heirs and barrenness are the common reasons for the existence of woman to woman marriage in many communities across the African continent. For instance, among the Nandi of western Kenya, a barren woman initiated a marriage agreement with another woman to sire children for her. Under this arrangement, the barren woman becomes the 'father' of the children and behaves like a husband since she pays dowry for the marriage. If the spouse of the barren woman is alive the female wife can have sex with him purposely to sire children for her. (Oboler, 1980). Similarly among the Fon of West Africa, wealthy women took wives and paid bridewealth for them. Then both female wives and their children became female husband's property, Therefore, the reasons, as well as cultural norms, beliefs and practices involving woman to woman marriage may vary from one community to the other.

The other motive for taking wives among the Kuria was economic gains and companionship. The Kuria wealthy women also took to relieve them off both domestic as well as farm burdens (Kjerland, 1997). Though, among the Nnobi of Nigeria, where there is no son, a daughter inherits her father's property and allowed to enhance his lineage after having been ritually granted full male status (Amadiume, 2015).

In some African communities like the Lovedu of southern Africa political leadership cannot be combined with motherhood. Hence, female political leaders took wives to bear children for them. Similarly, queens among the Nyoro of Uganda were treated like men and were expected to give birth. Therefore, they took wives to give them male heirs (Kjerland 1997:5).

The Kenya Constitution 2010 article 45(2) and the Marriage Act of 2014 section 3 (1) defines marriage as a union place between adults of the opposite sex. This gives only men and women the right to marry. Since woman to woman marriage happens between two adult women it does not conform to the provisions of the Kenya Constitution 2010 as well as the Marriage Act 2014. However, section 6 (1) (c); of the Marriage Act 2014 says that marriage may be registered under this Marriage Act if its celebrated according to the customary rites relating to a Kenyan community. This also includes payment of dowry as a token to prove the customary marriage has taken place.

Article 11 (1) recognizes culture as the foundation of a nation. Hence both the Constitution 2010 and The Marriage Act 2014 provides for the practice of woman to woman in Kenya. It is on this basis that Sitati (2016) points out that woman to woman is a customary marriage that is recognized by both the Constitution of Kenya and the Marriage Act. However, she adds that such does not involve sexual relationships between the two women as in the case of homosexuality and lesbianism but it is for the purpose of companionship and economic gains.

3.3 Benefits of Engaging In Woman-Woman Marriages

In African societies, children are a sign of productivity or fertility. Hence, a barren woman may be seen as a fruitless tree. A prospective female wife must have children before entering this form of marriage. This is because such a woman has not only to prove the potentiality of bearing children but must have some children ready to meet the

sonless woman's needs. Moreover, children are a significant aspect especially in woman to woman marriage.

Historically, Africans have associated infertility with curses or witchcraft. For instance, among the Kuria of Kenya barrenness is not only feared but also regarded as a bad omen. Such a woman is referred to as *Omogomba* and when she dies, she is buried in an arid place away from home as a sign of barrenness (Kjerland, 1997). Hence, women who are unable to conceive are expected to seek traditional medicine¹ for help. Children also determine the worth of an African woman. This is because childlessness is equated to inadequacy in African society. While in others, barren women are considered as trees which do not bear fruits because childbearing is proof of fertility and fruitfulness in the African context.

Nonetheless, having many children who cannot be supported is a sign of failure on the part of the parents. In many African societies, women who find themselves in a situation where they cannot find men to marry them, may prefer woman to woman marriage where they can also find resources for their children (Amadiume, 2015).

An African woman becomes a female wife under the following circumstances: if in her current status she is not married to any man, she has children especially boys and she needs resources such as land for her children. (Kyalo, 2011; Oboler, 1980). A female wife is expected to conform to the cultural expectations of a wife including accepting the rules of a woman to woman marriage: that her children will belong to the female husband; the female husband will give her resources especially land which she will utilize and later be inherited by her children.

3.4 Challenges in Woman to Woman Marriage

¹ In this case only women were openly blamed for being barren, or sonless. Male impotence was silently spoken of. When it was a man's issue then the wife was advised to secretly get another man from their clan to sire children for her husband.

