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Tara Saharan and Lau Schulpen

ABSTRACT
Restrictive abortion laws resulting in unsafe abortions form one of the key causes of maternal morbidity and mortality in Kenya. Despite the existence of several Women's Rights Organisations (WROs), advocacy for safe abortions against restrictive laws does not have the momentum the subject deserves. This research draws on agenda-setting literature to explore factors that impede advocacy initiatives of WROs against restrictive abortion laws in Kenya. Using qualitative methods, the article shows that women's rights agenda results from existing societal norms, funding priorities, state legislation, and lack of solidarity among WROs.

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Agenda-setting; Kenya; women rights; advocacy; safe abortions

Introduction

Out of the 55.7 million abortions that occurred worldwide each year between 2010 and 2014, it is estimated that nearly half of them were reported to be unsafe and they were significantly higher in countries with vastly restrictive abortion laws (Ganatra et al. 2017). Kenya presents one such example wherein restricted abortion laws are in practice as abortions are not permitted unless under emergency circumstances when the life or health of the pregnant women or girl is in danger (Republic of Kenya 2010). The complications related to unsafe abortions in Kenya are reported largely by disadvantaged populations including teenage girls and divorced women revealing their vulnerability to access legal abortion services (Ministry of Health 2013). This ongoing crises for vulnerable women remains a challenge despite the existence of a thriving civil society advocating for women's rights at national and international levels. This study aims to understand the limited activism of WROs in relation to safe abortions in the Kenyan context by drawing on debates on agenda setting through the research question: What factors influence agenda setting of WROs with respect to advocacy for safe abortion rights? While acknowledging that feminist struggle and practices cannot be homogenised (Mohanty 2003; Phoenix and Pattynama 2006) and not all activists will share the political standpoint in favour of safe abortions, this article argues that limited activism of Women's Rights Organisations (hereafter called WROs) has resulted from a combination of factors including the organisations, their networks, and the wider society.

Women's Rights Organisations' Agenda-setting initiatives

Debates on WROs' agenda setting are drawn on their relationships with the donors, governments, and the larger network within which they operate along with their internal dynamics (see – Alvarez 1999; Horn 2009; Lang 1997; Nabacwa 2005, 2010; Silliman 1999; Wendoh and Wallace

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2005). Donors bring the necessary financial support for advocacy work but their relationships with WROs are often characterised by power asymmetry, which is evident in the control that donors exercise over the advocacy agenda of WROs. While donors serve to create much needed dialogue about feminism, gender equality, and the role of women in democratic politics, more often, the advocacy strategies serve their need to gain geopolitical influence in the region (Horn 2009). Besides, some donors have knowingly or unknowingly seduced WROs to comply with neoliberal economic agendas (Horn 2009; Silliman 1999), therefore impacting their decisions. In several cases, donors' priorities creates limits in the agenda of WROs as a result of discourses that they are willing to support (Horn 2009). This limitation ends up distorting as well as diverting local priorities and the character of advocacy interventions. In addition, the shifts in agenda of WROs from empowerment to service provision has constrained feminist advocacy initiatives within the field of international development (Jenkins 2011). Because of financial support, donors often have the power to "force" recipient organisations (including WROs) to focus on certain areas and specific intervention strategies such as service delivery. Also, the relationships between donor organisations and WROs are very complex as both have different motivations for doing the advocacy work and as a result, at times, they end up having diverging agendas (Nabacwa 2005). Furthermore, even though different donors might share an interest in the issue of women's rights, they might have different priorities which might impact their funding language as well as advocacy strategy. For example, both USA and Nordic countries shared an interest in the issue of trafficking of Estonian women. However, where the latter viewed structural gender inequality as the root of the problem, the former thought of resolving the issue by creating women entrepreneurs (Horn 2009). Also, high competition between WROs because of depleting bilateral and multilateral aid in several instances results in general mistrust and lack of coordination in advocacy initiatives among the organisations involved (Jad 2004). Thus, the complex role of donors in the process of agenda setting is reflected in the power asymmetry due to the relation of dependency and in their diverse understanding, as well as the implementation of advocacy strategies for women rights.

