Abstract

The purpose of this project is to explore older Kenyan women’s resilience and adaptive strategies as a function of rapid socioeconomic, urbanization, modernization and cultural changes that are happening in their country. Socio-cultural and public policies have evolved greatly throughout the last decade in Kenya and this has produced lifestyle shifts. Most significant for this project is the change in status for older African women in relation to other individuals in the rural communities in which most of them dwell. This project focuses on Kenya’s older women living in the rural areas and draws heavily on the life styles of Kikuyu ethnic group for some specific examples of how public policies affect individuals in these rural settings. The general premise is that older women lose their status as societies become more industrialized. At the same time, demographic changes and medical advancements have seen women living longer and healthier than in any previous times in history. Because of this kind of longevity and changing family structures, both the older women and the society need to make some readjustments to accommodate these changes. To facilitate those readjustments, it is important to recognize the conflicting and often ageist ideas in Kenyan society about old age, and the self-concepts of older women, which tends to be more positive than the society’s view of them. Therefore, it is in order that older women’s voices should be featured in the debate about socio-cultural changes affecting their quality of life. Major theories of aging and feminism operate at both micro and macro-levels of the society. What they overlook is how older individuals, especially women, remain active and involved. Both sociologist and economists have established that women in the developing world are relegated to lower economic and social status. I suggest that in order overcome that lower status; Kenyan traditional customs and official policies need to change so that older women are permitted control of land and other productive resources.
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Introduction

I take an economic standpoint in saying that the control of relevant resources, both social and economic, and the capacity to take initiative together with the knowledge to decide when they are necessary, is fundamental in defining female autonomy. I use autonomy to refer to freedom of expression and economic independence. Oboler (1985) stated that it is logical for women in certain communities to have very little power yet have great deal of autonomy. High level of female autonomy does not mean that men’s power over women is restricted or eliminated. At the same time, some examples will show that older women and widows could potentially be free to assume economic rights that closely approach those of men (Oboler, 1985; 271).

In this project, autonomy is determined by the following four measures established by Ember and colleagues (2003): (a) material control, (b) demand for female produce outside the household, (c) political participation, and (d) group involvement and strength. Conwall (2005) emphasized that political and associational autonomy are important for women’s expression and exercise of rights. It is also worth noting that the life experiences of African women are quite diverse depending on their age, ethnicity, social class, religious and cultural beliefs, education, and geographic locations. Therefore, in as much as the ideas presented below might apply to many different groups and individuals, the main focus of this project is mainly on rural, older Kenyan women but draws heavily on examples from the Kikuyu ethnic group.

It has been a common theme for Western scholars to say that people, in this case women, in Sub-Saharan Africa live in harsh and unforgiving circumstances. However, some native African scholars have come out strongly in the defense of their people, claiming that such
generalizations reflect a Western bias. Yet another wing of progressive scholars argues that “context” and culture should not be an excuse for practices that clearly undermine humanity and the quality of life. My project stands in the middle of this debate by arguing that neither side completely right: some practices maintain desirable traditions of African culture, some tradition and cultural practices of Africa are flavorful and should be retained while others are detrimental to the cohesiveness of the ethnic communities. I agree with Robin Morgan (1996) that “the heavy fabric suffocating women is woven so tightly from many strands that it is impossible to examine one without encountering those intertwined with it” (p. 8). I believe that this is the mistake that most scholars, especially Western ones, make when they single out one practice or cultural belief without factoring in the contextual perspectives in which it is embedded. Patricia Hill Collin’s (2000) concept of intersectionality in relation to Black feminist philosophy can be adapted into the case of older Kenyan women. She argues that there are many factors that intertwine to define the identity and status of Black women in the United States. Similarly, changing policies, customary laws and personal traits define Kenyan women’s identity in terms of their roles as women, wives, grandmothers, caregivers, economic producers, and the second sex in a chiefly patriarchal society.

At 224,961 square miles, Kenya is approximately the size of France (212,000 square miles) or, similar in the United States to Lake Michigan and the surrounding Midwest states of Wisconsin, Illinois, Indiana, and Michigan (Sobania, 2003). However, only 14% of this land is arable and important for the country’s economy which is largely based on agriculture. Major agricultural products, constituting for 65% of all export earnings (Sobania, 2003), include crops such as tea, coffee, sisal, flowers, pineapples, and cashewnuts. Kenya is also famous for its game parks, which attract large numbers of tourists and is a major source of pictures, documentaries,
and movies used in international media houses like the BBC and CNN. The land can be divided into three belts, the savannah, the central highlands, and the Indian Ocean coast which support different agricultural and social interactions. The highlands support cash crop production, especially coffee and tea while the coast attracts tourists as well as sustaining sisal and cashew production. The savannah houses all the national parks and game reserves. The 42 ethnic groups in Kenya are found in different parts of the country as well. Hunting and herding nilotic groups like the Maasai live in the savannah, while the Kikuyu and the Swahili speakers dwell in the central highlands and the coast respectively. Even though the cities have mixed ethnic demographics, the other groups are found in specific parts of the countryside.

“Kenya, a country in the midst of a rapid transition from a rural traditional way of life to a modern urbanized one, affords an opportunity for the study of the roles and status of older women in a changing society” (Friedman et al., 1994). The demographic compositions of the nation and that of the Kikuyu show that there are more young people than there are older ones. Recently however, with decreased fertility and better health care, people are living longer in the Kenya and on continent of Africa in general. In 2001 a UN report estimated that 30 million adults over the age of 60 live in Sub-Saharan Africa and that the number is expected to double by 2025. However, Zimmer and Dayton (2005) state that most African countries (like Kenya) economic developments and other advancements projects are geared towards younger cohorts because the majority of their citizens are young.

Kikuyu people constitute Kenya’s largest and most prominent minority of the 42 ethnic tribes; they constitute 22% of the country’s total population. This Bantu ethnic group is mainly situated in the Central Province of Kenya around Mounts Kenya and Aberdare on Kenya’s fertile
highlands. Agriculture and animal husbandry are the traditional economic activities for the Kikuyu people. Women play a more important role in the production and processing of agricultural products, especially in the wake of male-migration into urban centers for jobs. Alongside this productive role; older women are identified by their roles as mothers, grandmothers, caregivers, reproducers, and role models to younger cohorts. Kikuyu’s have a strong sense of family and kinship ties even though geographic relocation and other modernization effects are jeopardizing these values. These ties are made even stronger by the traditional practices of filial piety and strong religious beliefs of the Kikuyu community. At the same time, however, customary laws followed by the Kikuyu people tend to discriminate against women. Most of these laws impinge on older women’s rights to acquire and own property as well as their economic security.

Many anthropologists and sociologists have also determined that older Kenyan women, like many other women of Africa, want better healthcare, contraception, quality of life, education and higher income. To achieve these goals, older Kenyan women have opted to different strategies and initiatives which seek to change or enhance their status and quality of life (Davies et al., 1986). It is impossible to investigate the lives of older women without considering other cohorts and individuals who interact with them. In order to do so, this project describes the changes in the lives of older women in relation to their roles, positions, and responsibilities within the community and the family. Chapter one introduces the major concepts and theories employed throughout this project. Some of them are applied from several disciplines by virtue of being closely related to the issue at hand, the lives of older Kenyan women. Chapter two highlights the roles and status of older Kenyan women in their community while chapters three and four address economic and adaptive strategies, and reproduction respectively. The last
chapter talks of the fostering responsibilities of older Kenyan women as well as widowhood as one of the stages that many older women experience in their life time. I have made the following assumptions and generalizations in respect to the population investigated; that the older Kenyan women in this project:

- have low economic status
- dwell in rural areas of central Kenya
- get limited help or no help at all from their husbands
- are uneducated
- are married with children and grandchildren
- are above the age of 55

Impact of change on older adults is valued and depends on gender, class, chronological factors, social organization of the local community and how the nation’s political economy transfers modernity changes in a region. Also, it is important to note how different groups are defined and the factors that influence resource distribution. Local control over vital economic resources can become the catalyst for very traditional systems to initiate modernizing changes in ways that support the interests of their oldest citizens. However, the general trend is that the situation of elders will be determined by their use-value. Chapter 1 introduces theories, concepts, conceptualizations, and stereotypes about older Kenyan women that appear in not only African studies but also feminist and gerontological literature. These definitions include both universally accepted theories as well as localized perceptions of age and ageing.
Chapter 1

Discussion of Concepts and Theories

This chapter includes a discussion of major concepts and the theories that inform my project. In the beginning of the chapter is the concept of ageing. Some examples of the theories used in this work include: modernization, disengagement and activity theories. I also draw the connections between these theories and the idea of ageing in the rapidly changing environment of Kenya. Also I include an extensive description of what it means to age in Kenya with respect to family and public values. This chapter also defines feminism and how it is used in the rest of my project. But as Temple (1997) argues, there are many different varieties of feminism and many ways of being feminist. As such this work focuses on a kind of feminism that is defined by personal experiences of Kenyan women as they relate to their environments. This portion includes feminist theories that are most pertinent to the issue of aging and the experiences that accompany it. I include feminist stand points not only because of subject matter but because it has been established that feminist theories like eco-feminism inform social work research on ageing (Bengtson et al., 2008). In this context, I propose that it is important to look at older women using feminist perspectives because they form the biggest percentage of the older population; it follows that issues facing older people are also women’s issues.

Conceptualizing Old Age

In many people’s minds the term ageing is synonymous with great advancements in age; some equate it to life after retirement while others think of it as a time period that individuals’
bodies undergo major physical and psychological changes. The gerontological discourse has focused on defining ageing as a decline in functions among middle-aged and older persons. There are a myriad ways of describing the age of a person, let alone the term “ageing.” The most commonly used definition of ageing is based on chronological age and refers to an individual’s life span from birth. On the other hand, some people refer to ageing as a stage of human development. It is possible that as varied as definitions of ageing are, so are its theories.

Traditional functional definitions have included biological, physiological and cognitive changes that cause impairments. Miller (2008) observes that lay people and gerontologists look at ageing from many perspectives, some objective and others subjective. She goes on to say that objectively, ageing applies equally to everyone in reference to their date of birth. On the other hand, subjectively, ageing is usually associated with being a member of the older adulthood and defined in terms of personal experience and meaning. In the context of African countries and other Third World countries, elders have been regarded as revered for their wisdom and cultural proficiency (Williams, 2003).

This chapter does not dispute any of these claims or generalizations but rather puts all of them in context by focusing on concepts of ageing appropriate to Kenyan women. Furthermore, this portion includes the often disregarded perspective of how the elderly describe themselves and their experiences. I align my arguments to Oberg (2004) who points that social ageing, and social age in particular, may be considered an attempt to gain an “understanding of a social and cultural phenomenon which applies to all age groups and life phases” (p.68). Social age refers to how people are supposed to behave at a certain chronological age as expected by the society (Stuart-Hamilton, 2000). In this way of looking at ageing, threshold ages like 55 and 65 in some countries are fundamental tools of measuring ageing as well as setting policies that apply to
ageing such as retirement. Therefore, in this chapter, social age refers to the roles and functions of older Kenyan women within not only their families and immediate society but also the nation. Stuart-Hamilton (2000, p. 20) adds another method of measuring ageing commonly used by gerontologists and anthropologists. He points out that some scholars use terms like primary, secondary and even tertiary ageing in defining the ageing process. In this kind of categorization, primary ageing captures the changes that occur to the body while secondary ageing includes changes which have higher frequency but do not have to occur in an individual’s life. Lastly, tertiary stage of ageing accounts for the rapid and marked physical deterioration just before death.

In this project, I use the term “ageing” to refer to a process that includes the passing of time that is closely related to other physical, psychological and social changes that influence people’s lives. To begin with, physical ageing is the easiest effect to perceive due to the changes that take place in and on the body of an elderly person. With time, the human body undergoes specific physical changes such as wrinkling skin, gray hair, decreased reproductive capacity, changing bone density, immune system response and cardiovascular functioning (Morgan & Kunkel, 2007). However, there is controversy as to whether these changes are natural changes that are inevitable and permanent. There is evidence of considerable diversity within the ageing population as well as in the changes that they experience. At the same time, even though many researchers have considered its starting point to be middle-age, Harbert & Ginsberg (1990) warn that there is no distinct age that marks the start of physical ageing.

Instead, some researchers point to physical aging from conception on and consider it to be distinct from chronological age. In the same vein, causes of these physical changes have been greatly debated. For instance, biologists have pointed out that wrinkles in old age are as a result
of lost connective tissue, and that the rate of deterioration is affected by life-style and cultural differences. However, wrinkling of the skin as seen in old age can be “accelerated and accentuated by sun exposure and by smoking” (Morgan & Kunkel, 2007). At the same time, we can all think of older people who have undergone these changes at slower rates or forgone them all together. One way of explaining these differences links experiences of later life to earlier lifestyle choices. Connidis (2009) calls this linkage the “life-course” perspective, which relies on personal biography and “puts current circumstances into context and improves our understanding of them” (p. 16). According to the life-course perspective, physical ageing is a process that starts at birth and ends at death. At the same time, it accounts for the physical changes that are seen over a period of time in an individual’s life trajectory.

However, since it has been mentioned that there is great variety in individual changes, Rowe and Kahn (1998) developed the concept of successful ageing, which draws distinctions between usual, optimal and pathological ageing. This concept has been important for researchers who seek to establish the differences between pathological and normal physical changes that accompany ageing. Physical ageing is further divided into optimal, usual, and pathological trajectories, with optimal ageing the most successful (Morgan & Kunkel, 2007; Claire & Woods, 2008). Otherwise, usual changes account for the physical changes that occur consistently across the board; on the other hand, pathological changes are characterized by illnesses and harsh environmental conditions (Shephard, 1987). Many theories have been proposed in a bid to explain the physical changes linked to age. My work resonates with the wear and tear theory of physical ageing developed by Kart (1985) who proposed that, with time, the human body undergoes natural changes that reduce vitality, energy and activity. This idea speaks to the low energy levels of the older women in Kenya in relation to the quantity of work that they have to
do within their families. I maintain that their lower energy levels do not match up with their labor-intensive roles within the society. It has also been observed that there is a higher occurrence in Kenya, and other developing nations, of debilitating diseases and conditions with age. In a 2008 report on health and health perception among Kenyan grandparents Ice et al. (2008) concluded that compared to the US and European elders (in this case, from the Luo ethnic group) of Kenya were more likely to be undernourished, have high blood pressure and anemic conditions.

Other than physical ageing, older adults experience progressive psychological changes which affect their personal traits and social interactions throughout the life-course. Many scholars have put in a lot of work in the field of geropsychology but Erik Erikson (1982) was the most influential. Erikson (1982) posited that psychological changes over the life-course occurred naturally over time. Both Butler (1974) and Erikson (1982) suggested that each stage of life has its own purpose and a psychological challenge to be overcome. Simone de Beauvoir (1996) offers a philosopher’s view in The Coming of Age which rejects postulated images of old age of tranquility and withdrawal. Like Erikson (1982) de Beauvoir said that new goals, whether in old age or at any other time, give our lives meaning. These authors also agree that development and growth continue throughout the life-course.