Although woman to woman marriage is a cultural practice which is highly recognized in various communities and legally protected by the Constitution of Kenya 2010 as well as the Marriage Act 2014 some scholars (Kareithi & Vijleon,2019; Sitati, 2016; Ojwang & Kinama,2014) have cited court cases of violence and eventual eviction of women married into these marriages. For instance, Lubanga (2016) cites a case in Nandi where a female wife who had been married for over 24 years was evicted from her home together with her children by one of her female husband's relatives. This act was oblivious of the cultural symbolism of woman to woman marriage and the legal frameworks that recognize such marriage arrangements.

4.0 METHODOLOGY

The main purpose of the study was to demonstrate that woman to woman marriage is an African cultural practice which still vibrant among the Akamba by analyzing and documenting the experiences of female wives in a form of marriage which is commonly 'invisible' and yet it is a cultural practice which is acceptable in contemporary society. The study therefore presents the female wives' backgrounds, reasons for becoming female wives, experiences with male lovers, challenges in marriage,perspectives about woman to woman marriage, sons and daughters of female wives, and the implications of woman to woman marriage.

The study engaged ten female wives (the women who are married to the female husbands) from the Kamba ethnic community who were purposively identified through snow ball sampling method.Ten children comprising of five daughters and sons of female wives were also purposively sampled. Primary data was collected using open-ended questionnaires. Interviews were conducted in a relaxed atmosphere which enabled the respondents to participate in the study freely within a specific context (Hammersley, 1995; Hesse-Biber and Leavy,2006). One local research assistant assisted with the data collection process. He was instrumental in identifying the female husbands and interpreting the research instruments in vernacular when there was need.

5.0 Results and Data Analysis

5.1 Background of Female Wives

At the time of study the female wives were between 39 and 57 years old. Eight of them were primary school drop outs while two had no formal education. Therefore, the female wives had pitiable education backgrounds which could be associated with the choices they made in life such as the large number of children they sired, their free involvement with multiple partners and unprotected sexual behaviour among others.

Unmarried mothers had children out of wedlock hence they easily accepted to enter into woman to woman marriage as it could provide a source of livelihood and security for them and their children. Even though the female wives were engaged in menial income generating activities (such as sisal making, sisal selling, vegetable and water vending, charcoal burning, stone breaking, basket weaving) this could not provide adequate money to buy property for their children. Hence, this could be one of the reasons for accepting to be married by other women who had sustainable resources. This was a solution to the children's situation of homelessness. Therefore, it was one of the reasons why single mothers chose to become female wives.

In terms of religion, only three female wives said that they attended Catholic Church services. One said that she worshipped in a traditional way. The rest six never attended any church service because they stopped attending soon after they got married to the female husbands.

When asked how the female wives got their female husbands, the general explanation was that, it was based on mutual friendship between a woman (female husband) and the parents of the female wife or between the woman and the prospective female wife. As Muthena² one of the female wives observes: the female husband came to my mother's house and asked if I can become her *Iweto*. She agreed. When I was asked I

² All names of the respondents are not their real names. These are pseudonyms used to conceal the respondents identities even though most of them are Akamba surnames

also agreed because I had five children and did not have any land for them. I joined her and became her wife. She later paid dowry to my parents.

Similarly another respondent Ngina, adds “the female husband was a great friend of my mother. I did not find a husband who could marry me or even accept my children. When my mother told me about the marriage proposal I agreed to get married to her”. The other three women explained that each of the female husbands approached them personally. As Munini says:

We became good friends with the senior woman when I used to work in her house. That time her husband was still alive. When he died, they had no children. So she asked me to stay with her and later she married me and paying bride price to my parents.

The abovementioned statements from the respondents indicated that the female husbands paid bride price once the marriage plans were approved. This process was conducted as the normal Akamba marriage ceremonies. Payment of bride price was critical to the marriage because it was meant to seal the marriage and give the female husband the rights to the children as well as the female wife. It also helped the children to gain official social rights to the female husband's wealth. (Kyalo, 2011; Kevane, 2004; Oboler, 1980).