Apart from aid organisations, governments also play a crucial role in the agenda-setting processes of WROs. Relationships between WROs and the government are increasingly having a semblance of "partnership". As a consequence of this "partnership", WROs end up confining their agenda to what is possible within this collaboration rather than holding the government accountable for the lack of support for women's rights (Nabacwa 2010). In addition, the government's strategy of not taking any position or decision with regard to gender issues obliges WROs to develop either a "reactionary" or narrow advocacy agenda rather than a "visionary" one (ibid). Moreover, close collaborations with the government as "gender experts" rather than citizen groups undermines WROs' ability to promote the women's rights agenda (Alvarez 1999; Lang 1997). However, the relationship between the government and the WROs is not always one of cooperation as there remain organisations which are critical of the state. In such circumstances, resources are skewed towards those WROs that are deemed to be politically "trustworthy" and these opportunities in turn provide them with greater access to advocacy at national and international levels (Alvarez 1999). These debates indicate that the relationship between WROs and governments is characterised by power dynamics unlike the ones with donors, where power is often concentrated in the funding agencies in comparison to WROs.

Unlike the notion of power that characterises the relationship of donors and governments with WROs, the networks of WROs are often confronted with cycles of "engagements and disappointment" revealing the ideological rifts that commonly exist in multi-generational cohorts (Nabacwa 2005). This contradiction between the WROs and the networks within which they operate is characterised by contradicting features that include collaboration as well as opposition to the advocacy agendas of the different organisations involved (ibid). Moreover, Lang (1997) argues that the apparent political apathy on certain topics among the WROs cannot be simply attributed to the distance from established politics, but must be seen in relation to the general lack of "feminist mobilization strategies" (111). This occurs because WROs are in danger of adapting to the vertical structure of current political life, even if their ideological focus remains a participatory and horizontally oriented

politics in which gender-conscious policies have become part of every level of decision-making (ibid). Thus, commitment to advocacy and the presence of powerful networks and coalitions at the national level does not necessarily translate into processes of change at the grassroots levels (Nabacwa 2005). Therefore, the extent to which networks and thus cooperation between and among WROs can be seen as determining factor for agenda setting.

Other than the external factors impacting the agenda setting of WROs, they face several internal hurdles experienced by their own staff members including reliance on traditional gender roles and serious lack of awareness regarding gender issues (Horn 2009; Wendoh and Wallace 2005). In addition, burden of institutionalisation has consumed WROs with the responsibility of several managerial tasks such as preparing reports or writing proposals and have made them become less available for the politically charged tasks (Silliman 1999). This rise in managerialism has been closely linked to technical demands placed on organisations through upward accountability, further increasing staff workloads as well as distance between the activists and the constituency that they represent (Alvarez 1999; Markowitz and Tice 2002). Furthermore, agenda setting is often linked to the organisational growth and development of WROs because their influence is rather limited at the beginning of the agenda-setting process as the structural obstacles outweigh organisational resources (Joachim 2003, 2007). This changes over time; as they become more established and formalised, they become more strategic and are able to navigate the political structure to their advantage by gaining institutional access, mobilising support from influential allies, and exploiting changes in political alignments and conflicts (ibid). Discussions related to the cultural context within which the WROs operate and the rise of institutionalism presents the limitations that exist within the WROs and how it influences their agenda-setting priorities for women rights. Following these actor-centric debates related to agenda setting, this article seeks to understand how the hybrid identities of Kenyan WROs and the structural constraints within which they operate impact their agenda setting for advocacy on abortion rights.

Data and methods

The empirical analysis of the research draws on data collected for a larger study investigating how the institutional design of aid chains enables and constrains CSOs in Kenya to perform their political roles.[1] The data collection was carried out in Kenya from June to November 2019 using qualitative tools including participant observation and interviews with nine WROs. Participant observation was done by closely collaborating with staff members of a national WRO located in Nairobi. Apart from participant observation, 15 interviews were conducted with staff members of principal organisations and eight with other WROs. In addition, five interviews were also conducted with representatives from funding agencies and Kenyan government to get a broader perspective and add to the findings from WRO interviews. Purposive sampling was done to select research participants and access was mainly possible through initial introduction from staff at the principal WRO. Project staff were selected for interviews in all the WROs and, where possible, management staff members were also consulted. The interviews varied considerably in length ranging from half an hour to nearly two hours. Anonymity of all research participants has been maintained by carefully ensuring that all personal information is kept confidential. The interviews were recorded and transcribed in full and subjected to computer-based analysis using the software Atlas.ti, which aided in generating codes for the research material.