Psychological ageing focuses on variance in personality, mental functioning and the sense of self during adult years. Older adults across cultures exhibit similar character traits that are linked to their stage of development, hence the treatment of old age as a separate category in human development (Butler, 1974). Personality traits are an inevitable part of the discussions on ageing because human development in later years focuses on personal development and individual contributions to the environment (Thomas, 2004). Personal traits, self-concept and self
esteem have been observed to remain fairly constant throughout people’s lives. However, some research findings have pointed to new ways of interaction on the part of older individuals. These changes, beyond stability and continuity, are attributed to older people’s advanced ages and experience levels (Lachman, 1989). “Sageing” is one of the concepts developed by Schacter-Shalomi and Miller (1997). It proposes that older people undergo important spiritual transformations which change their morality and relationships, and introduces the urge to pass wisdom to future generations. Older adults in Kenya have shown higher rates of religiosity in their later years than younger ones (Kilbride, 1989). Their character change could be attributed to religious teachings that preach moral uprightness or their realization of impending death. As people age, they also tend to move their focus away from materialism and rash actions to more holistic views (Tornstam, 2005). Moreover, Erik Erikson (1950) developed the concept of generativity which is pivotal in this discussion. It denotes the tendency of older people to develop, guide and establish future generations through transfer of experience with age. In one sense, researchers and other scholars’ ideas converge on the point that there are distinct characteristics that older people of all cultures develop as they mature and grow older. However, there are clear distinctions and differences amongst cohorts due to varying environmental factors. These differences can be explained by the concepts as well as perspectives provided by the study of social ageing.

Social ageing combines both cultural and structural perspectives in the discussion on ageing. This category is the most favored by social gerontologists because it includes relative differences between different cultures of the world as well as social structures that define roles and expectations for individuals of all ages. People make individual choices that are largely dictated by cultural institutions providing stages for interaction and discourses of meaning. Age
is an important aspect of social administration because of the social meanings, structures, and processes attached to it. Chronological age is used in most societies to categorize and allocate resource; for example, 65 is used as the cut off age for old age and retirement benefits in America. Chadha and Willigen (1999) said that social ageing includes life-course processes in the content, amount and the meaning of an individuals’ social behavior induced by their adaptive decisions within the structural context of the societies within which they live (p.3). On the other hand Behura and Mohanty (2005) define social ageing as a process through which individuals receive superior knowledge and take up roles that are linked to a given age-status in the society (p.6). In as much as people make individual choices, they do so in predefined roles and prevailing social practices. In effect, as individuals move from one age group to the next, they acquire new roles and expectations in accordance to existing cultural practices. For example, Nana Apt (2004), of HelpAge International, and Caroline van Dullemen (2006) have shown through research that African grandparents (especially females) have teamed up to find economic avenues to support their grandchildren left behind by their parents either because of death or emigration into urban centers.

This definition of ageing is largely constructed by the society just as physical and psychological ageing are. All physical changes and psychological changes would not be important if the society did not define those characteristics as meaningful (Morgan & Kunkel, 2007). Since these changes occur within the society, it is safe to conclude that social ageing shapes and is shaped by history. In terms of historic context, social relationships and social ageing reflect political economic structures within which people’s lives and their societies exist. This goes to the heart of my discussion because Kenya’s public policies on health, education and other sectors affect the lives of older women and their families along with different ethnic
customs and norms. I concur with Behura and Mohanty (2005) who point that age-related expectations, roles, and privileges are defined by the society (p.6). However, even as society has set norms for its members, people’s social lives are products of individual agency and pressure from social expectations. These choices occur in the entrance to and the exit from major from major arenas of social interaction in life like marriage, work, parenting and social organization (Bengton, 1973). The social structures for most societies, including Kenya, have institutions of education, work, marriage and retirement which segregate people through their different maturation requirements. Along the same lines, individuals interact with other members of the society who are faced by similar structural challenges, or sometimes similar social factors. Social ageing explains not only the changes in a person’s relationship with other members of the society from all age groups but also the profound effects on the opportunities available for the individual in the social world (Chadha & Willigen, 1999; Morgan & Kunkel, 2007). It has also been observed by sociologists that these age-linked changes could be a result of pressure exerted by the social clock (Fry, 1990). The social clock dictates what we can do, how we should behave and what we should do at different ages as per the expectations of the society; in a sense these are the unwritten codes of conduct and expected social norms that “bind” individuals to certain forms of behavior.

All the above definitions of ageing are mutually connected in their definitions and concepts. They are representations of people’s lives within socially constructed norms and regulations. Within the dominant life course perspective, scholars categorize individuals’ lives within socially constructed, culturally and historically specific sequence of platforms. Morgan and Kunkel (2007) stated that these platforms are often connected with social roles that individuals are expected to live through as they mature and grow older. The age-related changes
described above, and many more, occur within social environments that vary according to different localities in the world. Human beings take on the particular character of their social environment through the process of socialization (Abeles & Schaie, 2008). The same kind of person-environment interaction takes place between Kenyan communities and their older population of women; patterns of social and physical as well as psychological ageing are influenced by context. The routines that surround individuals as they grow are pivotal in determining interactions with other people as well as their character traits at the micro-level of analysis. However, some scholars have rightfully showed that physical, psychological and social definitions of ageing have their shortfalls. Oberg (2004) warned that the repercussion of conceptualizing ageing in terms of biological or psychological decline may be that gerontological research becomes focused on ageing as a problem, for example, to health. However, perspectives and issues other than those of gerontology can be revealed by conceptualizing age and ageing in terms of biographical time (captured by the life-course perspective) and its relation to historical time. Other than this holistic view perspective of research, Tanner and Harris (2007) agreed with the claim that biological ageing is influenced by social and economic conditions of their environment.

Other categories of ageing that could also be discussed as separate entities or as subcategories of ageing are chronological and functional ageing. Most researchers have used these two aspects of the ageing discussion to categorize the older people. While some like Birren and Renner (1977) defined ageing in term of chronological ageing when they proposed that ageing is the result of the changes that occur in mature genetically-representative beings as they advance in age. Chronological age is probably by far the most popular and at the same time universal means of categorizing people. Some social gerontologists have used chronological age
as a variable in their research under the assumption that it is objective (Infeld, 2002). But I discuss at the end of this section that some critics have found this assumption wanting because it does not factor in the diversity of the aged populations as well as their environments. Within the social structure, common phrases like “act your age” are a common reminder that there are expected behaviors that go along with a given age group or stage. Such behavioral norms are synchronized with the social clock that informally alerts people to their responsibilities not only as a member not only of a given age group but also of the community. Infeld (2002) extends this line of argument by suggesting that “culturally defined traits linked to particular chronological ages and articulated as norms and articulated as norms regulations are used to assign people to age categories and to guide behavior” (p. 139).

Basically, we all share the same social timing to such an extent that people identify themselves, partly, using their chronological age. Any kind of variance from the normal timing of social events in people’s lives is typically seen as off-beat. For example, a thirteen year old boy claiming to be retired could easily be disregarded as a joker or a hundred year old grandfather attending kindergarten branded “creepy” or seriously senile. The kind of age stratification which allocated certain roles and regulations to each age group emphasizes that people’s position in the age structure affects their behavior and attitude within their environment (Moody, 2007). As such, chronological ages are structural markers for schooling, retirement, marriage and expected first-time-parenthood. At the same time, both Moody (2007) and Saxena (2006) agree with other social gerontologists and ageing researchers in their claims that with chronological age human organs and psychological make up undergo not only structural but also functional decline. On the same note, psychologist have established that generally crystallized intelligence, reflecting accumulated knowledge and the effects of socialization, increases with
chronological age (Cattell, 1963). It is important to note, however, that such changes do not occur at the same rate for the highly heterogeneous aged community; people of the same chronological age tend to differ greatly in the rating of their biomarkers. In a myriad of ways, our conditions of living like social class, formal education, and work experiences are also affected by and determined by an individual’s age (Moody, 2007).

However, times are changing. The lines between retirement and employment are blurry: some women have opted to have children in their late 40s, challenging, for example, the strict linkage between education and strict chronological age. Chronologically-based age categorization has been rejected by most scholars for a variety of reasons. The most obvious of all being that chronological age is meaningless in a situation where people of different ages are being compared (Jewell, 2004); cohort and period effects are employed as variables in such cases. It also goes without saying that there are no standard bio-cultural, physiological, or even physical pointers that separately or collectively can define a particular chronological age uniformly. This suggests how many differences exist on local, let alone international, levels in how people undergo the ageing process. Other critics have disregarded chronological ageing on the premise that it applies only to those older adults who depend on government-run programs and health services (Moody, 2007) or NGO initiatives. In the case of Kenya, this statement holds true for a very small portion of older individuals and even fewer women. The government has retirement benefits just for civil servants, who are predominantly male. Kenya’s retirement age is 55 for most workers, which is ten years lower than the US 65 cut off. Yoshiro and Hurd (1997) disagree with this conventional definition of older individuals— which fixes the “cutoff age” between the unproductive elderly and productive non-elderly at 55, or 65 in the case of America— as misleading because it postulates that the labor force contribution of older people declines
irrespective of other factors. In the same vein, Robert Kastenbaum posited in *Growing Old: Years of Fulfillment* that using rigid terms like the cut off sixty-five is problematic partly because “there is no sharp drop off in either physical or psychological functioning at or around age sixty-five” (p. 8).

In summation, Infeld (2002) introduced three basic critics that I would like to highlight in this work since all the discussions hereafter are influenced by age among other factors. First, as I have noted above, an emphasis on chronological ageing overlooks personal differences in development. Secondly, age is just a relative or relational term used to compare different people within a community as a way of maintaining order and traditions. Finally, I agree with the claim that chronological age is meaningless unless there is substantial knowledge of the particular culture in question and its cultural meanings (p. 330). On the flip side, chronological age has been an important variable in research because it is easy to measure, objectify and universalize. Also, administrative as well as cultural spheres employ chronological gauges in the allocation of resources and other structural procedures.

On the other hand, functional age is another commonly used category in the study of the ageing population. Typically, it is defined in terms of the ability of individuals to adapt to their immediate environment and is typically measured by evaluating how well they take care of themselves and carry out usual roles in the society. Individual’s functional ability can only be measured relative to that of most people within their age group, and gender for that matter (Jones & Rose, 2005). Like all other factors and variables in social-gerontology, there is great variability in functional ability as people age. For instance, a 75 year old Kenyan might have the capacity to carry the same amount of firewood as another woman of 65 years. It therefore follows that the functional age of the latter woman in regards to carrying firewood would be 65 if
all factors remained constant. In similar situations, a different 75 year old might not have the ability to carry a similar load of firewood. Unlike chronological age which focuses on people’s years, functional age focuses on whether individuals can contribute to the society for the benefit of themselves and others. And in terms of care-giving, it provides a more holistic perspective on a rational basis for care than a mere measure of how many years have passed since a person was born. Moreover, the definition of functional age varies according to cultural differences and preferences; for instance, while self-sufficiency is pivotal in the livelihoods of older people in industrialized nations, contributions of older individuals to social functioning are key in developing nations like Kenya (Miller, 2009). Functional means of categorization have also been used in the realm of policy and programs to target some groups on the basis of their needs rather than their ages (Morgan & Kunkel, 2007). I concur with these authors by suggesting that there are many older people in Kenya who fall below the social or formal cut off point for old age but need as much help as the people who are “officially” old. Identifying people like these calls for measures of functional status such as Activities of Daily Living (ADLs) by governmental programs. ADLs measure older people’s ability to execute without any help, personal activities like eating, bathing, dressing and using the bathroom (Jones & Rose 2005).

Therefore, functional definition of ageing is a way to move beyond generalizing chronological age as a ticket for getting services and or resources though it is a more complicated screen to grant access to programs and services in public and social sectors (Morgan & Kunkel, 2007). The strength of this kind of definition lies in its ability to assess a person’s capacity to fulfill self-care tasks and responsibilities. Jones and Rose (2005) also add that impairments have a direct influence on older people’s functional capabilities and such functional limitations lead to disability. This category of ageing suggests that functional independence and competence are
key ingredients in determining the well being of older people. Functionally independent elders do not require intense care-giving; thus there is less psychological, physical, and or economic stress to their next of kin. Functional competence determines a person’s social life such as the ability to visit friends and family as well as carry out roles in the social structure (Jones & Rose 2005). Also, as suggested by Kastenbaum (1979), “three types of functional ageing can be recognized, biological, psychological, and social. An individual could be given functional ages in these spheres, as well as a composite, overall functional age. The more these three dimensions of an individual’s functioning allow him to adapt successfully, the less old he is” (p. 13). Therefore, my work does not depict age in simple chronological terms, but as a complex phenomenological entity.

**Theories of Ageing**

Many theories have been developed to explain the processes and patterns of ageing. All theorists develop their work within given categories according to their professions and areas of research. Naturally, biological aspects of ageing have been put in the forefront in defining ageing of the body as the factor that most greatly affects becoming old as well as the meaning of being old. Other theorists that base their work on cultural, social, economic and psychological perspectives have raised questions about the primacy of biology in the theoretical field. Such theorists introduce arguments which provide alternatives to biological ageing and include environmental factors and their influences to the argument. For example, as negative as it might sound, some economists have pointed that old age is quite an important stage as it produces sickness, and around sickness is a slew of thriving businesses (Cruikshank, 2003). I seek to combine as many perspectives as possible in categorizing some of the theories since it is vital to
look at ageing in Kenya from a holistic point of view. The nature of this project will not allow me to go into detail about biological theories, however. Instead, the four theories that inform my work could be classified as cultural, psychological, historical, social or even economic. In *Aged by Culture*, Gullette (2004) also emphasized that it is of utmost importance to include cultural considerations as well as chronological ages when examining the ageing process (p. 181).

However, the bio-psychological perspective captures the holistic nature of ageing according to Jackson and associates. In “A Cultural Lens on Biopsychological Models of Ageing,” these authors point that “the biopsychological model is especially useful in capturing…the environmental, social, and psychological complexity of human organism” (p. 221).

One of the most important but controversial theories is that of disengagement developed by Cumming and Henry (1961). Their theory states that there is a time in older people’s lives when there is a mutual withdrawal from the society which is also willing to relieve these individuals of their age, economic and social roles. Theorists who employ this assumption suggest that there is an unavoidable decrease in interaction between the ageing person and others in the social system. Ebersole and friends (2004) suggest that disengagement theory ushers in a new mutually acceptable optimum relationship established between the elderly and the society whereby individuals are more distant than they previously were in middle adulthood (p. 45). At the same time, it has been explained that this theory postulates that older individuals disengage naturally to prepare psychologically for the inevitability of death. Silverman (1987) suggests that as individuals withdraw to “contemplate” their deaths, the society prepares to fill the void with incumbent youngsters. The strengths of this theory lie in the observation across cultures that older people withdraw from active roles and responsibilities within the society. However variations exist cross culturally in the timing and style of disengagement as in the example of
retirement ages. Again, disengagement theory is reasonable because it ensures the continuity of social institutions as well as the life cycle. It has been argued that with the absence of older adults from active social scenes, younger people infiltrate to replace the elderly people who fade off as they prepare to die (the last stage in the cycle of life). Life stage theorists claim that when older individuals disengage, they allow for upward pushes that are needed for graduates of middle adulthood and the cycle continues to children (Ebersole et al., 2004). The need for disengagement is measured in terms of age, work, and decreased interest in societal obligations. However, this aspect of disengagement theory and others have been criticized by scholars on varying grounds. For example as we have established above, it is hard to measure and establish precisely not only what older people disengage from but also the age at which they do so (Kastenbaum, 1979). Furthermore, the idea that the society allows elderly individuals to disengage because they are replaceable, demeans adults as dispensable commodities. Moody (2006) observed that disengagement theory has also been criticized as reflective of changes that happened in the 1950s and unrepresentative of what is happening in developed nations currently; however, I maintain that this theory still holds in part for nations like Kenya.

Another theory that is closely related to disengagement theory is Cowgill and Holmes’ (1972) modernization theory. This theory states that as societies industrialize or industrialize, older people lose their status. With industrialization comes sophistication and complexities which nullify the experience of individuals who belong to older generations (Thorson, 2000). This is to say that, as societies become more modern, elders are less important. The other side of this theory posits that in traditional agrarian societies the aged tend to retain their status of serving as elders in their communities. Thorson continues to with the suggestion that elders’ high status tends to be associated with the agrarian nature of developing societies; these economies
depend on the traditional knowledge and land ownership of the surviving older individuals. All
the premises of disengagement theory can be seen from the following four factors inferred from

1. Advanced medical and health technology have led to people living longer than they used
to. The result of this is that elderly people have the capacity to live longer with more
physical and psychological strength than before. Unfortunately, when the growing
population of older adults conflicts with younger cohorts within the social spheres like
the labor force, the older people are forced by the system to disengage to create room for
“more” productive youngsters.

