# Sexualizing Politics in Kenya: an Evolving Strategy to Acquire Power?

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**Abstract:** *Politics has many strategies for the participants in their quest to acquire, use, and maintain power. The strategies have wide pronged approaches which require pragmatists in the field of political play to finding which suits their interests and desired end. As is practiced elsewhere globally, politics retains its shape as to the traditional rules of practice. Following from these background, it is not clear whether sexualizing politics is a new phenomenon, or a new practice (anti-discipline morality) that is gaining traction in some corners of the minimizing global political space or it has existed among the political societies with less publicity. Seemingly so, the theme narratively is gaining scholarly ground. In this article, with generalizations we deductively engage a discourse on this subject with Kenya in mind. As we interact with the existing knowledge that other scholars have written in related topics, we use objective guided themes and content literature review to arrive at our conclusions qualitatively. In our objectives; we are interested in finding out how sexualization of politics eventuates, establishing instances of sexualization of politics, and examining the context of sexualization of politics in power dynamics amidst constant morality in the society. This study argues from two theories, the objectification theory which propagates the ability to employ body as a tool to achieve political goals. On the other hand, our second theory – Foucalt Theory of power interpose to dis individualize power altogether. In the end, the article sums that whereas strategies are many in political power games, individuality is much shaped by their context in deciding whether to sexualize or to asexualize their politics.*

**Keywords:** *Power politics, Political sexualization, Political sexology, Power politics, Political a sexualization, Kenyan Politics.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The subject of sexualization of politics in Kenya is not clear from existing studies in the conceptual word expression used in this study. However, much studies prefer to use gender based violence, violence against women in politics, and mentioning them as election – related sexual offences. A very open discourse in this subject closer to the thinking being projected is what Audrey Wiper writes in her work "*The Politics of Sex: Some Strategies Employed by the Kenyan Power Elite to Handle a Normative-Existential Discrepancy*". In this piece, she focuses on disproportional power among the gender in which there is obvious male dominated power elitism emanating from the traditional system. It is easily observed in general that the discourses are leaned towards the gender rights of women. According to United Nations Women (2018), the range of experiences of political life have been the stories of abuse, violence and the fear of violence that have impeded women's participation and full contribution to political life (Ms. Purna Sen). Violence against women in politics is deeply damaging not only to women, but to all of us (Andrew Gilmour, Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights, OHCHR).

There exists opposing arguments on what sexuality itself is. It is important to craft it circumspective for clarity in understanding. Reference to sexuality (Ahlberg & Kulane, 2011) in the plural does not simply point to the diverse forms of orientation, identity or status. It is a political call to conceptualize sexuality outside the normative social orders and frameworks. The various dimensions of sexuality include sexual knowledge, beliefs, values, attitudes and behaviors, as well as procreation, sexual

orientation, and personal and interpersonal sexual relations. Sexuality touches a wide range of other issues including pleasure, the human body, dress, self-esteem, gender identity, power and violence. It is an encompassing phenomenon that involves the human psyche, emotions, physical sensations, communication, creativity and ethics. Despite these, many researchers (Oinas & Arnfred, 2009) still view sexuality within the narrow spectrum of the sex act without exploring the extraneous factors that impact and shape our multifarious sexualities. Some scholars caution against oversimplifying and essentializing the practice and discourse of sexualities in Africa.

Sexuality and gender go hand in hand (Ahlberg & Kulane, 2011); both are creatures of culture and society, and both play a central, crucial role in maintaining power relations in our societies. They give each other shape and any scientific enquiry of the former immediately invokes the latter. Gender provides the critical analytical lens through which any data on sexuality must logically be interpreted. Researching human sexuality without looking at gender is like cooking pepper soup without pepper – it might look like pepper soup but one sip will make it clear that an essential ingredient in this Nigerian specialty is missing.

Sexualizing politics as a power acquisition strategy is dependent on the actor involved and to whom the actor engages. It is with pessimism not specify the gender of the actor in descriptive terms since it is a crosscutting behavior that elevates into political play by men and women. In South Africa (Decoteau, 2013)., whereas Thabo Mbeki reconfigured racial politics in his attempt to avoid financing antiretroviral provision while simultaneously promoting an African renaissance, President Jacob Zuma's reign has been characterized by a certain sexualization of politics analyzed through the 'traditional' sexuality performed by Jacob Zuma. This case illustrates how shifts in the political economy instigated transformations in gender ideologies and sexual practices in the post-apartheid era. Although side by side masculinity in crisis have become popular in contemporary Africa, the sexualization of politics signifies and masks deep-seated concerns about the 'successes of liberation.