Table 1 provides an overview of some of the main characteristics of the WROs included here. Having been established between 1985 and 2001, these WROs have a relatively long history in which they actively advocate for women's rights and undertake service provision related to legal aid, medical treatment, and/or skill and capacity building for women in Kenya. All are headquartered in Nairobi while having offices in the different counties in which they work. While three of them can be described as national level NGOs, one is a charitable trust of a leading hospital and another is a membership organisation. Notwithstanding these differences, corporate donors are few (e.g.

Table 1. Background information on Kenyan Women's Rights Organisations.

	Key areas	Staff size	Budget
WRO1	Free legal aid, advocacy, community awareness, and capacity building for women rights.	32	US$ 115,000 (2018)
WRO2	Research and advocacy for human rights.	25 (+ 10 interns)	US$ 2.5 Million (2017)
WRO3	Medical psychosocial support, treatment, awareness, and advocacy.	18	US$ 1 million (2016)
WRO4	Advocacy in law/regulations related to health and human rights, capacity building, providing legal aid, and partnering for provision of health services.	15 (+ 4 interns)	US$ 2.2 million (2019)
WRO5	Free legal aid, education, and advocacy.	40	US$ 2.1 million (2017)
WRO6	Media based promotion of diversity, gender equity, social justice, and development for women and children in Kenya.	9	Not known
WRO7	Violence mitigation against women through access to justice, health services, economic empowerment, and leadership development.	7	Not known
WRO8	Economic empowerment and justice for women through skill building, prevention, and response to GBV.	20	Not known
WRO9	Mobilising women and girls to influences policies and practices.	24	US$ 3.5 million (2019)

Sources: interviews, websites, annual reports.

Safari.com) as are domestic resources making for a strong dependence (up to 99%) on foreign donors. With all, the latter are a mix of bilateral donors (e.g. Norway, Germany, the Netherlands, Denmark), multilateral donors (e.g. UNDP, Global Fund, UNFPA, UNICEF) and civilateral donors (e.g. Care, Hivos, Oxfam, Open Society Foundation, Plan International) – although overall just one or two (bilateral or multilateral) donors provide the bulk of funding.

Factors impeding WROs' efforts for safe abortion advocacy initiatives in Kenya

Taking into account theoretical debates around WROs' internal dynamics and their relationships discussed above and the interviews with the research participants, this study confirms that – (1) funding of WROs, (2) professionalisation of WROs, (3) lack of solidary among WROs and their networks, and (4) controversies related to abortion rights advocacy explain how WROs prioritise their agenda- setting initiatives. This empirical section presents the dilemmas experienced by WROs towards the process of agenda setting for advocacy around safe abortion rights in Kenya.

Funding of WROs

The funding priorities of donor organisations have direct repercussions on the advocacy possibilities of WROs, including the issue of legal reforms related to safe abortion rights in Kenya. The majority of the WROs interviewed reported that aligning with feminist principals in certain cases also meant making active decisions to forgo certain funding streams. A case in point is the global gag rule of the Trump administration preventing USAID to fund organisations providing legal abortion services or advocating for abortion law reforms as a part of their foreign policy. Not all Kenyan WROs harness adequate power to question donor-led agenda setting, even if it is in stark opposition to their own organisational beliefs and value system. Notably, some exceptions exist that can counter donor dominance, especially in WROs that are largely working on human rights concerns that are not limited to women. Such organisations have managed to develop credible reputation over time, and as a result, are at such a level that they can actually deny to work with any donor that does not align with them, exhibiting a more equal relationship and less power differentials in the donor–NGO relationship. However, for the majority of the WROs, because women rights organisations are considered to be a subset of NGOs working on human rights agendas, they have comparably much smaller funding streams, therefore, much lower negotiation power. This is also reflected through indirect

funding in the form of sub-granting that acts as an impediment to safe abortion advocacy initiatives. Because the majority of WROs interviewed work as sub-grantee and do not receive direct funding, they were therefore subjected to much more stringent measures of accountability compared to their international counterparts that get funded directly. This measure of upward accountability also results in decreased overhead costs of the WROs in the funding schemes – "I don't think the international organizations are subjected to the same level of [upward] accountability so […] they are drawing maybe a certain percentage towards indirect costs, without necessarily having to say, this is indirect costs" (Management Staff, 17 October 2018).