2. Growing economies have seen to the rise of new jobs which are filled by younger people
in the society. The technological requirements make the skills and experiences of the
older population obsolete.

3. Urbanization or the creation of towns in many cultures has led to the flight of younger
people into the cities, leaving elderly people to the labor intensive chores of the country
side. Increasingly, younger people with better education disregard their older relatives
and homes with their “archaic” and “unpleasant” conditions. It is also a general
assumption that jobs pay better in the cities.

4. Also, mass education is geared more towards contemporary younger populations. The
skills presented are either irrelevant or unavailable to the older individuals.

Even though some aspects of these factors hold true, criticisms have challenged the credibility of
modernization theory. To begin with, Cowgill (2002) discredited the claim that older people are
respected unconditionally among developing communities. This conclusion was reached after he
studied the least developed communities in Africa, the Khoikhoi hunters and gatherers of South
Africa. Anthropologist Cowgill deduced that the respected elder is a western assumption that ignores complex familial relations within specific localities. At the same time, it is uncommon that all older people decide to leave their jobs and roles at the same time. Moreover, modernization theory puts too much emphasis on the social structure at the expense of the diversity that exists amongst older individuals (Miller, 2008).

Activity and continuity theories are closely related and propose different perspectives than modernization and disengagement theories. Activity theory calls for regular actions on the part of older individuals as well as communal pursuit for their satisfaction. As suggested by Moody (2009) in *Ageing: Concepts and Controversies* “activity theory suggests that older people will find substitutes for earlier roles or activities that had been given up” (p.11). According to this theory, older adults reinforce their self-concept by getting involved in social life. Morgan and Kunkel agree “that individuals, in order to age well, must maintain social roles and interaction rather than disengage from social life” (p.179). For instance, residents of nursing homes who indulge in average formalized activities in nursing homes tend to have higher self-concepts than their counterparts in the general population (Longino, 1980). Psychologists have also suggested that what we think of ourselves is based on the roles of the activities in which we engage (Moody, 2009). In essence, many older individuals continue with the roles and life activities established earlier because they continue to have the same needs later in life. This statement hold true for continuity theory as suggested by Havighurst and colleagues in 1968. This theory connects successful ageing and activity to the expression or application of personal traits by individuals within the ageing population. There is enough evidence to prove that people’s personalities tend to remain constant and become more pronounced with age. Theorists believe that there is a direct co-relationship between personality (and consequently role activity)
and successful ageing (Miller, 2009). This theory also suggests that people’s success in old age can be predicted by the characteristic coping strategies that they develop long before old age. Thus, people will behave in relation to how they have adapted and adjusted to challenges and changes throughout life. However, Hendricks and Hatch (2006) suggest that even though personality traits tend to remain stable over time, some changes occur during middle and later stages of adulthood. An even more agreeable argument was developed by Mroczek and colleagues (2006) who propose that personalities of people are stable while other traits are not. Nevertheless, Moody wraps it up by suggesting that “both activity and continuity theories maintain that the decreases in social interaction are explained better by poor health or disability than by the functional need of the society to disengage” (p.45).

**Defining Feminism and Femininities**

In my academic life I am yet to come across an issue or concept as contested and re-defined as that of feminism(s). Almost all feminist scholars have their own definitions that suit their interests in research. Feminist perspectives introduce issues of gender and male hegemony to the discussion of ageing. For instance, social-feminist theories emphasize the importance of materialism as a fundamental form of male dominion (Infeld, 2002). Other concepts addressed by feminism include gender stratification, power structure and social institutions that define the lives of older women at a macro-level. On the other hand, some micro-level concepts of feminism used here are social expectations, personal identity and family relations with respect to the status of women.

As we will soon become apparent, intercultural differences have cause ripples within the feminist movement due to differences in ideas and focus among various groups of women.
around the world. For instance, Mikell (1997) indicated that in defining “feminism” the issue of independence has caused considerable friction between African and Western feminists especially over the sensitive topic of clitorectomy (p. 4). Yet other theorists have criticized the focus on the word “feminism” by claiming that it was unknown to most of the pioneers of the women’s movement, and still remains unknown to other activists in communities that lack the literal definition of the word. The overarching idea in the opposing and sometimes divergent views is that women are oppressed by different structures in society and it is high time justice is executed. As summarized by Baber and Allen (1992) in *Women and families: Feminist reconstructions*, “the bottom line of feminism is that women’s oppression as a group exists, and efforts to improve the world for women have relied on solidarity, shared values, and common goals among women” (p.11).

In the words of Disch (1997), feminism is the radical notion that women are humans. Feminism has therefore been used within different contexts, including academic discourses, organizational ideals, identity (when people refer to themselves as feminists), and within activist movements among others. As such, feminist movements and individuals that are reformists work within existing systems to represent the voices of typically marginalized groups; whereas revolutionaries see to the restructuring of social, economic or political institutions to accommodate marginalized women. All in all, a standard definition of “feminism” is yet to be proposed. However, for Yoder (2003) and for me, “feminism means valuing women and their experiences, a concern for equality of power, the need for change and activism, and the belief that gender is created and defined by our own culture” (p. 4). I also choose to use the plural form of feminism feminisms, because it reflects the multiplicity of ideologies underlying the feminist movement (Lorber, 1994). Naturally, men also come into the picture since one of the
fundamentals of feminism is the emancipation of women from male hegemony. There have been misunderstandings among some feminist activists and others who think that feminism is all about bashing men. On the contrary, I contest this claim by aligning myself to Yoder’s warning, “Feminism isn’t about male bashing; it’s about social justice– something we all have a stake in pursuing” (p.6).

Different environments produce varying experiences for women. It follows therefore that feminist issues, goals, and strategies are developed by different groups of women for their own good. “For instance, many Third World women connect their struggle as women to the struggles of their communities against racism, economic exploitation, and imperialism, whereas Western feminists focus on gender discrimination” (Burn, 2000:1). Some of the obstacles faced by women all across the world include: sexual violence and exploitation, forced marriages and dowry death, physical violence, feminization of poverty, androgyny, and objectification of women across social and customary scenes. Feminist theorists have come up with basic ways to categorize different forms of oppression as experienced by different women. To some, sexual and reproductive oppression is a product of a global system of patriarchal dominion that calls for social changes in social institutions, especially the family (MacKinnon, 1987). Beliefs surrounding marriage and reproduction (at least in the case of Kenyan women) are greatly influenced by religious fundamentalism with its deep misogynous rhetoric. Hartmann (1976) adds that oppression also sets in due to gender division of labor and interaction of gender discrimination with class oppression.

In addition, womanists suggest the influence of race and heterosexuality on the web of oppression. Patricia Hill Collins (2009) documents racism within the feminism discourse whereby black feminists are not acknowledged by their white counterparts and the general
racism that occurs against women of African origin within this country. Nonetheless, my work refers to the kind of racism brought about by colonialism, whose impact is still evident in neo-colonialism. According to Mohanty (2003), women from developing nations are not only fighting against customary oppression, but also the ideals of Western hegemony, capitalism and heterosexual concepts of neo-colonialism. Male hegemony allocates all power, both political and social, and economic control. As articulated by Collins (2009) “intersectional paradigms remind us that oppression cannot be reduced to one fundamental type, and that oppressions work together in producing injustice…Regardless of the particular intersections involved, structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal domains of power reappear across quite different forms of oppression” (p.21).

We have established that oppressions are created by people and rigid structures that favor certain groups over others. The same applies to some of the concepts that define women’s identity within their societies; in this case femininity and gender as a whole. As in the case of feminism, different cultures have a myriad of definitions of femininity as well as masculinity but their themes are very similar. As Lips (1999) noted about inter-cultural definitions of femininity, some of the recurrent themes include: “the cultivation of beauty, restrictions on movements and other freedoms, subservience to husband” (p. 6). The dynamic nature of these cultural expectations coupled with their immense variation from place to place, is evidence enough that femininity is socially constructed. Sociologists suggest that people are socialized into their roles which call for certain types of identity such as, in this case, being female. Psychologists who study gender have come up with the notion of “gender schema” that is a mental framework that stimulates individuals to notice, assess and define themselves in terms of gender (Lips 1999: 94).
**Feminist Theories**

There are numerous types of feminisms within the theoretical feminist literature, the prominent ones being: liberal, socialist, radical, postmodern, integrative, and eco-feminism. In this project I focus on post-modern, integrative (global) and socialist theories of feminism. All feminist ideas and theories stem from these categories. However, for the sake of some of my readers, here are brief definitions of these types as adapted from Kirk and Okazawa-Rey’s (1998) *Women’s Lives: Multicultural Perspectives*. Liberal feminism sees oppression as a result of inequality between men and women. Proponents of this line of thinking also ask that private matters be separated from public issues, like family from politics for example. Second, radical feminists subscribe to the idea that oppression is caused by patriarchy, a system of male authority that subjects women and is manifested in sexuality and personal relationships. Social feminists, on the other hand, explain discrimination against women in terms of their subordinate position in a system defined by both patriarchy and capitalism. Last, ecofeminism compares the dominion of women to that of the environment and argues that dualism is an important factor in determining the existing conception of the other. Loaded in this concept is racism, sexism, colonialism, and examples of vices that thrive on the binary of “us” versus “them.” Most of my work is based on postmodern feminism because it emphasizes the uniqueness of women’s experiences in specific socio-cultural contexts. Greene (1999) recorded that postmodern feminists not only believe in diversity among women, but also view categories such as race, class and gender “are reductive and leading to superficiality in understanding the meaning of human experiences” (p. 365). However, it has been argued by other scholars such as Burgess and colleagues (1999) that postmodern feminism paradigms cause more problems than solutions by accepting the complex diversity among women.
Postmodern feminisms discredit the general assumption of universalism in liberal, radical and social feminisms (Kirk & Okazawa-Rey, 1998) by proclaiming that feminists and their allies do not have to conform to certain definitions used by their counterparts from different cultures (Tong, 1998: 193). Tong suggests that “post feminists invite each woman who reflects on their writings to become the kind of feminist she wants to be. There is no single formula for being a “good feminist.” It has also been pointed out that Simone de Beauvoir’s existentialist philosophies had a great influence on the pioneers of postmodern feminism like Helen Cixuos, Luce Iragaray and Julia Kristeva (Tong, 1998). Postmodernism borrows de Beauvoir’s major central question in her Second Sex– Why is the woman the second sex? The question is however tweaked to include multiple dimensions by asking why woman is the “other” in many social scenarios. In some cases, postmodernist theorists have argued that the outsider’s standpoint could give women the advantageous position of criticizing faulty systems within the society. Otherness is typically used to define “different” people from the subjects in question without taking into account the former’s complex ways of life. However, it is evident from Tong’s work that “otherness,” for all of its associations with oppression and inferiority, is much more than an oppressed, inferior condition. It is also a way of being, thinking, and speaking allowing for openness, plurality, diversity, and difference” (p.195).

Many feminist thinkers from the developing world would subscribe to the deconstruction of universalism and holism when it comes to the definition of feminist movements. Feminism in Africa resonates with postmodern feminism since postmodernists believe that by rejecting holism and universalism, voices of women with different histories, needs and livelihoods can be heard. In this context, postmodernism would categorize African women as the oversimplified “other.” However, as Allen and Baber (1992) warn, “because all women do not share the same
past or the same needs in the present, different women’s conceptions of caregiving, sexuality, work, and other experiences capture different aspects of complex and contradictory social relations” (p. 11-12). It is true that the postmodernists’ emphasis (within feminism spheres) on difference can articulate the specific needs by women by exposing existing significant differences between men and women (Best & Kellner, 1991). Some of these have been economic, political, social, reproductive or religious needs of women as they try to keep afloat in predominantly patriarchal communities. Pivotal to this effort is the movement against oppressive policies and systems that support androgyny at the expense of the “subordinate” woman. There are several propaganda and public policies that need to be ironed out at local levels in order that the world becomes a better place for African women, a struggle that is fueled by postmodernism. As Best and Kellner (1991) put it, “the postmodern emphasis on the multiplicity of power relations entails that struggle must be waged against numerous social sites in the form of micro-politics” (p. 210).

Consequently, new feminisms in Africa have been the direct outcome of women’s agency and reaction against political leaders who infringe on women’s limited resources. This work includes varying aspects that align themselves to postmodernism with respect to the Third World feminism versus Western feminism. For instance, the difference in development of “feminism” has caused tension between African and Western feminists, especially over the issue of clitoridectomy (Mikell, 1997). Finally, critics see the postmodern theory as an impediment to global women’s movements. At the same time, some feminists from the South have disregarded it as another Western invention that is too concerned with Western concerns (Marchand et al., 1995). In addition, the postmodernist idea of relativism has been criticized for allowing too many “culturally” accepted practices that are hurtful to women (Allen & Baber, 1992).
Integrative feminism also captures African women’s lives and struggles by fusing all feminist perspectives. Theorists who employ this perspective in their work integrate values like nurturing, cooperation, connection, love and natural love to the study of feminism and feminist movements. In the case of African women integrative characteristics like mothering, “other mothering” (hooks, 2000), and the sense of community are fundamental in the definition of feminism. The good news is that integrative feminist ideas provide a framework that allows for the values necessary for collaboration. As Maclvor (1996) puts it, integrative feminism “also means bringing together the various strands of women’s activism to create a unified and non-hierarchical approach to social change” (p. 67). Even though this viewpoint has room for radical, socialist, anarchist, as well as lesbian feminists among others, its emphasis is on women’s values rather than communal ones. Integrative feminism works to reconcile such values with theoretical works. I believe that this is the right recipe for grass-root feminist movements in Africa since some of core values within African societies depend upon selfless contributions of individuals.

On the international scene, Todd (1997) said that this kind of feminism is antiracist, interdisciplinary, holistic, cross-cultural, as well as a multicultural pedagogy. The idea here is that women within a given context should develop their own movements relative to their experiences with oppression within male-dominated societies. This is also a call to transform society to be more equitable to all underrepresented and neglected groups, even within feminists’ movements themselves on the grounds that there is a wide variation of experience among women of the world. Advocates of this line of thinking hope that women are conscious of their distinctiveness and strengths as women, leading to cooperation and action on their behalf, and on behalf of other oppressed groups within communities.
Maclvor (1996) also suggested in *Women and Politics in Canada* that integrative feminism makes a broader suggestion that women should reorganize themselves in different ways than men, yet remain equal to them. In a way, this perspective suggests that as women rise to positions of power and control, they should be careful not to form matriarchal structures that look down upon men, but instead strive to build structures that accommodate all genders. This perspective is important in my work because it represents women being as realistic as possible; unlike other views like radical feminism that have provoked a negative impression of women.

Integrative feminism also points out that women, who happen to be wives, sisters, grandmothers and aunts, not only fight for oppressed children and men within their societies but also interact with them. Maclvor (1996) said that “integrative feminism in practice goes beyond the effort to end sexism; women’s sense of social integration leads them to campaign against poverty, racism, and other forms of inequality that affect men and children as well as women” (p. 68). At the same time, however, it has been suggested that integrative feminism is not very different from all the other types of feminist theories. This theory is actually seen as the bridge between theory and practice— it can encompass all feminist theories and practices. There has been a critique of integrative theory that discredits it as being too general and not capturing the complexity and inclusiveness of the world (Sydie, 1994). I see the logic in this argument especially because the theory does not mention much about the complex socio-political structures that influence the livelihoods of women. Another critique of this theory cries for more individuality within the definition of the theory rather than capitalizing on the central belief that women, as a group, have common dialogue and cooperation as a result of shared oppression and interests. This argument calls for the recognition of individual experiences even within different cross-cultural contexts. And I agree that more heterogeneity is of paramount importance within feminist movements.
However, shared experiences within groups could be an important source of strength and inspiration for individual women.