5.2 Reasons for Becoming a Female Wife

The reasons for accepting to be married by other women were: that they would provide the female husbands with children; female husbands needed children to inherit their property; lack of children put childless/sonless female husbands at the risk of losing their property to the kin therefore, marrying women with children especially sons was an immediate solution. This is demonstrated in Table 1.

Table 1: Reasons for Accepting Female Husbands

Reasons for Accepting Female Husbands	Frequency
Give female husbands male children	8
Female husband is barren	5

Have children and no man to marry me	9
To get land and a home for my sons	8
Provide security and sense of belonging for the children	6

Source: Data from female husbands

Although woman to woman marriage is considered a solution to barrenness and lack of sons among female husbands, it also gives an unmarried, mother a home for her children. For instance, having several children without a husband forced unmarried mothers to accept woman to woman marriage. As Mbata one of the respondents said “*I had children and had no man to marry me, so my parents encouraged me to be married by woman.*” Such marriage helped the children especially sons of the female wives to acquire the female husbands’ property and especially land and a sense of belonging. Moreover, having several ‘fatherless’³ children without resources to provide for their wellbeing exposes them to poverty. Such woman would be perceived as a ‘bad’ mother because she is unable to provide for her own children (Caplan, 2000).

Traditionally, most single mothers would struggle to ensure that the ‘fatherless’ children acquire a home and property at any cost. Consequently, a female husband’s marriage proposal cannot be turned down since it offers an imminent solution to the single mother and her ‘fatherless’ children. Therefore, sons of the female wives gained economic security in terms of land and property ownership. This is because once the process of marriage was concluded the children of the female wife automatically became the future heirs of the female husband. Hence, ownership of land was legally guaranteed.

The findings suggest that woman to woman marriage benefited female husbands, female wives and their children in terms of the gains accrued from the relationship by all individuals involved. This is because, female husband’s lineage was assured through the

³ Every child has a biological father. In the context of this paper, fatherless children are those children who live with their mothers while their biological fathers do not take responsibility of supporting them. In most cases single women may have several children whose biological fathers are irresponsible and are not known by the children. Hence, they are generally considered ‘fatherless’.

children of the female wife; while for the female wife she found a family and property for her children. As Mukunya, one of the female wives asserts *"the female husband was desperately in need of children because she was barren and myself I was desperate to find a home for my children..."*

Other respondents like Ndinda and Munini said that they got into the marriage in order to *"get possession of the property for their sons."* Hence, for female wives, the key driver for the marriage was to acquire property for their sons. However, Oboler's study of woman to woman marriage among the Nandi established that some women accepted to be married by other women after failing "to attract male husbands" due to "physical or mental defect" or because of conceiving before marriage or simply because the female husband was wealthy" (1980:76).

Mumbi is a primary school dropout and was the youngest respondent. She was married to the female husband at the age of 26 (in 2000) after having been persuaded by her parents to do so. She had no child before marriage. After marriage she gave birth to 4 children to her female husband. The situation of Mumbi shows that female husbands also married women who had no children. For instance among the Igbo of Nigeria if "daughter could be ritually transformed into a son" (Zabus, 2008) so as to enhance the kinship of her family through her children. Njambi & O'Brien's (2000) explains that a Gikuyu female husband was willing to take care of her daughters' children who were born out of wedlock.

5.3 Experiences of Female Wives with Male Lovers

The respondents were asked if they could recall the number of lovers they had dated since they got married to their female husbands. Two respondents said that they had 5, one said 7, two said 3, and another had 4. The other four did not recall the number of lovers they had interacted with. Hence, the response was "many." For Ngina, it was hard to count She says *"it is hard to tell because I cannot not remember. I have not been counting them. I have met many in my life since my marriage..."* Similarly Mary explains that her youthful looks made men to keep following her. As she points out *"I am*

young and beautiful so men think that I do not have children, but I have met many boyfriends."

Even though female wives had children before marriage, most of them bore more children after getting married. This was most probably because they wanted to bear more children for their female husbands. During the study, it was established that apart from two women, the rest did not use family planning methods. The female wives stated that their involvement with men was meant to help them 'produce' children who were the main purpose of their marriage. As Wambeti says:

I was looking for children from these men. I could not use preventives since my lovers wanted to have children with me. They assumed that the role of an lweto was to produce many children for the senior woman. So they were not willing to wear condoms.