This inequality in relationships between the donors and the WRO community also echoes in the conditionality set by the multilateral and bilateral funding organisations. For instance, as part of funding conditionalities, several WROs were required to collaborate with the local government to implement the project by incorporating activities that demand government and WRO partnership. This well-meaning strategy inhibits advocates from challenging the state with whom they are expected to collaborate through capacity-building measures. While donors claim that they aim to build the southern WROs, such funding trends unquestionably undermine WROs' ability to hold the government accountable. In most instances, WROs align with donor conditions and are likely to focus on issues that the donor prioritises at the expense of ones that are in conflict with donor interest. Resource dependency places the donor on a high pedestal and this often leads to capturing of agenda of the local WROs – "If a donor came today and said, okay we will give you money to do GBV work but you must not talk about sexual and reproductive health rights work, that is most likely to happen. The conformity is very high, you don't even ask and we had this discussion even internally. To us the donor is a small god, they should never be questioned, you can never say anything negative." (Project Staff, 3 November 2018).

In addition, there is limited domestic philanthropy to support contentious issues such as safe abortion. Private foundations such as Safaricom and Equity Group work through partner organisations, i.e. government, CBOs, and NGOs, and focus on topics related to SDGs and socio-economic prosperity of the Kenyan population but not engage with advocacy for safe abortions. This lack of support by domestic funding organisations highlights the limited legitimacy for advocacy related to safe abortion from a local perspective – "But if you look at the NGOs and if they are able to get their money locally,[… .]. Even if there is money available, they are not able to access it. So that causes […] more legitimacy problems: who do they represent, why do people not think it is an important thing to spend money on." (International donor agency representative, 28 May 2018).

Moreover, the dependence of WROs on short-term funding that is project based and likely to end in a couple of years also raises the question with respect to accountability: whether the WROs are accountable to the donors or to the communities that are left behind when the project comes to an end. The focus of project-based funding on clear and measurable outcomes often does not align well with the long-term nature of advocacy which is time intensive. Because of reliance on donors for funding, WROs often aligned their advocacy strategies to match to the priorities set by the donors at the expense of issues that demanded attention, including the subject of safe abortion rights. Moreover, short-term funding by definition is problematic to advocacy and it adds additional challenges for contentious issues such as safe abortion, which requires long-term commitment for any progress.

Professionalisation of WROs in Kenya

Related to funding conditionalities and relationship with the donors is also the issue of the professionalisation of WROs in Kenya. Interviewees widely mentioned the need for professional qualifications, skills, and experiences as a key area of prioritisation in the staff-selection process over feminist values related to women rights advocacy. For instance, hard skills are clearly much more appreciated in comparison to the softer ones associated with women's rights politics. Moreover, prejudices towards gender roles and lack of solidarity with feminist values are seen as attributes that can be

transformed but programmatic skills simply are not negotiable, as mentioned in this interview excerpt – "First [priority in recruitment process] is experience and ability to do the work, given all the circumstances and whatever the project demands. I don't think feminism is even a part of the interview" (Project staff, 29 October 2018). Additionally, although there is a substantial number of representative studies available on abortion rights nationally in Kenya, several WROs do not engage with these because of the limited research capacity of staff members and lack of solidarity towards the issue.

In addition to the professional capacity of individual staff members, all the interviewees stated that they view professionalism as one of the core organisational values. Organisational professionalism is indicated by attributes related to accountability systems, formal mode of operation, and capacity to undertake advocacy work adhering to global standards for performance. These practices are largely emulated from international organisations who are commonly in direct competition with domestic organisations for fundraising. Credibility associated with professionalisation is also explicated through the increasing presence of social media and the role of internet and communication technology that seem to be instrumental in profiling the organisations as professional partners for development and to attract funding. Professionalism is measured not only in the type of work that the organisation does but also the manner in which they showcase the work that they do.