The current and ongoing research problematizes the objectification of women politicians and candidates in Kenya. Most of the research has documented that women are targeted for sexually objectifying treatment in their day-to-day lives more often than are men. Sexual objectification refers to the fragmentation of a woman into a collection of sexual parts and sexual functions stripping her of a unique personality and subjectivity so that she exists as merely a body. Common situations that would constitute sexual objectification include gazing or leering at women's bodies, sexual comments about women's bodies, whistling or honking the car horn at female passersby, taking photographs of women's bodies and body parts with a cell phone, exposure to sexualized media imagery or pornography, sexual harassment, sexual violence, and rape.

But objectification doesn't just have political consequences for elite women. The objectification of women's bodies has been a hallmark of American society and culture. Psychologists purport that this constant exposure to objectifying rhetoric and imagery can lead to a phenomenon called *self*-objectification, which occurs when individuals internalize observers' perspectives of their physical bodies. Women tend to self-objectify at higher rates than men. The current political environment in Kenya has presented an opportunity for women objectification in both political divide. Queens of Raila, Warembona Baba, Warembona Ruto and the suggestive dance moves by women aspirants are some of the groups and instances that objectify women in the current political arena. This objectification has been seen as a strategy to endear the masses to their political narratives using their "beauty". This phenomenon is becoming more acceptable in the Kenyan context putting women and girls in the danger of the vices that comes with sexual objectification of the female gender.

Instances of sexualization of politics according to Valenti (2015) have been associated with expression of interest and exercise of electoral rights by women more so first time attempts. She observes, there seems to be no end to the number of insults that are tailor-made for women. And for those who decide to run for office, the sexist slams seem to never end. For as long as women have wanted to have a voice in our political process there have been men looking to shut them up with slurs and condescension. And it shows no sign of stopping – or even slowing. The first woman to run for president of the United States, Victoria Woodhull (who ran before women even had the right to vote), was called "Mrs Satan", a witch and a "harpie". Geraldine Ferraro, the first woman to run for vice-president, had her abilities constantly questioned and was frequently referred to as Ms or Mrs instead of "Congresswoman". Decades later, when Sarah Palin was a vice-presidential hopeful, she would have to endure sexualized insults, including having a sex doll modeled after her.

Current and former Government officials (UN, 2021), many speaking candidly from personal experience, explored the daily threats faced by women in positions of authority — as the Commission on the Status of Women continued its work today. Wafa Bani Mustafa, Chair of the Coalition of Women Members of Parliament from Arab Countries to Combat Violence against Women, and a former Member of Parliament of Jordan, said her group was formed in response to a complete denial of the phenomenon of political violence against women in the Arab region. Noting that many women in leadership roles in Jordan eventually leave their posts due to harassment and threats, she outlined her work to criminalize political violence and ensure that women receive their fair share of seats in both local government and in Parliament.

Radical activists first began discussing sexual objectification in earnest in the 1970s. Andrea Dworkin (1991) and Catharine MacKinnon (1989a), the most prominent of these, claimed that sexual objectification dehumanized women and consequently contributed to gender inequality and violence against them. Advances in communication technologies have enabled a new era of objectification, marked by an increasing presence and acceptance of sexual objectification in media and of late politics. The present study argues that, in the years since scholars began discussing sexual objectification, its ubiqiutousness, degree of penetration into our daily lives, and normalization have all increased since mobile communication gadgets and the ever increasing apps driven by easy access of internet connectivity has become common place. Neither the radicals who problematized the objectification of women, nor the psychologists who theorized it, could have anticipated the changes that the internet and other communication technologies would bring.

Extant literature has mainly focused on the negative mental health and cognitive correlates of self-objectification. However recent work has actually linked self-objectification to how women behave in the political sphere. A study by Rachel Calogero (2012) established that self-objectification is related to the belief that beauty is a type of social "currency," and that both this belief and self-objectification are negatively related to gender-based political activism. Put simply, women who are high self-objectifiers are more likely to be content with the status quo in terms of gender relations and less likely to engage in efforts to improve the current status of women. This is because women who are high self-objectifiers have incorporated their physical beauty as a central part of their self-concept. Often this entails the belief that physical attractiveness is an extremely important asset or "currency," and is something that will benefit them more than other skills, talents, and other pursuits.