Female wives indicated that most of their lovers blatantly refused to wear condoms during sexual intercourse. Showing that there was hardly any cautionary measures taken in regard to safe sex. Surprisingly, when asked whether they were aware of the risk of sexually transmitted diseases, all of them answered in affirmative.

While three female wives said that they no longer engaged in romantic relationship with men, the other seven as they ignored the risk of contracting sexually transmitted diseases as they engaged unprotected sex. This probably for procreation. According to Emonyi (1997) and Zabus (2008), such sexual behaviour had numerous negative health risks.

According to some female wives, once married, they were free to choose male lovers for themselves. The other four said that their female husbands chose for them male lovers. However, the female wives also revealed that they had their own secret lovers in addition to the ones recommended by their female husbands. As Nduku one of the female wives said: *"one lover is officially known by the family but I have my secret lovers too,"* indicating that she had several male lovers. The choice of other secret

lovers demonstrate that women cannot be entirely submissive to dominance strategies in society.

Female wives managed to interact with many male partners most properly because the relationship was temporary. In some cases female wives were not allowed by their female husbands to let their male lovers into the houses because the children had grown up so it was embarrassing to bring men to their houses. On the other hand, some male lovers preferred to conceal this relationship they had families (wives). So they could sneak in and out of their houses in order to meet with the female wives. Despite this, female wives explained that other women in society lived in fear that female wives would steal their husbands. Consequently, not all female wives co-exist peacefully with other women. This was a big challenge to the female wives.

5.4 Challenges facing Female Wives

Female wives live in a patriarchal society where the culture of male dominance is the norm. Hence, female wives must assert themselves in order to survive the challenges caused by the societal cultural demands. This section presents findings on the challenges that female wives face in society besides gossip and prejudices meted out against female wives. This is shown on Table 2:

Table 2: Challenges Faced by Female Wives

Challenges faced by Female Wives	Frequency.
Sexual abuse. Woman has no control over her body in terms of safe sex	9
Ridicule by society for being <i>Iweto</i>	9
Not recognized or not respected in society	7
No say in the family	5
The risk of contracting sexually transmitted diseases (STDs)	6
Wives of married lovers insult us or call us names-husband "snatchers"	6
Power struggle between female husbands and wives	3

Source: data from female wives

Although the existence of children in a family is one of the fundamental reason for women's acceptability into woman to woman marriages, the fact that female wives of women's engagement with several male lovers was likely to makes them vulnerable to sexual abuse.

On top of the list of challenges female wives faced included: sexual exploitation men, female wives were seen as sexual tools who offered free sex any man. As a result, according to the female wives, men always approached them for sex. As one of the respondents laments, "*nobody respects me, even young boys want to have sex with me.*" Linda adds:

I do not know how to say no to men who are asking for sex. Keeping one partner is hard because men tell other men about me and they will come for sex too and this makes 'us' get infections and we struggle to cure ourselves. Even at this age men keep following me.

Linda's response reflects a weakness on the part of women as opposed to sexual exploitation. Even though sex is a matter of choice therefore, sexual exploitation occurs- perhaps when relatives of the female husband come demanding to have unprotected and non-consensual sexual intercourse and issue threats that if they refuse they will be thrown out of their extended family. Moreover, the women's reactions clearly indicate men's attitude toward such women and demonstrate their inability to avoid being exploited sexually. The women's loss of self-esteem impairs their ability to resist male sexual advances. Such situations exposes women to the risks of contracting sexually transmitted diseases.

Besides, sexual abuse and exploitation, majority of the female wives pointed out that they were always ridiculed from various circles of society, leading stigma and

discrimination. More often, they explained, female wives were considered as prostitutes, and sometimes mocked by members of the community who often sneered at them. As Ndinda says, *"I am a target for sexual gratification. I am usually approached by men, regardless of age."* Others said that married women accused them of snatching off their husbands. Most female wives pointed out that they were despised and mistreated by other women in society.