Another type of feminist thinking employed in this project is socialist feminism. I regard this theory as both a movement and an idea that includes an understanding of the importance of domestic labor, the effects of governmental policies on women, and the social division of work along gender lines. Also included in this train of thought are the issues surrounding social stratification or class (Meulenbelt, 1994). Since its foundation, the socialist way of thought has insisted on the status of women as an autonomous group that often falls victim to misogyny coupled with capitalism. According to this theory, there is every need to change people’s way of thinking when it comes to capitalist and patriarchal systems that look down upon women. As Mohanty et al. (1991) rightly said, people’s material, or economic, relations cannot change unless their ideologies change; this is irrespective of gender and class (p. 292). Tong (1998) added to this argument when she proposed that the “fundamental cause of women’s oppression is neither “classism” nor “sexism” but an intricate interplay between capitalism and patriarchy” (p. 94). In Africa, for example, these systems are propagated within the society through social norms, cultural beliefs, biased public policies, and hegemonic religious practices, among others. Socialist feminists believe that women’s oppression is a result of complicated structures within the society that have hegemonic functional attributes. Socialist theorists, according to Tong (1998), “believe that women’s oppression is not the result of an individual’s intentional action, but the product of the political, social, and economic structures within which individuals live” (p. 94). In essence, unless patriarchy is destroyed, a focus on capitalism alone cannot put to an end women’s oppression. Lastly, bell hooks (2000) criticized the socialist way of thought of some
feminists because it does not emphasize or even reflect issues related to racism, colonialism, and naturism.

In general, all forms of feminists’ movements have not only faced criticisms but also resulted in a backlash effect. In Women and Gender, Yoder (2003) points to the fact that feminists and feminism are held in lower regard than housewives. The stereotypes against housewives are degrading in themselves and belittling of women within their societies. The situation is even worse for radical feminists because they are ostracized on the grounds that they are just as guilty as men in their fights for women’s control over socio-cultural issues. At the same time, feminism is threatened by homophobia; in many occasions female feminists have been equated to lesbians, queer, or transgender, who are not readily welcome in the society. Yonder says that feminism is linked to homosexuality as a means to disparage both forms of identity. Burn (2000) added that cultural norms observed by different groups of around the world could also be reasons for singling out feminists and feminism. For instance, some feminists in India have been outlawed on the premise that they are nonconformists who do not like cultural practices of dowry and marriage. In the United States women who go against the “norms” demanded by the beauty mystique are branded as men. Their counterparts in Africa face criticisms because they are believed to be puppets of Western feminists’ movements as well as neo-colonialists. These are only some of the problems that arise when the term feminism is mentioned within many parts of the world: These kinds of effects, coupled with gender, reproductive, religious, economic, and political oppressions, make it very difficult for grass-root movements to have great impacts on the local women, let alone on village elders in Africa. In this light, as we will see in the case of Kenya, it is not surprising to see that many African women support oppressive customs to avoid criticisms from members of their society.
Chapter 2

Older Women in Kenya

This project maintains that older Kenyan women fall into a heterogeneous group with a lot of differences. These differences include their tribes, social class, age, education levels and geographic differences among other factors. It is true that rapid growth of urban centers and the overall rise in modernization are changing the socio-cultural atmosphere of many people in developing countries like Kenya. The impact of change could also be as result of the national-state’s political economy as well as social organization of the communities in which older women live (Sokolovsky 1997). This chapter of my project highlights roles, duties and the status of older Kikuyu women within their families and community at large at a time of changing socio-cultural policies. The argument is that the changes that these individuals face do not have to be negative as suggested by Donald Cowgill’s (1972) modernization theory, which suggests that as nations become industrialized or urbanized, older people’s status deteriorates. The hypothesized decline (or otherwise) in values for older women’s roles, resources and respect can be analyzed through factors like modern health technology, urbanization, scientific advancements and, mass education and literacy (Sokolovsky 1997). This section also connects these kinds of changes to individual experiences of the older women and their families.

As recent as 1984, Rose Arungu-Olende observed (in Robin Morgan’s Sisterhood is Global) that 88% of women in Kenya lived in rural areas. In the case of older Kikuyu women, the most important matters in life are food, water, shelter, and good health. Other important aspects of these women’s lives are the well being of their children and the agricultural
productivity of their communities. Even though a majority of older Kenyan women are not formally educated, “they are far from ignorant about their own lives” (Arungu-Olende 1984). Thus, this chapter of focuses on the experiences of individual older women, whose views give a picture of how cultural assumptions and expectations about women’s roles have changed over time (Kiluva-Ndunga, 2001). It is accurate to state that Kenyan women want better healthcare, education, contraception, education and higher income, “but their needs and wants come a poor second to the concept of ‘development’ which male-dominated government and which predominantly male-dominated aid agencies promote” (Davies et al. 1986).

**Old and Female in Kenya**

Gender is a fundamental variable in the construction of public policies, allocation of resources. At the same time, gender and its definition affects how people interact within any given context. For the purposes of this project, gender is defined as a socially constructed phenomenon that could be classified as a system. Social constructionist scholars like Dindia & Canary (2006) maintain that it involves the creation of a practical dogma within a social group, such as the Kikuyu community in Kenya. Such creations normally benefit one class or group of people over another. Thus gender as a social construction bears the characteristic of being hierarchical: social power and control of opportunities and resources is held by a given group, in this case men. This definition of gender implies a continuous difference and inequality between men and women in which the former benefit from opportunities provided by customary as well as modern practice and policies. Gender has also been defined as a multilayered system because “this insight enables us to explore how social processes, such as interaction, and social institutions, such as work, embody and reproduce gender” (Wharton, p.55). People are born and
socialize into already defined gender roles culminating in what gender scholars like West and Fenstermaker (1995) have called “doing gender” or living and interacting according to set traits and characteristics considered appropriate for females and males.

Doing gender, otherwise known as gender-related processes, “influence behavior, thoughts, and feelings in individuals; they affect interactions among individuals; and they help determine the structure of social institutions” (Dindia & Canary, p.180). Traditionally, women (including most Kenyan women) were socialized into female roles of care-giving and child-raising. In Kenya generally, the jobs associated with those roles included housekeeping, working the fields (shambas), cooking, giving birth, looking after children, serving husbands, and cooking (Wainaina 2007). These constructions typically work within certain frameworks of the public spheres, like different social institutions, where people interact and put them into practice. In this project, social institutions include social or public programs, organizations and facilities that are directly connected to the older generations like pension, healthcare, retirement programs, and most importantly, families. Therefore, I use gender not only as an interactive process but also as a marker of status and social power. At the same time, gender can be seen as a part of people’s identity and system of social organization.

In the following pages, I use “ageing” in its social, cultural, psychological and physical senses. Morgan & Kunkel (2001) observe that even though we all have a general idea of what it is to age, we should move beyond our individual experience and broaden our view to understand how processes from the level of individual self to the overall society influence (p.27). It is difficult to define or conceptualize ageing without including the processes that go with it. Hence many scholars define ageing as a process rather than a distinctive stage with a clear cut definition. Looking at ageing from this perspective draws more on biological analysis than other
categories, especially chronological ageing. My definition of these two key categories resonates with Infeld’s (2002) approach. She points out that chronological age is a measurement of time lived between birth and someone’s present age while presenting biological or functional age as a category based on bodily and mental changes that come with time (p.3). Chronological age comes in handy in my discussion of policies and how they have influenced the lives of Kikuyu women. I second Morgan & Kunkel (2001) in their proposal that defining ageing is an onerous task because of its wide scope and the diverse experiences of the world’s ageing population (p.2).

It is in this light that I look at the older women of Kikuyu as a unique entity but at the same time make comparisons to general patterns of ageing around the Kenya. Person-environment fit dictates that people of different cultures, including the women in this study, adjust and develop different strategic behavior to cope with challenging situations within their communities. At the same time, some feminist scholars like Esther Chow (1996) argue, under great criticism, that it’s important to factor the lived experiences of different women into the international women’s rights laws under the concept of “relativism.” Just like anywhere else in Africa, the Kenyan societies have set gender roles for different age groups. Riley’s (1971) age stratification theory pointed to this fact by stating that social organizations are divided into different strata (childhood, adulthood, and old age) and that age grading “sorted individuals into particular strata that directed people into different age-grade roles and opportunity structures” (Blackburn & Dulmus, 2007). However, with the rise of modernization and urbanization, increasing cases of HIV, drastic climatic changes, introduction of formal education and changing public policies, some of the traditional roles for older Kenyan women are changing.
The Case of Kikuyu Women

Kikuyu women have played important roles both in their communities and the country as a whole. Their roles as mothers, grandmothers, home makers, providers and mentors come by virtue of belonging to different families and thus facing different socio-cultural expectations. Jomo Kenyatta (1953) and Elkins (2005) recorded that 5% of the Mau Mau fighters were actually women, though these Kenyan freedom fighters from the Kikuyu community were widely thought to be all men. At the same time, some woman assisted the guerilla fighters with food, water and hiding places as they fought for Kenya’s independence against the British. Women have also ventured into the national spheres in the recent times, the most famous being Wangari Mathaai who is a government minister and a Nobel Peace Price winner. Binyaranga Wainaina (2007) documented that Kikuyu women work hard or have learned the value of hard work especially within their homes. Both psychological and sociological studies of these women suggest that in the long run, they tend to internalize these roles and make them a part of their daily routine (Wainaina 2007). Therefore, women of the Kikuyu ethnic group have busy schedules with little leisure time and they derive a sense of importance from their roles as mothers, farmers, entrepreneurs, and caregivers (Edwards & Whiting, 2004). Even though I have established that Kikuyu women have left their mark on the international scene, this chapter focuses on their role within their families and their immediate societies.

Kenya has approximately 42 ethnic groups and all of them have some variations in customary laws that govern their members. As with the other 41 ethnic groups, Kikuyu customary laws are written and dictated by men who allocate power, property and land to themselves. In Gender and Economic Growth in Kenya, a 2007 report prepared for the World Bank, Amanda Ellis pointed out that customary laws are implemented by both local leaders
(such as elders, and regional chiefs) and judges in formal courts (p. 5). Ellis (2007) also documented that some of the customary laws are pretty standard for most of the ethnic tribes in Kenya. The following list of general customary laws was adapted by Ellis (2007, p.5) from *Human Rights Watch* (2003).

- Married women do not inherit from their parents.
- Unmarried women inherit less from their parents than their brothers.
- Women with sons can retain their husband’s property to hold it in trust for their sons.
- Childless women do not inherit from their husbands; property is given to male relatives as though she was never married.
- Divorced or separated women are expected to leave their matrimonial home and return to their mothers with only personal items.
- Unmarried women can use land in their parents’ home but only for seasonal crops.
- Married women have less control over significant family property than men do.
- All property owned by women before and during marriage is controlled and basically owned by the men.
- Widow cleansing or inheritance is permitted in some communities.

The Kikuyu ethnic community tried to follow most of these customary laws. The general trend that comes out of these guidelines is that women do not have a lot of say in terms of property and land ownership. The list above is not exhaustive of all the undocumented laws (customs) and practices that define women’s roles in the Kikuyu community. For instance, women are meant to be loyal to their families as long as their health and life permits. These expectations come with
set roles for the Kikuyu women of all cohorts especially within their community’s subsistence economy (Ahlberg, 1997).

Women cooked, cleaned, gave birth and looked after children within the traditional Kikuyu cultural practices. Wife beating, polygamy and genital operations (Friedman et al., 1994) are some of the practices that went along with the extensive roles that women played in the male hegemonic Kikuyu community. These practices were guided by some of the customary laws stated above, giving power to only male members of the Kikuyu ethnic community. Some scholars have suggested that Kikuyu women’s main source of status was childbearing and child rearing (Freidman et al., 1997). Women also controlled food production, through which wealth (land and livestock), status and influence was acquired by male elders in the community (Ahlberg, 1997). Therefore, the survival of the Kikuyu ethnic group depended in part on the ability of the women to produce food as well as on their generosity.

Central to women’s roles were the raising children and marriage, especially since in the Kikuyu tradition, unlike other ethnic groups in Kenya, children belong to the woman (Wainaina, 2007). Due to this tradition, women always took custody their children in case of a divorce or separation. Historians have also recorded Kikuyu women’s roles outside of their families. Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch (1997) said that Kikuyu women controlled trade in the central parts of Kenya before colonization. They lost their trading role with the rise of the capitalistic and opportunistic colonial administration from the British in the mid 20th century. In essence, a Kenyan “woman can control property and dependents through whom she builds up relative independence, prestige and security for her old age only in the context of marriage” (Hakansson & LeVine, 1997). In the same context of rural families, women’s ability to accumulate savings is
limited by her dependence on cultivation and the unfortunate fact that her husband controls most of any income she may earn.

**Older Kenyan Women**

In Kenya as elsewhere age remains an important means of stratifying women, individually and in groups. On one hand the society had set roles expected of women of all ages as they interacted and went about their activities. On the other, women learned and internalized their roles to an extent that they became daily or seasonal routines (Ahlberg, 1997). Women’s roles and routines were carried out within a predefined framework which allowed for little wiggle room for different cohorts of women. I agree with Nancy Foner (1988) who suggested that a successful study of older women must view them in relation to younger ones. Evidently, the pre-colonial Kikuyu community had pronounced age groups called *mariika* (Singular- *riika*) through which every member had to pass. These were highly developed age sets and grade systems that included people of a particular cohort who had similar or closely related characteristics, including age, number of mature children, achievements and their participation in communal activities. At the same time, people higher in the *riika* system enjoyed more privileges and had better access to resources within the community. These systems ran under the assumption stated by the social role theory of ageing—that as individuals age they grow out of earlier roles such as child, student, parent, and employee (Moody, 2009). In the process, all individuals take on new social roles as they mature or change their environments. Even though *mariika* grades have gradually died off, senior women in the Kikuyu community underwent all of the *mariika* stages and rituals. Older Kikuyu women had a share of the prestigious elderhood
(nyakinyua- women elders) in this hierarchy as soon as their children were initiated (Edwards & Whiting, 2004).

The chart below provides brief descriptions of the riika stages that applied to women. It should be noted that the most culturally significant ritual into womanhood is circumcision. (I should also clarify that female genital mutilation (F.G.M) of any form has since been outlawed in Kenya and other parts of the world as well. The use of this practice in this project is done within the context of traditional Kikuyu customs which encouraged F.G.M as an important cultural ritual.) Key terms associated with this ritual are:

- **karigu**: a small girl
- **kuiritu**: a grown, circumcised girl
- **muhiki**: a bride with young children
- **wamung’ei**: a woman with three or more children (boys and or girls), one of whom has been circumcised
- **mutumia**: a woman with several children (boys and or girls) who have been circumcised
- **muongia**: an old woman past menopause

(Source: *Voices from Mutira* by Davidson, 1996 p. 33-34)

Jean Davidson (1996) gathered from her research that women looked forward to the transition to elder status and they were upset that the practice was not carried out anymore (p. 237) even though is plenty of damning evidence against FGM compiled by leading African women and western feminists who condemn the practice (Howard, 1986). Foner (1988) also observed that
women enjoyed older status because it is a time for greater freedom, influence and prestige within and beyond the family group. These advantages started when Kikuyu women entered junior elder status at age 40 and had demonstrated their experience beyond their immediate homesteads (Edwards & Whiting, 2004).