## 2. THE OBJECTIFICATION THEORY AND FOUCALT THEORY OF POWER

To objectify, posits Cash (2012),is to make into and treat something that is not an object as an object, which can be used, manipulated, controlled, and known through its physical properties. Philosopher Martha Nussbaum specified seven qualities that represent common attitudes and treatment toward objects and things that when applied to a person constitutes objectification. Importantly, each of these qualities is inherent in the sexual objectification of girls and women. Objectification theory, originally proposed by Barbara Fredrickson and Tomi-Ann Roberts, is essentially a synthesis and systematic formalization of the many disparate lines of scholarship on the sexual objectification of women. Objectification theory attempts to explain the extreme and pervasive tendency to equate women with their bodies and why this can have such negative consequences for women's body image and beyond.

The theory in its narrations is very relevant in explaining sexualization in politics. In its deeper analysis, more than all emphasis is how women gender (or bodies) can be objectivized or how they themselves can objectificate their bodies for some benefits. A very private occurrence and not easily admitted yet true is gaining prominence in African politics in a unique way probably shaped by the prevailing politico - environment. From this argument, we may say objectification is made much more pronounced by the presence of a medium where the media in the current open societies tend to lay bare such information to the society.

Objectification is a notion central to feminist theory. It can be roughly defined as the seeing and/or treating a person, usually a woman, *as an object*. In this entry, the focus is primarily on sexual objectification, objectification occurring in the sexual realm. Martha Nussbaum (1995, 257) has identified seven features that are involved in the idea of treating a person as an object:

i. *Instrumentality*: the treatment of a person as a tool for the objectifier's purposes;

ii. *Denial of autonomy*: the treatment of a person as lacking in autonomy and self-determination;

iii. *Inertness*: the treatment of a person as lacking in agency, and perhaps also in activity;

iv. *Fungibility*: the treatment of a person as interchangeable with other objects;

v. *Violability*: the treatment of a person as lacking in boundary-integrity;

vi. *Ownership*: the treatment of a person as something that is owned by another (can be bought or sold);

vii. *Denial of subjectivity*: the treatment of a person as something whose experiences and feelings (if any) need not be taken into account.

Rae Langton (2009, 228–229) has added three more features to Nussbaum's list: *reduction to body*: the treatment of a person as identified with their body, or body parts; *reduction to appearance*: the treatment of a person primarily in terms of how they look, or how they appear to the senses; and *silencing*: the treatment of a person as if they are silent, lacking the capacity to speak. The majority of the thinkers discussing objectification have taken it to be a morally problematic phenomenon.

Objectification theory (Balraj, 2015) provides an important framework in understanding ideas to improve women's lives in a socio cultural context which sexually objectifies the female body and equates a woman's worth to her body appearance and sexual functions. Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) developed Objectification Theory and postulated that women are sexually objectified and treated as an object to be valued for its use by the male gender and the media. The understanding of this theory is that the media plays an important role in shaping women's thoughts on how they should or should not be looked upon in the public. Weskot (1986:5) stated that objectification "is the socially sanctioned right of all males to sexualise all females, regardless of age or status."Objectification may occur in many ways ranging from sexual violence to sexual evaluation (Fischer, Vidmar & Ellis, 1993). The most subtle and deniable way of objectification is enacted and is through gaze or visual inspection of the body (Kaschak, 1992).

Goh-Mah (2013) discussed the objectification of women as the elephant in the room; though this issue is seen as being too obvious to ignore, it does come as no surprise that the issue of objectification is often side swept by media pundits. He further stated that because sexual objectification has become so visible in viewer's day-to-day lives, it has become the most potent sector of objectification; this does not however, mean that the other kinds of objectification should not be resolved." She used dichotomy and the differentiation between subject and object status in the simplest story lines, and proceeded to say, "…in society's dominant narrative, subject and object status is heavily gendered, with men granted subject status the vast majority of the time, and women severely objectified." This proves that sexual objectification of women is something that stems from something much deeper than images that are seen daily.

According to Cash (2012), objectification theory takes as a starting point that cultural practices of sexually objectifying women are pervasive in Westernized societies and create multiple opportunities for the female body to be on public display. A large body of research has documented that women are targeted for sexually objectifying treatment in their day-to-day lives more often than are men. Objectification theory articulates the range of ways in which sexual objectification can manifest in day-to-day life.

The way female politicians are discussed in traditional and new media may contribute to the way individuals evaluate those candidates. Objectification theory suggests that framing individuals in a way that reduces them to their physical characteristics is detrimental to perceived agency (Funk and Coker, 2016).Furthermore, in light of increased visibility of female candidates in national political races (Perks & Johnson, 2014), understanding the relationship between objectifying messages and candidate perception is of the utmost importance. Nussbaum suggests that rhetorically reducing an individual to their physical selves strips an individual of agency and articulates the subject as incapable.