Even though some female wives had indicated that their relationships with their female husbands was good, surprisingly, four out of ten female wives observed that the relationship with their female husbands was poor. According to such respondents, some female husbands only valued the children while ignoring their mothers (female wives). Some of them claimed that their female husbands sidelined them in terms of decision making; they were too much controlling and they did not allow them to have any say in family matters. This is most probable because they were supposed to be wives and in traditional patriarchal society decisions are made by men. This can also be seen as an indication of gendered power relations in an African patriarchal society where it is assumed that men are sole decision makers. Since female husbands were likely to assume masculine behaviour, they are not expected to exhibit femininity in their undertaking as female husbands.

Among the Nandi of western Kenya female husbands take masculine social roles. Hence, they 'behaved' like men (Oboler, 1980:70). This most probably led to the issue of unequal power relations between female husbands and their wives. On the contrary, Njambi and O'Brien's study of the Gikuyu woman to woman marriage found that the relationship between female husbands and their wives was that of love and reciprocity (2000:6). Good relationship determines the stability of any marriage. However, most female wives said that they were not recognized by Christians who always preached against woman to woman marriage. They said that Christians received them scornfully and tried to persuade them to abandon the practice in order to be received in church. While Christians may simply base their argument on the Book of Mathew 19:3 which

says that a marriage is a union between a woman and a man, the Kenyan Catholic Church Policy on women to woman marriages which states:

In regard to this traditional practice, the first step is to insist that this arrangement be given up completely and that in the meantime all those involved, plus any other persons directly responsible for the arrangement, be denied the sacraments. After the women have separated completely, each one will be helped separately and any infants will be baptized (Kenya Catholic Bishops, 1991, 21)

Such open disapproval indicates that woman to woman marriage is not acceptable in the Catholic Church. Those in the marriage can only be cleansed through baptism after abandoning the practice. Mueni being a female wife and traditional healer felt unrecognized as she often mocked by Christians. Nonetheless, such disapproval and opposition from Christians did not end the practice. However, majority of them avoided going to church fearing that their marriages would be disregarded.

Nonetheless, various scholars have demonstrated that woman to woman marriages are strongly entrenched in African traditional customs and practices (Amadiume, 2015; Njambi and O'Brien, 2000; Oboler, 1980; Kyalo, 2011). Moreover, the Kenya Constitution, 2010 and the Kenya Marriage Act 2014 recognise traditional practices including such marriages. Even though these marriages are continually disparaged in contemporary society.

5.5 Female Wives' Perspectives about Woman to Woman Marriage

The foregoing experiences are not unique to woman to woman marriages but are common in intimate relationships. The question is what would force a female wife to quit her marriage regardless of the gains it may brought. According to some female wives, one would relinquish her marriage due to mistreatment by the female husbands' relatives who envy their property or female husband's unwillingness to share property with her. As one of the respondents explains "*I will quit if the senior woman doesn't love*

us and if she is not willing to surrender her property to my children”; Are reasons for quitting the marriage are: being seen as a tool for producing children or being disregarded by the female husbands. Another respondent stated, “I am seen as less important apart from just giving birth to children for the senior woman.”

Mumbi, the youngest female wife (39 years old) who got married at the age of 26 years without a child, now regretfully sees the worst part of this relationship as she retorts “*I am tired of keeping men who do not belong to me.*” Mumbi probably assumed that being young, she could find a man who could stay with her permanently even though such relationship was expected to be temporary. Njambi & O’ Brien’s (2000) study of the Kikuyu female wives confirms that the relationship between female wives and their male lovers was not “permanent” (2000:7).

The female wives’ experiences cited in this study calls for an exploration of their perspectives about this form of marriage. Interestingly, 9 out of 10 female wives said that they will not encourage other women to involve themselves in woman to woman marriage. However, one female wife had mixed feelings about the marriage as she said:

...Only those women who want to find a home for their children, or help other women who are desperate for children can have them through woman to woman marriage. Otherwise, women should look for men to marry them.

Some female wives also felt that they would quit this form of marriage because female husbands mistreated them. They also felt disrespected by society. As one of the respondents explained: “*It is bad to be disrespected, misused and ignored by society.*”

Since a female husbands’ reason for marrying, a wife is to acquire heirs for the continuity of her lineage, usually female husbands relatives covetously wait for an opportunity to access the property of the female husband. In most cases they continuously attempted to possess the property by evicting female wife and her children especially after the female husband’s demise. Such actions may threaten the stability of woman to woman marriage.