Among the range of organisations interviewed, formal structures of operation were reported by the majority of respondents. This formalisation of operations is to a large extent associated with a clear structure of accountability, communication, and efficacy in management. Despite emphasis on formalisation by many, a limited number of respondents also indicated a compound mix of formal and informal modes of operation in their organisations. For instance, while the lines of reporting and accountability mechanisms are vertically arranged with clear protocols of operation, project staff has the flexibility to approach the managers on an informal basis, thereby working in compound structures that ensure a degree of accountability as well as ease of operation.

Additionally, the compound structure of functioning was also discussed in relation to the entire organisational set-up when some departments operate in vertical fashion and others adhere to an "open-door" policy by working in a non-hierarchical environment. For instance, departments of finance and administration often follow vertical structures of operation and management, while on the programme side, the staff members frequently operate in an informal and flexible fashion. These compound structures of management in project teams work well as many of the Kenyan WROs function in tandem with grassroots organisations in the form of CBOs, human rights networks, and activists based locally. This flexibility is crucial in advocacy work that is often remote in nature as the majority of the organisations operate through satellite offices based at the county levels. However, though the programme staff has the liberty to undertake advocacy in relation to the local context, decisions for fundraising are centralised and often limited to management staff located in the head-office. Therefore, these compound structures often do not aid in an egalitarian decision-making processes for the WROs. Moreover, these top-down formal structures of operation force the WROs to function in a corporate rather than movement-based manner, thereby limiting the possibilities to engage in grassroots issues, including advocacy for safe abortion rights – "Because with more professionalism, sometimes you tend to move away from what the real problem of the grass-roots women are and now start dealing with your own problems, some elite problems" (Project staff, 29 October 2018).

Lack of solidarity among WROs and their networks

In recent years, the Kenyan women's rights movement has witnessed a growth of radical feminists who are largely invested in the WROs. These women and men happen to work openly as well as under-cover for the cause of women's rights, advocating for issues lined with stigma, including for the cause of safe abortions in Kenya. However, the activism on women's rights issues is structured

differently in terms of practices between advocacy initiatives of older activists and the younger radical ones:

> The majority respected leaders of the women's movement are of the older generation. And are not receptive to the ideas because of the morality or their own personal views or societal issues. They don't want to be seen as the ones who pushed too far and because of that probably younger women would not want to pursue those issues because they would be castigated by the older women. And some older women would boldly stop you, they would tell you in this space, it is limited to this and in this space we cannot discuss this. So, [they say] you cannot do this because how will the rest of the movement think of us. Probably something like keeping up with the Joneses." (Project staff, 29 October 2018).

The older generation of activists holds moderately conservative views towards women's empowerment and they have often distanced themselves from socially stigmatised subjects such as those related to safe abortion rights. This divide among activists in WROs is also extended to the organisations, mainly because the younger, radical activists hold much less power in comparison to their older counterparts who often work at senior levels in projects as well as management.

These differences among activists are also reflected in the issues that the women's rights networks focus on. There are several platforms that envision bringing together actors from different organisations under one umbrella, but these networks are also arranged along thematic lines. As a consequence, it is difficult to move outside of these themes, leaving certain issues (like abortion rights) at the fringes. This also results in different and disconnected networks operating for issues pertaining to women's rights in Kenya. Moreover, the lack of a single forum that brings all of them together under one roof further contributes to dispersion in advocacy agendas for women's rights –

> A lot of feminist organizations work in silos so there are a range of feminist issues, women's unpaid work, labour laws, economic oppression, there [are] people doing things on land rights, there's people doing things on sexual and reproductive health and rights and all those forms of rights that we know that fall into the SRHR component, there's people doing women in political leadership but there is no one forum where all these actors come and say, this is what am doing and this is how it links to your agenda. (Project staff, 3 November 2018)

