

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 the male 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*’.

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 nothing⁶. 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 "nothing⁷". 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 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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