On the whole, it is difficult for the female wife and her children to co-exist peacefully in an unfriendly environment. One of the female wives said she would quit the marriage because: “ *of pressure from the female husband's relatives who feel we should not own property. It is difficult to live well with the relatives who are eying her property*”. While another respondent felt that:

we are accused of taking away other women's husbands... Many other bad things are associated with us and our children. Such challenge if unchecked can culminate into a broken relationship

The manner in which some members of society treat female wives and their children has made them to re-evaluate position in regard to woman to woman marriages. Whereas some of the female wives responded that they would hardly encourage single mothers to be involved in woman marriages, they felt ‘stuck’ in their own marriage because they had children who needed to be economically supported. For that reason the answer to the question whether or not they will encourage other women to be married by female husbands, was “No”. Such respondents felt that woman to woman marriage is not the only option for unmarried mothers because it has many challenges. Therefore, some female wives suggested unmarried mothers should find male spouses to marry them..

Nonetheless, since preference for male children/ heirs is entrenched in African minds woman to woman marriage is bound to persist because procreation remains the core of woman to woman marriage for reproduction of kinship. However, since the Kenya Constitution 2010 which allows women and girls to inherit land on the same footing with the men, there may be no reason to justify woman to woman marriage especially for those with female children.

5.6 Children of Female Wives

Children⁴ are a critical factor in the accounts of African marriage in the past and present times (Zabus 2008). So valuable are the children to the extent that a female husband from one of the Kenyan communities in an interview with a BBC TV presenter equated them with blankets. As she says:

You know children are like blankets. And one needs to have their own blankets so that you do not have to go to the neighbours' house at night to ask for a blanket since he will definitely be using his at that time. (Telewa, 2012 BBC News).

The preceding statement made by the female husband clearly explains why sonless or childless women opted to marry female wives who could give them future heirs and companions instead of allowing their spouses to marry other wives. Because children are the main reason for woman to woman marriage relationships, it is important to examine of their experiences and perspectives in this form of marriages.

A total of ten (10) children: five sons and five daughters were purposively sampled for this study. The respondents were born between 1972 and 1994. Six respondents had secondary school education while four had primary level of education. Of the ten children, seven indicated that they had bad experience for being children of female wives. They unanimously cited stigmatization by society as a common experience. As Mary one of the children laments:

I feel like I miss something. People call us names and I wish my mother stayed single or got married to a man. It is very discouraging when my wedding day comes and only to find two women escorting me to the high table⁵.

Children born in woman to woman marriages are not likely to live as those in heterosexual marriages. Mary imagines that on her wedding day both women will

⁴In the African society a parent refers to his or her sons and daughters as children regardless of age. Likewise in this study the sons and daughters of the female wives will be referred to as children even though some of them are mature people

⁵High table here may also mean the platform or the podium which is designated place for distinguished guests

present her to her future husband. It was established that the girls in this form of marriage seemed to miss the male father figure presence in their lives as one of the respondents' said *"I miss having a father. Anyway I never chose to be raised in this type of family"*. The other three girls appeared to accept the situation in which they found themselves. As one of them said. *"I feel okay. It is much better than nothing"*⁶. *Although people don't like to associate with us, I am comfortable with where my mother chose to place us."*

Women's' decision to engage in woman to woman marriage relationship might have improved the status of their children. Because the daughters of female wives felt that the choice made by their mothers of getting married improved their status in society because this enabled them to have a home and family. Hence, they generally felt that their current situation was better than "nothing"⁷. It provided a sense of belonging even though they felt that some of the community members were sceptical about them.

Jerry, one of the sons said that he was satisfied with his mother's engagement in woman to woman marriage even though he would have preferred to be in a normal⁸ family setting. As for Samson, he was comfortable with his situation. *He said :*

I don't see any difference between myself and children in other families. Considering what they also go through, I believe, I am even better off than the children who have fathers and mothers. At the moment I cannot change the situation because our mother had already made a choice.

Generally children in woman to woman marriages felt that their current situation was better regardless of being children of female wives . One of them felt that it was not possible to undo the choice their mother had made.