The class and political aspirations of the activists largely result in overriding their solidarity considerations with disadvantaged women. Several middle-class women and men who work in a professional capacity as WRO staff members view their position as a stepping stone towards career advancement. They do recognise the politics related to the women's movement in Kenya but the majority are careful not to step on a wrong note that might strike discord with the social values and thereafter act as an impediment in their personal career graph. For instance, the representation of women in politics is one of the key areas of advocacy by a large number of Kenyan WROs that were interviewed. Though this is an important issue for many educated middle-class women who are more likely to work as NGO staff, it is of little concern to rural women who in most cases do not have access to such opportunities and are largely concerned with daily realities centred around livelihoods, healthcare, education, etc. Therefore, by working on agendas that advocate for increasing the political participation of women, WROs have shifted their constituent base from disadvantaged women living in rural areas to a more middle- and upper-middle elite class of women. This results in "lukewarm activism" that often limits the discussion of controversial issues such as abortion rights to the board rooms:

> the organization doesn't want to out rightly say things so there is usually a lot of "No we can't say that, we cannot critique the government like that, we cannot talk about abortion rights" and really that bothers me a lot. If we are really not speaking for the women and the true experiences of the women in this country because we are afraid of rubbing some people in the wrong way [..], is it activism that is safe to the organization or it is activism that really changes the lives of the people that we claim to represent? (Project staff, 3 November 2018)

Moreover, this shift in focus is particularly worrying as women living in economically marginalised contexts are the ones who are disproportionately impacted because of the lack of access to safe abortion services. Intergenerational and class divides along with limited solidarity within the WRO

networks, especially for controversial issues, including safe abortion rights, illustrate the lack of a common political agenda for women's rights.

Controversies related to abortion rights advocacy

Controversies related to abortion rights are fuelled by structural concerns related to existing religious, cultural, and social norms widespread in the society. Deep-seated prejudices exist with regard to abortion rights in Kenya – "So if you walk around in Kenya saying abortion rights somebody is bound to throw you out or stone you" (Management Staff, 16 October 2018). To combat this trend, some of the WROs reported a range of tactics. For instance, they framed the issue of abortion rights as a health concern primarily because of the economic burden of cases related to unsafe abortions placed on the public health facilities. Also, spoke about reproductive health rights instead of abortion rights, as described here:

> When we are saying reproductive health rights we are saying you have the right to decide how many kids you want to have. When you want to have them and what to do with your body your reproductive system which includes your womb and who checks in your womb and who doesn't by which I mean abortion. (Management Staff, 16 October 2018)

Though these non-confrontational strategies help in the provision of facilities related to safe abortions in some instances, they do not contribute towards challenging the existing social and cultural norms around abortions nor support advocacy for safe abortion rights from a feminist perspective:

> There are organisations that work with issues of abortion but they don't have a feminist lens, they come with a public health angle that it is much cheaper for the government to offer free abortion services then it is to take care of the mortality and morbid burden of women who cannot really procure safe abortions and go on with the pregnancies and have all these consequences later in life. (Project Staff, 2 November 2018)

Structural factors associated with the existing legal framework and cultural norms exposes the WROs that work on the contentious issues in the risk of being confronted with criminalisation and public condemnation:

> Our biggest concern is the safety of our officers, it has nothing to do with the stigma that is associated, as you noticed if you get in here, you can access this door and that door quite easily and all you have to do is press up the lift 4th Floor and come and throw inks and label us as abortionist. (Project Staff, 26 October 2018)

Therefore, several WROs prefer working on moderate issues that would elicit large-scale public support, such as gender based violence, economic empowerment, and political participation. Notwithstanding that many of these concerns, including violence against women, are a serious problem in Kenya that effects women and girls from all walks of life, several members of WROs simply deny expressing solidarity with contested issues related to women rights in the Kenyan society, including rights to safe abortion.