Ageing automatically brings rewards, though sometimes abuse as well, in many cultures of the world. In the case of older Kikuyu women, as those of other communities, elder-hood brought relief from much physical labor, allowed for much appreciated female companionship and gave women’s bodies time to recuperate from childbearing (Maathai, 2009). At the same time, older Kikuyu women experienced an increase in power, over younger women as well as everyone in the society, when they entered elderhood—nyakinyua (Foner, 1988). Respect for the nyakinyua group of women also came as a result of experience and acquisition of important cultural and ritual knowledge concerning pregnancy, birth complications, marriage, complications and initiation. Such groups of older women (typically 50 years and up) had the opportunity to participate in the public domain and acquire leadership roles due to their release from restrictions by menopause and the end of childbearing (Davidson, 1996; Edwards & Whiting, 2004; Maathai, 2009). Other older women had power by virtue of being older wives in polygamous marriages. Younger women relieved their mothers, mothers-in-law and sometimes their husbands’ older wives of more burdensome tasks and owed older women respect and obedience (Foner, 1988; Sobania, 2003). Younger women were expected to be quiet and cautious in public while older ones could be more assertive, confident and speak their minds regardless of their audience. Poverty, lack of skills, social policies, and personality are some of the factors that might hinder older adults from enjoying these rewards. Llewelyn & Osborne (1990) agree that
“even in mature adulthood, women often have to battle against negative attitudes, poverty, and stereotyping to take control over the development of their lives” (p. 240).

**Changes in roles and status**

I have established that older Kikuyu women performed vital cultural roles such as supervising younger women in the household (Foner, 1988), controlling initiation of young girls into womanhood (Thomas, 2004) and sat in local elder-councils, *nyakinyua* (Davison, 1996). Mutindi Kuluva-Ndunda (2001) added that older women also held positions of power in women’s self-help groups even though a majority of them might be illiterate (p. 36). It has also been documented that older women try to observe customs that contribute to younger women’s unfavorable position in the midst of cultural and socio-economic change (Foner, 1988; Maathai, 2009). I suppose that older women react like this because their position of power and influence has been threatened by the changes that face the Kikuyu community today. Even though younger women resented older women’s control and authority, they waited patiently for their own turn. Maria Cattell (1991) found similar patterns among Kenya’s Samia ethnic community where older women exercised power over younger ones just as men did in most patriarchal societies. This project argues that older Kenyan women are losing their cultural roles and privileges because of changes brought about by modernization.

Modernization theory of ageing suggests that the role and status of older adults are inversely proportional to technological and industrial changes (Cowgill, 1986). Therefore, as a society continues to change from a traditionally agrarian to an industrial one, older people lose the respect and adoration as they did before. The idea behind this assumption is that the society evolves to a level that does not rely on the experience and traditional prowess of the older adults
about life in the society. The result of this assumption and other social factors is that older people tend to fall into a “roleless” group unless they are used as volunteers and caregivers (Cumming & Henry, 1961). Old age was also characterized as a time when people have dissatisfaction and low morale. Disengagement theory also assumes that “a society and older people engage in a mutual beneficial process of reciprocal withdrawal to maintain social equilibrium” (Miller, 2008). This perspective suggests that the society’s needs supersede those of individuals who are viewed as human resources. Some economists have suggested that this theory is pivotal for the continuation of the society since fresh labor is required with the “expiration” of older adults (Zhang, 2008). Disengagement theory covers both micro and macro levels of the interaction between older adults and the society. At the macro level, the society formulates strategies such as retirement, to maintain the flow of manpower in public sectors while at the micro level of things individuals prepare to turn their power inward (Morgan & Kunkel, 2001).

Even though similar cases apply to the older Kikuyu women, modernization has been the biggest effect in their lives. I have noted that Kenya is undergoing relatively rapid changes in its economic as well as social structures (Edwards & Whiting, 2004; Maathai, 2009). And these changes are affecting social policies as well as life at the family level. It is evident that with those kinds of changes, some people’s values and traditional cultures change while others persist. Max Weber and Karl Marx (both cited by Inglehart & Welzel, 2005) argued that socio-economical developments have powerful impacts on people’s actions and behavior but societies’ cultural heritage continue to mold existing beliefs and practices. This is true in the lives of older Kikuyu women who have been faced by modern changes affecting policies and life structures, but still view life in the light of traditional Kikuyu beliefs.
Manufacturing and processing industries have cropped up in Kenyan cities since early 20th century. It is obvious that these changes have affected the family and individuals, along with the rise in formal education. Urbanization has opened up new roles and job descriptions that require people to fill up in Kenya. As such, “there is a constant flow and drain of young and able-bodied people from the rural areas into urban centers, leaving the aged behind to tend the farms without much help” (Tout, 1989). Men tended to leave their wives and children in their rural homes and visit during the weekends. However, in the recent past, the trend has changed; many individuals opt to take their families with them into the urban centers. The end result of this kind of exodus is that older Kikuyu women are left in the rural setting by themselves with underdeveloped economic structures and fewer people to control.

The assumption held by modernization theorists that older people lose their social status holds true in the lives of the older women discussed in this project. Modernization has opened new wage–earning opportunities for younger women and this has reduced the traditional authority of older women (Foner, 1988). I also mentioned earlier that older women were important because they played important cultural roles and rituals during marriage and conducting FGM ceremonies (Thomas, 2003). They also played an important role of talking about female sexuality to their granddaughters (Kiluva-Ndunda, 2001). Many older women blame formal education for erasing the importance of mariika and thus FGM. Davidson (1996) documented that in the process of being educated, younger cohorts of Mutira (a rural city in Kenya) women have accepted a different set of social principles that structure their behavior (p. 238). Furthermore, younger women have more freedom to choose their spouses making the role of older women as match–makers and marriage planners, obsolete. Contemporary Kikuyu families disregard traditional laws that required women to serve as housekeepers. Such changes
have happened recently, especially in the wake of feminism and increased girl–child education (Maathai, 2009; Kiluva-Ndunda, 2001).

Older women’s authority and influence also deteriorates due to health problems and natural frailty. Illness comes with old age, a situation that puts older adults into a state of dependence and in most cases strips them of any form of authority. Cases of joint aches, eye cataracts, loss of hearing and problems with mobility are some of the universal health issues that arise with age (Miller, 2008). Such health problems are normally detrimental to the social lives of older people and the kinds of support that they receive from friends and families. In fact Sokolovsky (2004) documented that there are extreme cases of neglect, abuse and or abandonment when older adults lose their religious, economic, social functions and roles both in industrialized and developing nations. In a nutshell, I agree with Isabella Aboderin’s (2006) observation that “the loss of older people’s religious, economic or social authority and functions through education, urbanization and the development of new technologies meant, first, an erosion of their exchange recourses and, second, an erosion of their power to enforce children’s conformity with filial obligation norms” (p. 35).

An increase in divorce rate among couples and the AIDS scourge has also introduced a relatively new role for the older Kikuyu women. Many rural grandmothers have become the primary parents, custodians, and caregivers of their grand children who are left in their care by either their daughters’ divorce or the death of their HIV infected parents. In African Families and the Crisis of Social Change, Weisner et al. (1997) observed that divorce (a new phenomenon) creates a parenting role for some grandmothers because their daughters, including educated women, do not take their children from a previous union with them into another one if they decide to marry again. At the same time children born from teen pregnancy and out-of-wedlock
cases end up in the care of their grandmothers if their mothers go back to school or get married respectively. The AIDS pandemic has also been a major cause of the increasing number of orphans in Kenya and other parts of Africa. Regardless of how the infection gets into the family structure, the fact remains that children belong to the society in the Kikuyu culture, especially during hard times like the loss of biological parents (Kenyatta, 1971).

However, grandchildren could either be a source of happiness or of sorrow and distress to their grandmothers. Llwelyn & Osborne (1990) agreed, in Women’s Lives, that “while for some older women, caring for their grandchildren can provide an intimacy which is less stressful than their experiences had been with their own children, this is not true for all grandmothers…Most importantly, many of them feel that they have done their share of childcare and have no desire to start all over again” (p. 179). Also other grandmothers have problems with raising grandchildren due to inadequate resources and lack of support from their own children. This is usually the case for the unemployed older women in rural Kenya. For these women, providing funds for school, food, clothing, and medical bills could be a real challenge, as I discuss in the third chapter of this project.
Chapter 3

Economic and Financial Situation

In chapter two, I illustrated how traditional Kenyan customs have contributed to older women’s unfavorable positions within the society. Apart from the traditionally patriarchal constraints, modern times have brought with them formal education, newer technology, migration into urban centers, and disintegration of extended families. All these changes hurt the economic well being of older Kenyan women. The situation of older adults is clearly determined by their use value in most cultures (Sokolovsky, 2004). Practices or beliefs like these look at aging women in terms of the economic or socio–cultural value attached to them by the larger society. Structural functionalist theorists such as Burgess (1960) described aging as a “roleless” process because their theories value social status in terms of its contribution to the society’s survival. James Dowd (1975) was working at a micro level when he developed the exchange theory. It states that there is decreased interaction between older and younger cohorts because the older people do not have resources to contribute to intergenerational exchanges.

In this chapter, I look into some of the situations that have caused lower socio-economic status for older women as well as their contributions and adaptive strategies to make a life for themselves. The assertion throughout this project is that older Kenyan women can achieve autonomy if they take control of their own resources as well as own vital property like land and houses. However, there are constrictions that make this realization tough for women, primarily because traditional Kenyan culture is structured to provide more opportunities to men than women. Homelessness, poverty, and over burdening of women are some of the problems that
face some certain Kenyan women as a result of patriarchal customary laws. It should be noted that older Kenyan women are proactive in their own ways; they have means of supplementing for their less fortunate situation in fields that men do not venture into (Huston, 1979; Maathai, 2009). These strategies involve cooperative measures like those found in *Maendeleo ya Wanawake* (Women’s Development) women groups, craft groups, water and land development clubs, and women religious groups. On a different level, older women have been caught up by the drastically changing technological sphere. I discuss and argue that technology, like telecommunication and the media, has been adopted by older women as a means of maintaining social networks and keeping abreast with news.

**Economic Constraints**

Kenyan traditional customs are based on cultural practices which exalt male individuals over their female counterparts. In *Women in African Development*, Boko et al. (2005) and their contributors believe that sustainable development in Africa is possible by increasing women’s skills and giving them access to resources. Traditionally, the ethnic group discussed in this project did not provide women with the necessary resources to assist in elevating their status. However, things are changing; more men accept that women can venture beyond the kitchen and farms into originally male–dominated fields. At the same time, socio–historical times are such that women’s rights are being observed and implemented by human rights groups and local feminist groups (Cook, 1994). Homelessness is a possibility for women in Kenya as pointed by Swadener and Mutua (2001) in *International Perspectives on Homelessness*. These authors list three factors that contribute to the vulnerability of Kenyan women to homelessness: (a) increasing single parenthood, (b) traditional cultural beliefs, attitudes and practices among the
majority of Kenyans, and (c) Kenyan laws. I believe that without homes, it would be hard for older women to take care of themselves and others under their custody. Renting a home is not an option for many women because landlords equate single motherhood to prostitution. Cases of single parenthood are on the increase in Kenya and it is a newer phenomenon that is hard to deal with in social realms that are structured around heterosexual marriage (Kilbride et al., 2000). The case of single mothers is tough because their fathers, brothers and former husbands kick them out to the streets because traditionally, homes and land belong to men (Swadener and Mutua, 2001).

Rhonda Howard (1986) observed that even though in the late nineties a quarter of the household heads were women, only 5% women owned land in their name. As such, the remaining percentage of women used land with the permission of male relatives. The issue is that single motherhood often brings up is the case of children who have to be left in the care of their grandparents as their mothers move into urban centers to find employment. There are cases of well educated and professionally employed women who can support their children, but the cases are few and isolated. Evidently, educated women have better access to the basic amenities of existence and more resources to claim and fight for their rights than their rural–dwelling uneducated counterparts. In the case of women, more education leads to later marriage, fewer children, higher economic status and more participation in the public domain (Friedman et al., 1994). The majority of older women fall into the latter group because they grew up in a time that formal schooling was considered a leisure activity accorded to men only. Their parents gave preferential treatment to their brothers when it came to educational opportunities (Kiluva–Ndunda, 2001).

Both Kenyan law and Kikuyu traditional beliefs are based from customary laws which perpetuate male dominance over women. Customary beliefs and cultural practices oppress
women and limit their ability to inherit or own land. Whether married or unmarried, women have less control over family property and even property owned by a woman before and after marriage belongs to men (Ellis, 2007). The Kenyan judicial system also follows the model of traditional customary laws in its adjudication of justice. Laws regarding divorce, sexual and family violence defend men while they punish women, who are normally the victims of such vices. An example that affects some older women directly is the fact that women own children within the Kikuyu culture (Kenyatta, 1971). As such their daughters leave their children with the older grandmothers. This, as I have established before, could turn out to be stressful or even depressing to the older women, especially if they are economically challenged. Culturally, the society expects that grandmothers should always take care of their grandchildren especially in dire situations like death of parents or a single mother wanting to fend for herself or get remarried.

The lifestyle in rural Kenya is hard for most older women who do not have professional training of any kind. However, Swadener and Mutua (2001) argue that older women who stick to rural settings have higher chances of survival compared to their younger counterparts who go into the city. They argue that social life in the city is riddled with bureaucracy and other restrictions that do not allow for low scale survival initiatives like businesses. Improvisation of older women could be due to their disadvantageous position relative to men or because of other forces like death of husbands and or supportive children, or because of illiteracy and unemployment. Widowhood is known to be a time of uncertainty and economic struggles for most women who experience it (Mutongi, 2007; Ozawa, 1989; Llewelyn & Osborne, 1990). Their economic struggles could be a reflection of low paying jobs during their productive ages or patriarchal control over resources as in the case of Kikuyu widows. Even though there are
possibilities of widows plunging into economic problems, they are more likely to live by themselves, unlike widowers who are most likely to remarry (Llewelyn & Osborne, 1990).

The British colonial administration introduced plantation farming to Kenya and took away Kikuyu women’s agricultural contribution to the long distance trade of East Africa (Coquery-Vidrovitch, 1997). According to the Kikuyu women of Mutira, next to agricultural production, motherhood is the most important aspect of being a woman. Agriculture is a big and important part of Kikuyu people’s lives and a woman’s functional role as a mother, i.e., reproducer, does not supersede her role as a cultivator, i.e., producer (Davison, 1996). I agree with Boko et al., (2005) and their contributors when they observe that Africa’s development depends on the economic contribution of the women. Today, large scale horticultural economy has changed the kinds of crops grown to suit the international market. For example, Hawthorne (2002) articulated that Kikuyu women face the challenge of new crops. Traditionally, white eyed beans (njahe) constitute a large part of Kikuyu traditional diet and a ritual for women’s lives. The kind of beans grown has changed from the traditional njahe beans to green beans. The production of njahe was literally connected to the lifestages of mature Kikuyu women; they ate these beans prior to clitoridectomy, during marriage negotiations, during pregnancy, after childbirth, and after menopause (Hawthorne, 2002). This speaks to the fact that cultivation or farming was not just another role for women, it had cultural or ritualistic significance to the women and the society. Older women in the village or first wives controlled farming operations for different family units due to their greater experience.