⁶ Having "nothing" here means : having no place to call home of their own

⁷ Better than "nothing" literally means better than having none. For the Maweto children woman marriages enabled them to find a home.

⁸ Normal family according to Jerry is heterosexual relationship which is generally accepted by society.

However, children who are the cause of this marriage often faced several challenges in various places. For instance, those who went to school indicated that they received negative comments from their teachers. As one of the girls said: *“my teachers teased me that I am a daughter of female wife...students laughed at me...”* One of the sons explained that he was construed by his teachers to be a child of a prostitute.

Because of such unfriendly school environment, Samson, one of the sons was forced to drop out of primary school since he was unable not put up with day-to-day humiliation by his teachers. He pointed out that, *“Teachers claimed that maweto children were ‘big headed’⁹ and that is why they did not do well in school.”* Only one male child indicated that he did not experience any negative comments about his status because his school was far from home where his background was unknown to the teachers and students.

The *maweto* children were asked to comment on how Christians treated them. Of the ten respondents, only one did not attend church. He quit Church following a lot gossip that he did not have a father and that his mother was a husband “snatcher”. Even though some of the *maweto* children attended church services, they said that Christians were unfriendly to them. Generally, the respondents believed that the Christians discriminated against them by claiming that they were cursed for being offsprings of woman to woman marriage.

The experience with peers was equally bad as majority explained that they were discriminated against by other children who were born in heterosexual marriages.

Some daughters pointed out that they were sexually abused. As Mweni said: *“men think we are available for sex at any time...”* Mbithe added: *“... Men want to have sex with us at an earlier age...we are not protected against any form of sexual abuse...”* Most probably men might have assumed that since some of the female wives frequently

⁹ Big headed literally means to be rude

interacted with multiple male lovers, the same could apply to their daughters. However, the manner in which the female wives and their lovers conducted their affairs may have had exposed their children to unscrupulous sexual behaviour.

Such desperate situations may have been exacerbated by lack of decent housing and adequate education during their early age as a result of school dropout. This was due to their social background, lack of moral and material support from their mothers who were already burdened with the responsibility of caring for several 'fatherless' children. In fact, this study established that, some female wives had up to eight children and they did not engage in activities that could economically support the children.

When *maweto* daughters were asked what they would do if they found themselves in a situation similar to that of their mothers. They gave varied reactions: Of the five daughters, one said that she would rather stay unmarried forever instead of getting married to a female husband. The other one said that she would prefer to involve herself in a polygamous marriage instead of becoming an *Iweto* (female wife). The other three said that they would prefer child adoption if they were childless. The *Maweto* daughters' perspectives demonstrate that they have different approach to bareness/sonless contrary to the female husbands.

Two of the sons, said that if their wives gave birth to girls only they would be comfortable with their children. The other two said that they would marry other wives (second wife) if their wives failed to give birth. However, if they had girls only they will be contented with them. Hence, they concurred with some of the daughters. One of the sons however said that he already had a family of two boys and one girl so he had no challenge.

Maweto children's perceptions about the relationship between the two women (their mother and grandmother), in their lives, five of the respondents said that the relationship was poor while the other five said it was relatively good. For those who said that the relationship was poor, they generally pointed out that the two women were ever

quarrelling, and that the female husbands (their grandmothers) always disrespected their mothers and they never allowed them to make any decision in the family.

Hence, some sons and daughters disliked their grandmothers for being too controlling and authoritative. However, two respondents said that the two women were friends and they equated this relationship with that of mother and daughter as one of the sons confirms:

they live as mother and daughter and they respect one another. Indeed, this relationship is good. My grandmother is really caring. I am happy for them because there is mutual respect and love between them.

By and large, they still liked their grandmothers as one of them confirmed: she protects us against family members who try to humiliate us; she provided for our basic needs; she loves us; and she has given us a home and property we can own". Another son concludes: "What else in this world do you need? Land to inherit and have a future for your family?" This has been given by grandma...".

Sons and daughters had mixed reactions about their experiences. Nonetheless, they unanimously agreed that the benefits accrued from woman to woman marriage was remarkable despite the challenges experienced. However, discrimination against them defeats the purpose of the significance of woman to woman marriage practice. Female wives also felt that society generally looked down on their children.