In addition, advocacy initiatives around politically charged issues such as safe abortions are watered down as a result of the organisational trajectories of WROs. Several organisations that started up with pressing concerns that were often controversial in nature during their formative years, within a decade or two, prefer working on issues that are considered moderate, attract public empathy, and do not challenge widespread public opinion on the subject of women's rights. This is also largely related to the political environment where they operate, as stated here:

> The current situation in the country is that no one wants to talk about what you term as the hard-core feminist topics like human rights around sexuality, bodily integrity, rights of sex workers, the current environment doesn't have a lot of spaces that you would engage policy makers maybe on such, but that said, I also feel like historically [that particular organisation] has taken hard stands on issues like weren't exactly in the public narrative and a lot of work was done to bring them into the public narrative, what then I do not understand is why then now that is not happening. (Project staff, 3 November 2018)

Some of the WROs have such a stark reputation that all means of communication are closed as soon as they reveal their organisational affiliation as explicated here: "Advocacy has its own challenges. […] for instance: when going to a government office […] some people would lock the doors and refuse to talk to us the very minute I say I am from […]." (Management Staff, 16 October 2018). As a result, several WROs struggle with the balancing act in their advocacy work and abortion rights clearly highlighted this dilemma. On the one hand, issues of safe abortion presents one of the most urgent challenges faced by numerous girls and women in Kenya, on the other hand, advocating for it would not only lead to social ostracism but also institutional exclusion by those with whom the WROs are expected to work.

Concluding note

In this article, we explored the factors that influence the agenda-setting of WROs for building advocacy for safe abortions in Kenya. The differences at the organisational level along with the existing socio-cultural societal norms that are largely patriarchal in nature makes it politically challenging for the WROs to support safe abortion rights. As a result of these challenges, the WROs who engage in advocacy related to safe abortions are either stigmatised and therefore find it very difficult to sustain local partnerships especially within the government sector, or they do so in the guise of reproductive health, which does not have a feminist approach and is therefore limited in its reach. The empirical research highlights how the process of the depoliticisation of the women's rights movement has influenced their agenda-setting strategies. While this article does not aim to engage in NGO bashing, it also does not present a romanticised notion associated with NGOs. In contrast, efforts are made to seek a plural understanding of the agenda-building strategies of WROs through the constraints within which they function. In understanding these constraints, this article shows that WROs' position in this power-play leaves them little choice other than not to put it on the agenda. It is beyond doubt that WROs have come a long way in Kenya – from having limited or no voice to having strong representation on local, national, and international scales. What was not even imaginable two decades back is an achievable reality today, so the efforts of the activists cannot be questioned. With shrinking civic space, several WROs commonly struggle to ensure organisational sustainability in the environment of short-term funding, which is often indirect, and as a result, they end-up aligning with the donor-led agendas in contrast to their own organisational values or local needs, including advocacy for safe abortion rights. The need for professionalisation has led to a class bias towards educated, middle- and upper-middle class women as advocates and the existing abortion legislation disproportionately impacts women who are oppressed, marginalised, and vulnerable to exploitation; consequently, many WROs in Kenya do not focus on safe abortion rights. Therefore, concerted efforts are needed towards the "repoliticisation" of the women's rights agenda (Nyambura 2018) by reconstructing a political movement that generates awareness to build a just and equal society.

Using the empirical case of Kenya, this research has shown the combination of factors that limits advocacy for safe abortions in Kenya. Additional research on agenda setting by WROs in African nations and other countries of the world would provide a grounded understanding of the topic. We propose three areas where further research is required. First, how does the growth of professionalisation impact the agenda-setting priorities of the CBOs of Kenya? While this research has focused on WROs with head offices in Nairobi, grassroots women groups of Kenya in the form of CBOs have shown great potential and serve as conduits for NGOs located in Nairobi for project implementation. Therefore, further research building on the agenda setting of CBOs working on women's rights concerns would help us understand agenda setting and decision making across scales. Second, more research is needed to develop a pluralistic understanding of WROs that is far from polarised depictions wherein women are either romanticised as "angels" or criticised as "devils". Finally, though this research has provided a critical snapshot of factors impacting the agenda setting of WROs in Kenya, future research should examine the historical shifts in agenda-setting priorities

and factors attributing to the same. This might help us understand dynamically why WROs choose to work in certain sectors and how structural factors related to donors as well as local context impact their choices.

Note

1. For details about the NWO-WOTRO research project that supported the research presented in this article, please see – https://includeplatform.net/new-roles-csos-inclusive-development/enabling-rules-advocacy-kenya/.

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