Resilience and Adaptive Strategies
This project is formulated around the idea that female autonomy is only valuable when defined as the ability to mobilize relevant resources and the capacity to take initiative and the knowledge to decide when they are necessary at all socio–economic and cultural levels (Weisner et al., 1997). Economic autonomy is necessary, especially for older women, since in developing countries, social and economic developments take priority over the graying populations in their quest for modernity (Tout, 1989). Women also tend to have problems of financial and material support because in these cultures some men have more than one wife, women outlive men, and women have low paying jobs and “less significant” roles. Nevertheless, Alberg (1991) stated correctly that Kenyan women have exerted strong influence through their participation in self-help organizations and associations that help their lives and those of their family members. Historically, Kikuyu women have participated in co-operatives (Ngwatio and Matega) that would not only help to market their farm produce but would also work the farms of its members in turns (Kenyatta, 1971; Ahlberg, 1991; Davison, 1996). In their travels around the world, Davies et al., (1986) also observed that “large number of women’s groups have banded together to earn some money by making handicrafts, growing crops, keeping goats” with varied reasons and success (p. 185). These groups normally have problems and have been criticized for maintaining the status-quo of women and denying the possibility of radical change. Again, nationwide groups in Kenya are led by middle class urban women whose ideals and obstacles are divorced from the situation on the ground (Ahlberg, 1991). Like any other welfare organization, self-help groups have been ostracized since the time that Robin Morgan (1984) wrote Sisterhood is Global. She accurately observed that the majority of women who participate in the self help groups are less educated or older. These groups have been viewed as serving only illiterate women; educated ones came in to school the rest (Morgan, 1984). Disorganization, inexperience, or simple lack of time is other
possible problems that local groups face (Davies et al., 1986). However, “income–generating projects remain one of the most common types of women’s projects” (Burn, 2000).

Next, I discuss some of the functions served by these self-help groups as well as other lifestyle adaptations that have affected older women’s lives significantly. The underlying assumption is that older women have taken up distinctive behavior and practices in a bid to keep up with the rapid cultural and socio–economic changes. The idea is that most of such adaptive practices are beneficial to the older women rather than detrimental, as imagined by many Western scholars. It is also true that some changes have affected them in negative ways. The most popular self-help group, *Maendeleo ya Wanawake* organization (MYWO) teaches women about home economics, primary health care, and nutrition—vital requirements to improve their lifestyles. Apart from MYWO and other self-help groups, individual women have taken steps towards new technology, such as advanced and more viable seeds for their fields, while the rest of them take up new jobs, like becoming school matrons or housekeepers. At the same time, some older Kikuyu women have realized the need for education and thus put emphasis on educating their children who in turn help them with legal or official procedures within the family.

It is unclear whether MYWO is a government-sponsored entity as in the 1950s during its conception or an NGO, since in 1988 the government co-opted the organization. Since it looked like the organization belonged to the government, most women assumed that MYWO was no longer an independent advocate of impoverished rural women (Davison, 1991). However, it is clear that a lot of politics surround this organization, which was founded by the British Colonial government “to develop and improve conditions for Africans through social intercourse by bringing the women together, encouraging neighborliness and cooperation and education”
MYWO was developed to pull women, especially of the Kikuyu ethnic group, from their participation in mau mau (guerilla war against British colonial government) struggles (Maathai, 2004; Ahlberg, 1991). The organization has both international and local donors as well as the support given to it though the Department of Community Affairs and Rehabilitation (Ahlberg, 1991). Wipper (1975) wrote that the first administrators of this organization were white women volunteers who taught Kenyan women skills like embroidery, handicrafts, childcare, cooking and guest entertainment (Ahlberg, 1991). Equipping African women with such skills was meant to meet MYWO’s goal which was to advance women’s development and grassroot progress in Kenya (Aubrey, 1997). However, these techniques and strategies were criticized because African women did not have the requisite facilities to practice their skills. Even though the initial intention of the founder was for MYWO to assist rural women develop their skills and generate income (Robertson, 1997), Davison (1989) recorded that the organization has been highly politicized to a point that rural women do not associate with it.

Poor governance on the part of the government has made rural women think of the state as an obstacle to development rather than an instrument of change and empowerment. The result is that Kikuyu women stick to traditional cooperatives that do not require supervision from the government. Kenyatta (1971), Maathi (2004), and Ahlberg (1991) all list three types of Kikuyu women cooperative groups: ngwatio, matega and gitiiro. This project focuses on ngwatio and matega which were concerned with the economic development and socioeconomic status of women rather than gitiiro which had to do with initiation rituals. In Facing Mount Kenya, Kenyatta (1971) established that Kikuyu people, especially women, organized themselves into ngwatio cooperatives to tackle tasking activities like cultivation, harvesting, and thatching. These working bands were made up of friends, relatives and age mates who worked together for each
other. *Matega* was a female activity surrounding women’s lifecycle and entailed assistance of younger cohorts by more senior ones during childbirth, weddings, and marriage. This group was made up of closely related women and their family friends. Some of these practices are still carried out within the community but with migration, the majority of people that participate in the co-operatives are older women who are left in the rural settings.

The first advantage of these cooperatives is that older women’s work load, on the farms, is reduced considerably. At the same time, these groups provide older women with the necessary social network required for healthy aging (Morgan & Kunkel, 2006). Social ties are important not only for stress release but also for resources and connections. Older women who participate in the *mutega* version of women’s groups get a chance to share their experience thus exhibiting what gerontologists and anthropologists call generativity. Erickson (1950) theorized that as people age, they tend to reach down and share their skills with younger generations. It could be argued that in the present day weddings, birth and marriage have become less communal as such; older women do not get to participate in *mutegas*. Furthermore, mothers have access to better and more reliable healthcare with the advancement of the medical field in Kenya.

Secondly, some cooperatives are tailored as income–earning activities that give women extra cash to supplement their family incomes. These groups operate on similar grounds to MYWO by creating economic activities for women within localities (Wainaina, 2007). Items of trade or small scale businesses range from farm produce to baskets, mats and other handicraft products (Halperin, 2005). Another common type of group is called “merry-go-round” whose members live in close proximity of each other and operates like a non-interest-bearing bank. Halperin (2005) continued to mention that the women whom she interviewed used this money to buy household items as well as support projects like children’s education. Older women have
used these groups to their advantage, especially if they are widows with limited monetary support or have husbands who cannot support them. Lack of support from husbands could be caused by retirement or if they choose to spend their money on younger mistresses in urban centers (Maathai, 2009). There are examples of women who have changed their socio-economic status within the community from their participation in such groups; at the same time, some groups are full of irregularities and administrative problems (Halperin, 2005).

Today older Kikuyu women can communicate with their children in far away cites thanks to advancement in telecommunication. Before the introduction of cellular phones, families relied on letters and telegrams to communicate with their members in other cities (Bradley et al., 1997). It is safe to say that Africans in rural settings have better access to information and technology relative to two decades ago (Rathgeber, 2000). At the same time however, some feminists still insist that in general, African women’s quality of life is affected by inadequate technological advancement (Burn, 2000). Furthermore, women are slower to adopt new technologies probably because of inappropriate design of technologies or the idea of male dominance and control surrounding their use (Rathgeber, 2000). Nevertheless, newer technologies like grinding mills, water pumps, energy-saving stoves, radios, and cell phones are examples of advancements that have improved Kikuyu women’s quality of life. Some of the developments have reduced women’s labor loads thus allowing for better health while providing women with time to do other things or rest (Burn, 2000).

These are some of the strategies and adjustments that older women have made in their lives. As expected, these and other changes like the increase of education opportunities have implications for their lives and those of their families. The next chapter looks further into this.
Chapter 4

Reproduction and Family Planning

I have argued throughout this project that womanhood, specifically childbearing and rising, is a fundamental part of women’s identity in Kenya (Ahlberg, 1991). However, many things surround this part of women’s identity ranging from their own health, the amount of labor they are carry out, to public policies as well as cultural beliefs. Age is also a factor to consider in this discussion because the cohort discussed here is assumed to be past the child-bearing ages. Reproduction has been taken seriously in the Kenyan traditions and cultural practices because of the cyclic nature of life. Mothers play the important role of raising new generations that carry on a family genealogy (Kenyatta, 1971). Older women had some time for themselves and other activities because their older children shared the household labor. It is true that some parents raised children to help out with work on the farms.

Therefore, this chapter discusses not only the relationship between women and their reproductive role in the Kenyan culture, but also their relationship with their children, parents, and the society. Most notable is the economic security that some older women receive though the support that comes from their grown children. On the other hand, there have been reports of land and property snatched from widows by their sons. This part also discusses issues surrounding female genital excision practices since they gave women the cultural pass to get married and have children. I also put emphasis on women’s body and identity issues, a topic that has not been explored by many scholars. In order to understand the coping strategies of older Kenyan women, it is important to understand the many circumstances that shape their character and sense of self.
within the changing society. It is thus important to understand the specific contexts in which older Kenyan women live.

**Women and Reproduction**

Beth Ahlberg said in *Women, Sexuality and the Changing Social Order* that “children were highly valued among the Kikuyu for security and social status of parents, agricultural labor and continuation of the generation line” (1991, p. 66). Ahlberg went on to suggest that children were so important the beliefs, practices, taboos, and social sanctions were used to prevent conception and childbirth under certain circumstances (p.66). Neil Price (1996) took this argument further by pointing out that the value of children came as a result of the importance and emphasis put in cultural heritage and beliefs. In, *The Changing Value of Children among the Kikuyu of Central Province*, Price mentioned that Kikuyu ancestors were honored and appeased through bearing of children and naming, thus high fertility among the ethnic group was morally correct. These kinds of beliefs and practices brought stigmas on both childlessness and subfecundity, which “denied” the right of ancestors to be reborn. The Kikuyu women were not only in the middle but also responsible for child-bearing and raising. Belanger & Ghorayshi (1996) confirm that marriage and child-bearing were (even in current times) assumed to be an essential part of one’s identity as a woman in the traditional Kikuyu socio–cultural practices.

It has been the theme of this project that even though Kikuyu women control some aspects of family life, the burdens of domestic work, including the role of child-care, fall mostly on them. For this particular group of women, domestic work included food production, processing and preparation, child-bearing and raising, and nurturing of husbands (Belanger & Ghorayshi, 1996). On other hand, Price (1996) said that women capitalize on reproductive roles
because high fertility was women’s way of managing their social status and economic position. Children, especially sons, ensured women’s access to land and labor in the patrilocal Kikuyu ethnic community (Thomas, 2003). This was the case in past decades because women did not have enough access to their own property, unlike today when educated women have good wage-paying jobs and can thus afford to buy their own land and houses. Younger cohorts of women do not have the pressure to give birth to many children as a source of security because some of them, as I have pointed, can afford their own property while others bank on the fact that there is less pressure for marriage and that their parents can house them. Nonetheless, female responsibilities and labor is unpaid because it is taken for granted. Traditionally, child-bearing and all the labor that goes into giving birth and taking responsibility for children was deemed natural and normal to women (Belanger & Ghorayshi, 1996). As such, women had an average of six children (Davidson, 1996) and older women played the role of midwifery within the community.

Changes have come to Kenyan’s beliefs surrounding reproduction and women’s roles. However, for a long time old women tried to retain their influence over fertility and procreation because they believe that midwifery was not limited to comforting laboring mothers and receiving newborns; it included protecting the community from dangerous births and ensuring that new mothers were exercised properly (Thomas, 2003). Educated women of younger cohorts are planning their families more often than their older counterparts. At the same time, more women living in urban cities have chosen to raise families without the traditional help of a male spouse (Belanger & Ghorayshi, 1996). At the same time the abolishment of some cultural beliefs like arranged marriages has also affected the family and the fertility of traditional Kenyan communities. Older women played the role of educating younger women in valuable parenting
skills and marriage life. These lessons would be traditionally tailored and had clear cut roles expected of married women. Overall, family planning initiatives and programmes, social and economic changes, together with developments in education and health programmes, have altered the demand for high fertility among the Kenyan women as in the case of Kikuyu people (Price, 1996).

Bledsoe and colleagues (1993) confirmed in *Social Dynamics of Adolescent Fertility in Sub-Saharan Africa* that “older women became role-models because in economies with marked divisions of labor by sex, it is the older women who train younger ones in marketable skills” (p. 141). Anyway, changes in both health services and the spread basic school education have made this role, previously held by older women, to be invalid or outdated. The colonial era in Kenya (1889 – 1963) introduced new birth assistants who were hospital trained. According to Thomas (2003) these knowledgeable hospital–trained midwives threatened the authority of the old women because midwifery was viewed as a prestigious position that commanded respect and admiration. On the other hand, the introduction of health education in schools has taught girls, and thus married women, the importance of professional health care during pre- and post-natal stages of childcare. These changes not only challenge the position of older women but also ensured that maternal and infant deaths were decreased through appropriate health services before, during and after pregnancy (World Bank, 2008).

With education also came the idea of family planning which saw younger cohorts of women having significantly fewer children that their mothers’ or grandmothers’ generations. Senanayake (1993) observed that younger women with fewer children were more likely to be users of family planning than older women who already had many children. For instance, the World Bank (2008) reported that the use of contraceptives has risen in developing countries from
about 14% in 1965 to 60% in 2006 among married women between ages 15 and 49. Older women, religious and cultural leaders oppose the use of family planning strategies to protect their own interests and beliefs. Even though older women resist family planning to protect their traditional roles, Bledsoe et al., (1993) argued that older women may be controlling or protecting younger women from early marriage and childbearing because their work is needed. Price (1996) added that education, alongside monotheism, has eroded cultural practices and the importance put on extended family relations and ancestors. At the same time, fertility and marriage practices have changed as a result of single parenthood whereby women are the heads of their families. This kind of situation arises due to widowhood, personal preferences, divorce, or constant male migration into cities. These kinds of factors force women into “non-traditional” women’s roles like fending for the family as well as making cultural and legal decisions. At the same time, the numbers of children per female-headed families are significantly lower than those living with both parents. Ghorayshi & Belanger (1996) went on to argue that the number of female-headed families in developing countries is rising because of different forms of marital instability, and the emerging trend where urban women choose to have children but not get married. The implication for older Kikuyu women is that generally, they tend to outlive their spouses and lead a significant part of their mature-womanhood and senior lives as single parents.

All of the changes mentioned above have affected women and their families in more than one way. Some general trends show that older cohorts have a larger support system from their grown children because they had bigger families. Economists have argued that the changing trend in fertility is a reflection of the fact that there is a considerable increase in the costs of childbearing and that the costs shared by other family members are diminished (Lesthaeghe, 1989). This author continued to note, in Reproduction and Social Organization in Sub-Saharan
Africa, that husbands’ income and responsibility to meet the daily needs of their families do not increase proportionally with the number of children or rates of inflation. These kinds of imbalances have deterred contemporary families from having the number of children per women. It could be argued that better sense of community as well as resource availability made it possible for current seniors to raise large numbers of children. However, some of these seniors find themselves in different situations where they are forced to look after their grandchildren at a time that individualism has taken over with the nuclear family structure and expensive lifestyles (Davison, 1994). For the older cohort, children were important because in traditional Kenyan customs the success and survival of older women is based on the success of their sons (Weisner et al., 1997). The effect of this is seen in amongst the Kikuyu where, small families or the possibility of infertility was, and still is, a major problem for older women since Africans desire large families (Lesthaeghe, 1989). Older women are faced with a different kind of problem because of their children’s exodus to schools and careers. Belanger & Ghorayshi (1996) noted that women living in rural regions of developing countries are faced with labor shortages because older children are in schools and cannot help with farm work on a regular basis. Old age could also be a time that Kikuyu women can try new activities, like participating in self-support groups, because older daughters are able to take up chores that originally belonged to their mothers. However, before young women could be married, traditional Kikuyu practices expected them to be circumcised.