6.0 Implications of the Study

Women's acceptance to be married by other women could simply imply that African men have refused to be responsible husbands. Instead they sire children and abandon them. Women end up with the responsibility of caring for 'fatherless children. This has socio-economic implications. Therefore, some single mothers not only regain status in the community but they also secure their own and their children's socio-economic survival through woman to woman marriage.

Extinction of a lineage is not a concern of women only but men as well. In some traditional African societies if a woman is barren or has female children only her

husband marries another wife to give birth for him. In others a woman takes a wife to give her children. Consequently, woman to woman marriage expands and strengthens the pillars of the 'childless' woman's house and lineage as well.

In some African patrilineal systems of inheritance the practice is that sons inherit their father's land whereas daughters do not. Hence, land is passed from father to son across generations. For that reason, women do not own land but only have use rights. Woman to woman marriage enables women to own land through sons' of their female wives. This practice should be seen as a strategy used by women to break the societal cultural practices which discriminate against them in terms of access to resources.

Woman to woman marriage does not only benefit 'childless' women who initiate the marriage. It also benefits other persons who are involved in the marriage. Therefore, it has various implications. For instance, in some communities wealthy women take advantage of woman to woman marriage. Hence, they take wives in order to have rights over children sired to gain prestige just as polygamous men do. Hence, the practice enables wealthy female household heads to exercise their autonomy in society. The practice further demonstrates how women assert themselves to threaten men's ego by taking over prestigious status and positions which are normally preserves of men especially in patriarchal societies.

The fact that some female husbands in this study hardly allowed their wives to entertain their male lovers in their compounds means that male lovers' role was temporary and was intended for procreation which was the intention of woman to woman marriage. Allowing male lovers to permanently share a compound or house of married female husbands would be inappropriate, unethical and un-African because that is like having two husbands under the same roof or in one residence. However, this kind of control shows the level of powerlessness among male lovers in woman to woman marriage. It further shows that their relationship was strongly controlled by female husbands even though their purpose was to sire future heirs for the female husbands.

Female wives were expected to produce more children for their female husbands. This necessitated both sexual interaction and the physical presence of the male lovers. However, this can easily lead to the possibility of contracting sexually transmitted diseases as well HIV/AIDS as male lovers' refused or could not engage in protected sex since the main objective was procreation. Nonetheless, some female wives' sexual permissiveness was a demonstration of assertiveness and rebellion against decisions by some female husbands who attempted to control their sexuality.

On the whole, any thoughtless sexual behavior calls for sensitization of society about safe sexual indulgence. The existence of this practice is persistence in contemporary society regardless of alternative solutions to 'childlessness'. Showing how women can use culture to address their own issues in society. The practice also presents the mechanisms women in oppressive patriarchal cultures device to access power, rights and status so as to empower themselves. It also shows how women utilize this marriage in order to improve their social and economic status in society .

Woman to woman marriage is an assertive and wise strategy that 'childless' women use to discourage men's practice of polygamy while ensuring security of their resources and continuity of their own lineage as well. Moreover, woman to woman cultural practice is recognized by the Constitution 2010 and The Kenya Marriage Act 2014. Hence, it has a place in the contemporary society which is deeply entrenched in cultural beliefs, norms and practices particularly about the importance of children in society.

In Kenya, male child preference syndrome is common for the purpose of inheritance which is usually bestowed on male children. This cultural practice has been the main cause for the existence of woman to woman marriages. However, cultural disregard for daughters is gradually being overcome with the coming into force of the Law of Succession Act Cap 160, which does not distinguish between son and daughters in regard to inheritance of the deceased parents' property. Additionally the Kenya Constitution 2010 Article 60 (1) (f) outlaws all forms of gender discrimination in relation to ownership of land and property.

7.0 Conclusion

Woman to woman marriage is a strategy used by 'childless' women to improve their social status in society and also as means through which single mothers can use to regain social status, economic security and societal acceptance for themselves and their children. This study established that woman to woman marriage is an African tradition which was and still is vibrant and recognized by the existing Kenyan legal frameworks despite challenges experienced by those involved its advancement.

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