Similarly, Fredrickson and Roberts (Funk and Coker, 2016) theorize a litany of normatively negative psychosocial outcomes with internalizing objectification, pointing to male gaze and objectifying

commentary as contributing to an environment hostile and exclusionary to women. Heflick and Goldenberg (2014) further caution that, despite normatively negative outcomes associated with dehumanization, negative affect, and literal objectification of women, such messages continue to exist in the public and political sphere.

In relation to power, we may ponder to ask, how humans become subjects and objects in helping clarification of the theoretical underpinnings of sexualizing politics. Arguing philosophically about subject and object in relation power theory, Michel Foucault outlines his thoughts thus; my objective (Foucault, 2014), instead, has been to create a history of the different modes by which, human beings are made subjects. My work has dealt with three modes of objectification which transform human beings into subjects. I have sought to study, it is in my current work the way a human being turns himself into a subject. For example firstly, I have chosen the domain of sexuality-how men have learned to recognize themselves as subjects of "sexuality."Secondly I have studied the objectivizing of the subject in what I shall call "dividing practices." The subject is either divided inside himself or divided from others. This process objectivizes him. Last mode, the objectivizing of the productive subject, the subject who labors, in the analysis of wealth and of economics. It is an amazing in our thinking from Foucault that being an object goes through a fact to recognize self as a subject of sexuality which emanates from objectivizing self who is a divided being in pursuit of financial gains.

Foucault's analyses of power (Lynch, 2010) are simultaneously articulated at two levels, the empirical and the theoretical. The first level is constituted by a detailed examination of historical emergence of modes. Hence, he identifies modern forms of power, such as the closely related modes he termed "*disciplinary power*" and "*biopower*", and earlier, pre modern forms such as "*sovereign power*". Much of his work on power is devoted to articulating the emergence of later modes of power from earlier ones, and his analyses of disciplinary power in particular have been especially useful for subsequent scholars. Illustratively, first, imagine a pyramid, with a king at the top, his ministers in the middle and the king's subjects (the people) at the bottom. If the king issues an edict, then his ministers will execute the order, imposing it upon the king's subjects. Traditionally, power has been understood as "being at the top of the pyramid"; and that was all that it was understood to be. Foucault totally reconceives what constitutes power, and situates the traditional view a new fuller understanding; that power arises in all kinds of relationships.

## 3. THE CONTEXT OF SEXUALIZATION OF POLITICS IN POWER DYNAMICS AMIDST MORALITY DEBATES

Drawing a picture of context of sexualization in politics leads us to draw some comparisons with what takes places in other disciplines and work related activities such as researches. There are great inferences which one can have study and practical nexus. In an effort to expose the sex – research obstacles in China, Schneider et'al (2020) observes that although banquets, karaoke bars, alcohol, and sex/sexualized relations are ubiquitous in informal accounts of China-based fieldwork, they are largely hidden, excluded, or marginalized in formal accounts where we work in China Studies (a multi-disciplinary field including geographers, sociologists, anthropologists, political scientists, historians and others).

These similarities are not unique to research in China. Sandra Wekesa reports, every time Kenya has elections, the faces of political leaders plastered across walls, and billboards, always have one common characteristic: most of them are men. The missing faces of women occur because women face multiple barriers to enter into politics, including prevailing gender stereotypes and institutional obstacles and often face harassment, threats, and violence. Although all politicians are exposed to violence, women bear the brunt, largely because of their gender. Dr Juliet Kimemia, a gubernatorial aspirant in Kiambu County is one of the women previously targeted. "As a survivor of elections violence meted on me by my male counterpart, I must admit it plays a role in the mental and emotional well-being of a person," she says. Further, having suffered a lot of violence from him including verbal, emotional, psychological, Kimemia attests this is one reason most women would not want to get into political spaces. "While I was a County Executive Committee in Kiambu County, I went through a lot of psychological torture which led to my decision to run for governor," she explains (Wekesa, 2022).Characterizing sexualization in politics' quest for power is their nature; largely hidden, excluded, or marginalized in formal and full of harassment, threats, and violence. Sometimes the benefits are upfront shared or promised thereafter.

Discussing how gendered and sexual encounters during fieldwork shifted or shaped the research project can carry a sense of shame, feelings of failure, and fears of damaging one's professional standing and reputation (Nelson et al. 2017). We have found remarkably similar stories about navigating gendered and sexualized power relations in the field. Stories include responding to invitations like the text message quoted above, reacting to commentaries on the researcher's physical appearance, being pressured to drink alcohol to intoxication at banquets, visiting spaces of sex work like karaoke bars and massage parlors.