**Female Genital Operations**

The practice of female circumcision was an important rite of passage for the senior women whose lives I discuss in this project. It is important to distinguish the definition and the
importance of female circumcision in the context of women’s bodies and responsibilities because it was central to their identity within the clan and a certain age-grade. At the same time, there is a lot of discussion of it not only in the feminism literature, but also in anthropological, social, and health studies. The dominant argument is that any form of female genital cutting is a form of female oppression in chiefly patriarchal societies. However, as I discuss below, anthropologists have uncovered the “victimized” women’s views and perceptions of these practices only to discover that a large number of them do not regard the operations as torture. I stated that this project does not advocate female cutting but condemns western criminalization of the practices and the ritual that accompanied it within the communities in which female operations occur. This chapter also highlights efforts to initiate alternative rituals to substitute for any forms of non-medical female genital cutting as a ritual. Momoh (2005) recorded that the practice of female genital cutting came to the public eye in 1970s in the UK when doctors noticed “abnormalities” in Somali women refugees. Forty years later, there is substantial evidence to show that the rates of female genital cutting are declining because advocate groups and governments have taken action against the practice. Rahman & Toubia (2000) adapted WHO’s measures or definitions for what should be considered female genital “mutilation.” These include: (a) clitoridectomy or the excision of the prepuce without the cutting of part or all the clitoris, (b) excision of both the prepuce and clitoris together with partial or total excision of e labia minora, (c) infibulation which entails excision and stitching or narrowing of the vaginal opening, and (d) all procedures of any form that entail partial or complete removal of any part of the female genitalia.

Most people accept the idea that any form of alteration done to the female genitalia is cruel and inhumane. In Momoh’s (2005) words female genital operation “is a violation of women’s physical and psychological integrity and an impediment to their health and well being”
(p.25). Even though the practice was done on young girls of 9-19 years, Momoh observed that in extreme cases, including some in Kenya, the practice has been forcefully undertaken on women as old as 60 years. Other critics have questioned the practice on the grounds that it is performed on children who do not have a voice to defend themselves (Rahman & Toubia, 2000). Abusharaf (2007) argued that there are some versions of body mutilation within the American context. He pointed that bodily alterations like breast implants are condoned by American culture under the guise of beauty and cosmetic enhancement. The argument is that Western critics of female genital operations overlook their own version of bodily mutilations like infant circumcision, and breast “mutilation” which is done to please men more than genital operations. Anti-genital operation groups believe that female genital operation is a form of violence against women and is motivated by their sex and social roles in the society. Some Western feminist argue that even if the practice is acceptable within the communities which practice them, it is not consistent with human rights (Momoh, 2005).

On the other hand, African feminists and women in different localities have defended the practice on different levels. These feminists ask that the issue of female genital operations should be addressed within the African context while the older traditional women support the practice because it is natural in their socio-cultural environments. Female circumcision was a gateway or pass for a young woman to join maidenhood, and later sexual intercourse and marriage (Bradley, 1997). The operation was a ritual that was carried out by a traditional practitioner (often an older woman) from a family in which generations of women had been practitioners (Rohman & Toubia, 2000). Female genital operation was an important time because just like male circumcision, it allowed the initiates to formally join a new age-grade as well as the community (Halperin, 2005). It also gave individuals an air of seniority and stratified them into different
cohorts who went through similar rites and activities together. The young initiates were expected to take up new roles of womanhood by virtue of having the operation. Girls who did not undergo the operation were faced with threats like the idea that men would not marry them, and they were called immature traitors. These coupled with other ostracizing factors pressured girls to get circumcised (Brown & Putman, 1998).

Older women played the important role of socializing and teaching the young girls how to be women. Kiluva-Ndunda (2001) agreed that younger people learned acceptable norms and age-group rituals from their grandmothers. Older women commanded a lot of respect because of their role as teacher and custodians of women’s rituals. An extreme exhibition of their influence is depicted in some regions of Africa where educated daughters are forced to circumcise their female children because of their fear of their grandmothers (Halperin, 2005). Edwards & Whiting (2004) emphasized that initiation was a time when initiates were taught secrets and other community essentials that would be required in adulthood. However, like all the other practices discussed in this project, many communities are shifting from these kinds of rituals and practices. Older women are also losing their roles as practitioners of female genital operations and as teachers of the communities’ traditions during the ritual. Christian, feminist, and political leaders have stepped in to condemn this practice that can lead to both physical and psychological complications for the initiates (Rahman & Toubia, 2000). Physical complications can be serious bleeding and infections while psychological problems include fear, submission, and bitterness. Changes, both socio-cultural and economic, have undermined the traditional institutions, like initiation, which were avenues for older women to disseminate wisdom to younger women (Rahman & Toubia, 2000). Recently, however, communities, with the help of human right’s groups and other donors, are finding alternative means of inducting young women into
womanhood. For instance, some older Kikuyu women have decided to replace genital cutting with constructive training, education, and gift giving while others use role models of established people who oppose the practice (Maathai, 2004).

**Women’s Bodies and Identity**

I have already mentioned that in traditional Kikuyu customs, women are identified through their reproductive and domestic roles. However, there is more to these roles than the two aspects mentioned above, as is evident in practices like marriage arrangements, socio-economic class, wife inheritance, wife beating, the importance put on virginity, and more modern things like going to school. My argument is that such activities forced women of older cohorts to internalize certain characteristics, like submissiveness, unlike younger ones who live at a socio-historic time that allows for more autonomy and choices for women. Some older women have also benefited from freedom created by changing social stigma or restrictions, thus opening the way to different personalities or character in old age. At the same time, there is an interplay between other social factors like age, sexuality, and gender, and older women’s identities. Sociologists maintain that the society and public structures have a strong influence on the ways that individuals grow or define themselves. Reh & Ludwar-Ene (1995) emphasize that an individual’s identity is determined by social interactions and strengthened by spatial ties and continuity.

According to Beverly Stoeltje’s (1995) study of Ghana’s older Asante queen mothers, continuity and patterns in social relations are prerequisites in the establishment and performance of power and authority. In this study, Stoeltje found out that the queen mothers were accorded unquestioned respect because they are socialized into such kinds of obedience throughout their
lives. These findings resonate with most sociological work that looks at the interaction between individuals and the society. Moreover, the findings could be adapted to the case of older Kikuyu women and the rest of the society in terms of how their life trajectory is dictated by laws and changing roles. Age is an important factor in the relationship between the individual women and the society. Riley and colleagues’ (1972) age stratification theory dictates that different cohorts are exposed to similar opportunities, roles and socio-historical events. The result is that people of the same cohort tend to have similar characteristics within the cohort due to similar experiences with the social structures like retirement services. At the same time, there are inter-cohort differences because individuals have different life trajectories and exposure to opportunities.

In a sense, as individuals move through life, they are faced by a variety of situations and descriptions which shape their sense of self (Cahill, 2001). It is vital to note that apart from social or physical influences on identity, there are biological and psychological factors that affect women’s identity. Older Kikuyu women’s identities and behavior are defined by traditional customary laws that give more privileges to men. Behavioral scientists and anthropologists have aptly observed that these women’s personality changes with age; they become more outspoken and powerful within the community. Cash & Pruzinsky (2004) note that women in later adulthood can use identity assimilation to incorporate age related changes to their identity and thus boost their feelings of self worth. They maintain that “age assimilation maybe aiding older women incorporate age related changes into their existing identities, rather than becoming discouraged and feeling negative about themselves” (p. 87). Nelson (2004) adds that identity assimilation is used by adults between ages 40-65 to maintain positive self esteem and to make behavioral changes to cope with the aging process. In the following paragraphs, I examine how
some traditional practices among the Kikuyu have affected the identity of older women. Even though practices such as wife beating, bridal payments, wife inheritance and cleansing, forced circumcision and arranged marriages are contested in society today, they defined the male-female relationship in ancient Kikuyu culture (Kilbride et al., 2001).

In relation to their bodies, women have a greater chance than men for self neglect and self harming behaviors because they have various roles and functions as caregivers not only to their children but also to other family members (Baistow et al., 2007). This idea holds true for the older Kikuyu women whose personal life is unknown to the public because of their roles as mothers, grandmothers, cultivators and caregivers. Unlike their colleagues in the Western world, older Kikuyu women are not faced by the youthful notion of beauty. Simone de Beauvoir (1953) extrapolates that there is a liberating freedom for older women resulting in a more authentic self because they are free from many restrictions placed upon them by conventional gender roles. Beauvoir’s idea hold true for older Kikuyu women because as we saw in Chapter 2, older Kikuyu women acquired higher status that allowed them to partake in “gender-defying” roles like making laws and sitting in councils. However, some older women have been branded “witches” because of their old age and solitary life styles. In Cry My Beloved Africa, Vukunta (2008) elaborated that in Africa, the female body is a battleground for different discourses on not only identity and sexuality but also traditional beliefs. Calasanti & Slevin (2001) agreed when they stated that bodies are symbolic and cultural sited and thus engender socio-cultural factors. For example, there was great emphasis on virginity because it spoke well of the woman’s parents and predicted fertility in marriage life (Kenyatta, 1971). In more recent times, Calasanti and Slevin (2001) documented that modern mass communications have created a democratization of body shape ideals that cost time, money and effort to achieve (p. 64).
Other identity issues arise with practices surrounding marriage. Practices of bride price and sometimes arranged marriages were and still can be important aspects of Kikuyu marriage traditions. Kikuyu traditions have been observed to be extremely patriarchal in nature thus allowing for wife beating and other forms of marital violence that forced women to adopt submissive traits. This community’s sayings and proverbs reflected the patriarchal nature of relationships between men and women. An example of such proverbs is “mondo moka ndare igweta” which translates into “A woman has no independent identity,” which states the status of Kikuyu women in relation to their men. Accordingly, “men have a significant advantage over women who have to define their identity in patriarchal and patrilocal societies; as children through their father’s family, as adult women through the family of their husbands and in old age through their sons” (Reh & Ludwar-Ene, p. 72). Most feminist scholars have argued that bride price and other marriage arrangements in most heterosexual marriages are belittling to the women in question. Robertson (1997) in Trouble Showed the Way and Stamp (1989) in Technology, Gender, and Power in Africa reflected this way of thinking when she recorded that since parents agreed upon the quantity or form of the dowry, the woman become a possession of her husband. Roy & Sideras (2006) added that the fact that dowry can be paid back due to cases like barrenness on the part of the wife, the wife’s infidelity and madness prove that it is a real business transaction and the good in question is the woman. Human rights activists argue that cultural practices of wife inheritance and ritual exploit women’s property rights, personal freedom, and health risks (Ellis, 2007). However, African scholars have argued that practices such as arranged marriages and bride price were cultural practices that had nothing to do with gender differences (Maathai, 2009). As I have pointed, older Kikuyu women had a chance to exhibit their true identity in old age or during widowhood. Contemporary changes like education
and increased gender equality have given women more opportunities which translate to higher self esteem. The assumption here is that more opportunities, like those that come with age (Maslak, 2008) and education opportunities (2004) will increase women’s self esteem and sense of self.
Chapter 5
Changing Family Structures and Values

Finally, my project addresses the changing family and social organizations in the rural Kenyan society, with major emphasis on changes in family structures, lifestyles and the increasing possibility of women being widowed. William Goode (1963) proposed that with modernization and urbanization families change from extended kinship ties to nuclear kinds of family settings. Extended family ties had their own advantages and reasons for popularity among traditional East African communities. The need for agricultural labor and economic security was the most fundamental reason for the ties. On the other hand, urbanization has brought about different values and beliefs about the family, especially since people move into urban centers or jobs and other economic opportunities. Zimmer & Dayton (2005) suggested that even though there are significant changes in Kenya’s demographic composition due to decreased fertility, the focus is still on the younger population leading to neglect of older adults.

Other accounts of family changes address the issue of changing cohabitation whereby unlike times in the past, older people prefer or are forces to live by themselves instead of cohabitating with their oldest sons. Studies have shown that these changes do not affect the flow of resources and help, a purpose served by cohabitation; the premise is that children still find means of sending help to their older parents despite location differences. Moreover, women’s lives have improved with the rise of feminist movements that advocate for women’s rights in matters of property ownership and other personal rights. Kenyan women have a better chance of
fair trials in cases where violence or discrimination is directed towards them. At the same time, it is universal that women are likely to live longer than men, and this situation leads to different life styles. Studies have also revealed that many grandmothers are forced to take care of their grandchildren in cases when their parents are either wiped out by AIDS/HIV or when they move into cities for better economic opportunities. Widowhood is an important turning point for some older Kikuyu women that affects kinship relations, socioeconomic well being as well as social standings. These changes and others introduce not only unexpected roles like child-fostering for older Kikuyu women but also possibilities of being neglected by their children. On the other hand, increased activism and advocacy have given older women more autonomy and freedom of expression on top of the respect accorded them by due to their age.

**Changing Family Structures**

In *Cultural Anthropology*, Gary Ferraro (2005) stated that extended families were found in specific kinds of economies. He suggested that agricultural economies tend to correlate with extended families while wage employment and foraging economies thrived best in nuclear kinds of family settings. This assumption held true for the traditionally agricultural Kikuyu ethnic group in pre-colonial and earlier years of independence. Ingoldsby & Smith (2005) and Ferraro (2005) aptly suggest that extended families provide not only the large number of workers required for agricultural production but also prevented the land from being continually subdivided into smaller and less productive plots. Some people also believe that there were strong cultural factors that determined African’s preference for large and intricate family ties. Kevin Shilington (2005) suggested in his *Encyclopedia of African History* that “Africans believed that extended family reflected the continuality that bound various generations and
nuclear families through lineal or horizontal networks of affinity” (p. 286). Shilington (2005) added that members of extended families were bound to help each other at all times in the communal kind of life style that they led. He stated that extended families “imposed the burden of extensive obligations that called for reciprocal actions, moral sanctions, and codes that could not be violated without the threat of sanction” (p.286).

Large families were also cherished at the nuclear level, for social and economic reasons. Yakan (1999) and Shilington (2005) observed that the functions and values of extended families depended on power, prestige, status, and certain resources in African societies. Higher social-cultural status was accorded men who had many wives and children to look after, thus propagating practices like polygyny. According to Goode’s (1963) assumptions, lower fertility and other factors have changed the family settings into smaller ties including parents and children alone. However a different group of anthropologists has argued that there are still many ties with extended families as was evident in the results of Kenyan Kinship Study (KKS) of 2006. This study was conducted to see whether “Goode’s assumptions held for Kenya, a country that has undergone rapid urbanization after its independence in the 1960s” (Ferraro, 2006). The finding was that there are exceptions of Kikuyu individuals living in industrialized areas who used extended family ties as a strategy for coping with hardships. Families in Kenya have become smaller due to the influence of social-cultural changes. Zimmer and Dayton (2005) observed that nuclear families cropped up due to changes in work whereby individual qualifications and skills overtook fortunes of the family; increased employment opportunities in urban centers have attracted younger individuals who move with their families or get married in these settings; and more people prefer to be self-independent rather than depend on members of their extended families. Other factors like land scarcity and changing personal values, such as
those regarding education, are also crucial factors in the assessment of the changing ties (Weisner et al., 1997).

Nevertheless, this project looks at the majority of the cases where hardships are not the determining factors for family relationships. Amongst all these changes, the functions, roles, and the situation of the elderly women is most importance to this project. The consensus in literature is that older people tend to disengage and that modernization drives them away from the public realm. Both disengagement and modernization theories of aging assume that all older people participate in major public domains, and they lose their status with time. This project proposes that older Kikuyu women do not disengage completely, partly as a survival strategy but also due to the social exceptions of other members of the community. At the same time, there are adverse effects on them because of outmigration of their children, leaving them in the rural settings. It was recorded in 2005 by Zimmer and Dayton that not only had Kenya’s fertility rate decreased from 8 to about 4 in 30 years but also the total of older adults living in Kenya is expected to increase fourfold by 2040. UN (2001) reports also projected that the total number of older people living in Sub-Saharan Africa was expected to double by 2025. The implication of this report is that there are already more Older Kikuyu women than in yester years. This situation brings about issues of care-giving, cohabitation, and neglect in some cases.

Even though living with or near the family is vital for the maintenance and support of different family members, socio-economic and industrial changes in Kenya have forced families to downsize. However, some sociologists have argued that the nuclear family is incomplete without the extended family (Ingoldsby & Smith, 2005). It is a universal trend that older people tend to require instrumental assistance with chores like cooking and shopping when they become frail (Zimmer & Dayton, 2005). The increasing numbers of older women, coupled with the
inevitable changes, have eroded some of the values and practices of the extended family. To begin with, members of the extended family would chip in to help take care of older Kikuyu women in the past, but recently care giving is seen as a burden for smaller families that are could be living in far away cities. It should also be noted that this pattern does not hold in all family settings as depicted by the results from KKS (2006). Within the rural settings, traditions allowed for older parents to move in with their sons; that way, their daughters-in-laws could attend to their needs. Ingoldsby and Smith (2005) added that taking care of older adults was considered cherished piety by the clan and community at large.

Secondly, it is increasingly difficult for older women to move in with their children since most of them prefer to live with their wives and children, or move into urban centers for jobs. Urban centers are characterized by higher standards of living and accelerated lifestyles. Thus it is more burdensome for children to house and maintain their aged mothers. Furthermore older women’s reliance on agricultural production of their sons’ established families has declined as more emphasis is put on education and urban employment (Weisner et al., 1997). These situations make it emotionally and financially difficult to live with and maintain older Kenyan women. Lastly, both Weisner and colleagues (1997) and Calasanti & Slevin (2001) observed that ageism and neglect of older adults are the other result of changing life styles within the family. Studies done on older Samia women of western Kenya (Albert and Catell, 1994) and !Kung older women (Shostak, 2001) show that older people complain of being disregarded, disrespected and undermined because of the Westernization of their cultures. This trend can be applied to Kikuyu women too, as evidenced by remarks such as “we’re being forgotten,” “the extended family is falling apart,” and “old people don’t get the respect and care they used to” (Weisner et al., 1997). This not only reflects the difficulties experienced by Kikuyu families in
maintaining the value of kinship ties and traditions, but also speaks to the erosion of older people’s roles and status.

This project proposes, arguably, that Kikuyu families lose or give up vital traditions and roles that were conducted by older women in the society. At the same time, older women have devised ways of maintaining these familial ties and calling attention to themselves amidst changing structures. It has also proposed that upsetting the Kikuyu traditional land tenure system that thrives on extended family structure leads to the “loss of the individual or group and, therefore, the cohesion of the Kikuyu people” (Shilington, 2005). Loss of family identity and cohesiveness has led to the loss of older women’s roles like educating children and grandchildren about cultural practices and beliefs. As mentioned earlier, wisdom was disseminated during cultural traditions like initiation and story telling sessions. The Kikuyu ethnic community like many other Kenyan societies had non-fictional story telling and education opportunities that were conducted by elderly women. These women taught younger cohorts about ethnic history as well as general moral issues regarding life in relation to their community and country (Yakan, 1999). I also mentioned that some older women served in elder councils which dealt with conflicts within and other legal matters at the community level, and of course older women, and Kikuyu women in general, identify themselves strongly with traditional female roles of caregiving, parenting, and grand-parenting. Changed in the community’s lifestyles and familial practices takes away these functions and roles.

Even though some older Kikuyu women do not live with or near their children, technological and infrastructural advancements have made it easier for these women to keep in touch with their larger families. In From Rural Village to Global Village, Heather Hudson (2006) outlined that cellular phones, computers, and money transfer systems are some of the factors that
have made it possible for people in rural settings to enjoy some form of connection with and support from city dwellers. At the same time, older women of the Kikuyu ethnic group participate in the “complaint discourse” (Catell, 1994; Sokolovsky, 2001). This is a means through which older people call for attention; if could be described as a cry for help that is learned by rural elders as a coping strategy (Weisner, 1997). Remarks such as, “children don’t listen to us any more” or “I was forgotten by my own children,” are typical of many older women whose children have moved into cities (Weisner, 1997; Brown & Dicherson-Putman, 1998).

**Widowhood**

It has been accounted that half of the women aged 60 and up in Sub-Saharan Africa are widows (Sokolovsky, 2007). Deborah Carr (2005) testified in *Widowhood* that widowhood is one of the most depressing and distressing of all life transitions. She also stated that the source of stress could be attributed to the fact that the absence of the male spouse reduces the number of resources available to women. The assumption is that with the change to nuclear kinds of families, families today are expected to be socially and economically autonomous; thus spouses might be highly dependent on each other for emotional and instrumental support. Couples that observed strict traditional gender roles, as in the case of older Kikuyu people, are forced to implement many role readjustments (Carr, 2005). In the case of African widows, scholars have established that there are commonalities in the problems they encounter. Potash (1986) said that African widows from groups with differing social systems often face similar problems. Later, Cattell (2003) observed that in the absence of extensive research on African widows, information from research on other ethnicities can be used but with caution. Cattell listed the following
characteristics for African widows and she goes on to state that they are common amongst African women regardless of their marital status:

1. Embeddedness in kinship systems and dependence of these systems for claims of productive resources.
2. Economic self-reliance and initiative.
4. Gender relations dictated by patriarchal persuasiveness.

At the same time, widows’ status tends to fall with the loss of husbands because in these patriarchal communities, women lose their claim to resources and extended family’s support. In the event that older women should lose their control of resources, they also lose their power, status, autonomy, and voice in the community (Potash, 1986).

The major connection between psychological disorders and widowhood is financial (Carr, 2005) or general economic constraints. In the case of traditional Kikuyu family settings, financial strains came about because of widows’ dependence on their husbands’ financial contributions during marriage. This is especially the case because widows are less likely than widowers to remarry. Therefore, widows are vulnerable in the patrilocal and patriarchal Kikuyu culture and face “potential dispossession by their late husbands’ blood relatives” (Welch, 2001, p. 95; Cohen & Menken, 2006). Other anthropologists and sociologists have argued that older Kikuyu widows and other African widows attain a different status that comes with power and authority because of the masculine responsibilities that they have acquired (Potash, 1986; Sokolovsky, 2007). At the same time, their freedom, power and autonomy could be a result of reduced male dominance and access to more resources like land with the absence of the husband. For the most part, I agree with Potash’s (1986) claim that widows are actors who choose options
that best fit their situations within the community. Kikuyu widows tend to come up with coping mechanisms since most of them have dependants, like grandchildren, and themselves to support with fewer resources than they had when they were married.

Moreover, Sokolovsky (2007) suggested that “modernization and development have wrought changes in informal support systems and the roles of widows and older women, and women have to be sensitive to these changes and be creative in their responses” (p. 163). For this reason and others, some of them opt to remarry for economic and social security (Potash, 1986). The male figure replaced economic support and access to resources within the clan and family, especially land (Sokolovsky, 2007; Cattell, 2004). In addition, grown sons become very important to widows for the same reasons — to be secure in claims to land and other productive resources and support. Another strategy used by widows is commonly known as the “complaining discourse” which proposes that older widows lament and complain to non-family members about how they are mistreated and neglected by their own people (Cattell, 2004). Similarly, in her study of Maragoli wisdoms of western Kenya Mutongi (2007) discovered that widows respond to changing socio-cultural and political circumstances by using language and gender roles to appeal for assistance. Lastly some of the widows turn to the judicial system for help. This yields mixed results depending on the situation and how well they argue their case could either get help or not.

However, widows experience different situations depending on both their social situations, as mentioned above, and personal differences as was depicted by Greef and Ritman (2005). They studied 25 widows of rural South Africa, who were asked to state personal qualities which helped them adapt to the loss of their spouses. Optimism, perseverance, faith, self-confidence, and expression of emotions were some of the personal traits that came up. It is safe
to say the same in the case of rural Kenya, where personal traits of older widows determine their coping and rates of survival. Positive self-concept and optimism are associated with higher quality of life for older individuals.

**Fostering Grandchildren and HIV/AIDS**

There are several reasons that might lead to this kind of relationship but this project focuses primarily on the AIDS/HIV orphans and their dependence on their grandchildren. We have seen that urbanization often leads to the need for grandparents to act as care-givers for their grandchildren when they are often left behind by their parents in rural settings (Bengston et al., 2005). However, this section discusses the situations that arise when parents are wiped out by AIDS and their children have to depend on their grandparents for survival. At the same time grandparents, especially grandmothers, are faced with the role of caring for their infected children and sometimes spouses.

From an economic stand point, grandmothers’ informal contributions, through their roles of care-giving for spouses and grandchildren, are not considered in discussions of national macro-indicators (Bengston et al., 2005). In *Aging in Sub-Saharan Africa*, Cohen & Menken (2006) agree that older women either have the virus (6% of reported AIDS cases in Africa in 1999 affected people age 50 or older) or are the parents of infected adult-age children. Statistics showed that by 2005, AIDS-related deaths have forced elderly Kenyan grandmothers to adopt 2 million orphaned grandchildren (Oburu & Palmerus, 2005). However, “modernization and development have led to broad social and economic changes that put in doubt the continual viability of traditional arrangements for the care and support of older people” (Cohen & Menken, 2006:16). Weaker traditional, social, and customary ties; greater independence and autonomy;
and geographic isolation are some of the factors that have led to the decreasing support for older foster parents. Even though support is remitted by relatives living in urban areas, it is typically irregular and may not be sufficient to provide economic security.

According to reports by the UN program on AIDS (2006) 25.8 million people affected with AIDS in Africa are not only in their prime earning years but also the principal source of material and economic support for older people and children in their families. This loss could also have psychological ramifications on older Kenyan women’s lives because of the trauma of seeing their children die. Their loss forces older individuals (who might themselves be widowed) to take up the responsibility of caring for their children. At the same time, grandparents are forced to “start life all over again” by feeding the children and buying them other vital necessities like clothes and medicine (Bengston et al., 2005). It has also been established through studies that AIDS has affected the overall agricultural productivity of rural area. This is a setback since the economic stability of these locations, and the country in general, depend on farm produce. Laura Murphy (2008) observed in her report, *AIDS and Kitchen Gardens: Insights from a Village in Western Kenya*, that subtle changes in crops and farming techniques can be traced to diverse HIV and infections, illness, mortality, widowhood, influences of foster childcare, and AIDS. The overall effect is a significant decrease in the production due to reduced labor or the monetary support needed for proper agriculture. Murphy’s observations were drawn from a village census and in-depth interviews with rural gardeners and group discussions in Bungoma district of Kenya.

Child fostering in such scenarios could a big problem for older Kenyan women in rural settings, especially if they have to lower socio-economic status. Cohen & Menken (2006) stated that older Kikuyu women who lose their grown children are faced by double burden of replacing
lost resources of income while supporting additional family members. With this kind of adjustment comes mental stress and physical fatigue due to the addition of labor. At the same time, there is social stigma surrounding the HIV and AIDS epidemic that lead to isolation of the victims and those following the death of household members by the scourge. A different kind of problem raised by medical professionals is that some of these older women are healthy and stand the risk of being exposed to opportunistic diseases like TB and other complications brought by patients (Cohen & Menken, 2006). There is hope and some sense of support for fostering grandparents in Kenya because of the government and NGO’s initiatives to create awareness about the AIDS scourge. Women have also created self-help groups that directly address issues of caring for AIDS orphans by providing necessary monetary and informational resources.

As stated above, there are several factors which have changed life styles and preferences of people living in rural parts of Kenya. Family relationships and care-giving options are some of the areas that have undergone drastic changes due to modernization. Some of the demographic changes that have upset the traditional family-centered eldercare include: increasing aging population, rapid growth in elderly households, higher rates of disabled elders in need of long-term care, and the growth in labor force participation particularly among younger cohorts. In traditional Kenyan customs, filial piety was demanded of children as a binding requirement of children to look after their parents. Cultural emphasis on family care-giving still remains strong. Gendered nature of care-giving reflects social norms and constructions which makes care-giving women’s work. Moreover, extended family ties have not disintegrated but have changed in accordance to the socio-cultural changes within Kenya. Nevertheless, older people are not held in as high regard as in older days. This chapter also highlighted the situation of older widows who could have economic hardships especially due to their dependence on agriculture as their
main source of income. Among the reasons for widowhood is the AIDS epidemic, which has upset economic status of families and introduced new care-giving roles. Widowhood could also be a time of economic and emotional liberation as a result of decreased male supervision and authority. As for child fostering, Ice and his colleagues (2008) noted from the Kenyan Grandparents Study that more support from other members of the family led to better physical functioning and general health for foster-grandparents.
This work includes a mixture of both micro- and macro-level perspectives on studying ageing as seen through different lenses of the family, society, public policies, economics, cultural practices, gender, and religion. Studying policies by focusing on individual life experiences along with broader social forces allows for a holistic analysis. At the micro level, this project concentrates on individual women of the Kikuyu tribe in Kenya. The micro perspective looks into individual choices made by these women and how they affect the lives of other people around them. People interact with one another and the society within pre-defined roles which are dictated by age norms. Morgan and Kunkel (2007) point that in all this, the most important factor in studying ageing is the diversity of choices and resources available to people as they mature. These authors suggested that diversity refers to the patterns of difference among societies of people (p. 21). Diversity in choices leads to different patterns of experiences because older people do not necessarily experience the same events throughout their lives.

On the other hand, macro effects operate at the structural level of society. In this case there is a shift in focus from individual women to structural systems like health care, public facilities and amenities, community centers, governments, education, and pension plans among many others. The lives of older women and other members of the society are influenced greatly by these systems. For example, chronological age is a major qualification for most of the services offered by public structures. In any case, these systems influence or help shape the experiences and meanings of ageing (Morgan & Kunkel, 2007) as well as the quality of life.
However, rules and guidelines created by these institutions could create a matrix of oppression for women and other groups too. In this project, however, I focused on oppressive systems that are male hegemonic and disregard women or place them in subordinate positions. Customary laws that informed the Kikuyu way of life and traditions are the most evident systems that propagate bias against older Kikuyu women. However, I have proposed that many older women accept their position as mother, servers, home keepers, child-bearers and caregiver as a part of their life and nature. As such, older Kikuyu women are less likely to protest publicly about female discrimination.

As we have seen above, ageing does not occur in a vacuum. Individuals are surrounded by social, economic and historic events that influence personal lives and groups. Naturally, as people mature they go through experiences and lessons that influence their behavior as well as choices a process that is called the age effect (Miller, 2008). The period effect, on the other hand, accounts for major events that affect members of a certain age group. For example, the women who lived in Kenya during the British rule have different perceptions of the country and foreigners as compared to younger women. In the same breath, cohort effects explain the experiences of a group of people born around the same time in history. These three factors come in handy in discussing differences between ageing individuals. Similarly, an umbrella perspective employed here is life course theory. Morgan and Kunkel define life course as a road map that influences individuals’ choices about moving into and out of important roles within the society like parenting, employment and retirement (p. 94). As such, the ageing experience is a trajectory built by individual choices and role transitions throughout life.

As we saw in chapter two, the ageing experience varies greatly among women in Kenya. However, there are similar patterns which allow for general deductions and observations about
Kenyan women in relation to woman throughout the world. I also discuss women’s roles and resilience in relation to policy as well as socio-cultural changes. I agree with the economist and Nobel Prize winner Amartya Sen (2001) in his claim that development is necessary in freeing people (this case older Kikuyu women) from imprisonments by poverty, social deprivation, political tyranny, and cultural authoritarianism. This project has proposed the same for older women in Kenya and highlighted some of their initiatives to liberate themselves from over-dependence on men for existence. I also dispel the assumption that many women are involved in formal women organizations that fight for women’s rights. Instead, I have presented the idea that older women and other women in Kenya are more concern about financial security than equality with men. Gordon (1996) agreed that Kenyan women form self help groups not for gender equality but for overcoming financial hardships and reducing their work loads to assist their homes and families. Nevertheless, I have established that there is need for more theory-based research in the case of changing social-cultural policies in relation to the lives of older Kikuyu women in Kenya.
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