The contrast to how sexualized encounters shaped research projects leads to scenes where Copenhagen school of thought (speech act) type is applied with thought to enhance political action but in reality it is a clear projection of sexualization in politics. In this instance a constitutional duty of participating in politics is being equated with to give or not to give sexual relations. Peralta (2017) records Mishi Mboko, an opposition member of Parliament in the NASA coalition, has a less conventional idea to encourage new voters: Women in areas where the opposition holds sway should refuse to have sex with their spouses unless they register to vote."Sex [is] a powerful weapon to make reluctant men rush to register as voters," Mboko said."Women, this is the strategy you should adopt," the paper quotes her as saying. "It is the best. Deny them sex until they show you their voter's card." (Her own husband has already registered, Mboko told the paper). The setting of the context of sexualization by responsible persons acting in authoritative platforms set the pace for acceptability of its practice within the society and institutional confines.

While the formal rules that impede women's equal participation in politics were eliminated (George et'al) in most countries during the 20th century (with women's disenfranchisement persisting in the Arab Gulf region in some cases into the early 21st century, easing with Saudi Arabia's 2008 reforms for women in politics), informal rules and norms still mean that women's routes to participation in politics and experiences can differ from those of men. Since the Beijing Declaration set a goal for women's full and equal participation in politics in 1995, the story has been a mixture of much progress and some setbacks and persisting challenges. Women have become an undeniable force in positions of political power in the 21st century. Female leaders such as Dilma Rouseff in Brazil, Angela Merkel in Germany and Ellen Johnson Sirleaf in Liberia, among many others, have made their mark on the world's political stage in recent years. And while women have become a growing presence in politics, increasingly diverse types of women hold power.

This practice (Mutonya, 2022) takes a number of trajectories including the most common sexist languages. The following few depict the cases in Kenya's recent past; In December 2020, a leading Kenyan political party official, Edwin Sifuna, made vulgar remarks against a woman member of parliament. While campaigning for their political allies in a by-election, Sifuna said the woman is "not attractive enough to rape". In January this year, controversial bishop David Gakuyo, who is seeking election as a member of parliament, made demeaning remarks about two women politicians. He accused them of seeking votes while "swinging bare behinds". Kenyan politics is also laden with linguistic sexism. In the run-up to the 2017 elections, the former Kiambu County governor William Kabogo directed unsavoury remarks towards former Thika MP Alice Ng'ang'a, a single mother. He said unmarried women were "causing problems", and implored young women to find husbands.

Sexual violence has been a recurrent and brutal feature of elections in Kenya since the 1990s. Despite a progressive new Constitution and strengthened institutions and laws developed to prevent and respond to sexual violence, Kenya's National Commission on Human Rights documented 201 cases reported to have occurred in 11 counties during the last general elections in that country in 2017. What is known as 'electoral-related sexual violence' is a form of sexual violence, such as rape and sexual assault associated with electoral processes that is intended to influence a political outcome.

## 4. CONCLUSIONS

The aim of practice of objectification may be so casual as in achieving short or long term political aims to the actors, however, it has deeper consequences. "Sexualizing Politics in Kenya as a Strategy to acquire Power" may not be so elaborate and exposed but the study is an attempt to open a lid to an evolving practice. The 'Politics of Sex' in power discourse tend to handle a normative-existential discrepancy. It describes a disproportional power situation among the gender leading to male

dominated power elitism especially in 'culturalized traditional' systems. Sexuality and gender in the sense of this study go hand in hand and are creatures of culture and society playing a central, crucial role in maintaining power relations. The explanation here explains the first line of consequences which women activism have found necessary to advance for women rights in political equality champion fora.

However, objectification doesn't just have political consequences for elite women. Researchers (Calogero, 2012) have documented that women are about twice as likely to be depressed as men, and this gender difference in prevalence is evident across different ethnic groups. From the perspective of objectification theory, having a female body in a hypersexualized culture that chronically sexually objectifies the female body has consequences for women's emotional experiences. A considerable body of evidence currently exists to suggest that when girls and women self-objectify, they are more likely to experience a wide range of intrapersonal and interpersonal difficulties, far beyond those originally intended or proposed by objectification theory. The practice is in itself more to do with a psychological misnomer. Building on prior feminist scholarship, objectification theory moves beyond the internalization of the thin ideal to describe eating disorders as a response to women's feelings of powerlessness to control the systematic objectification of their bodies.

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