

An Analysis of Absence and Emergence: Conceptualising Social Change through the Prism of Women's Running in Kenya

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Kenya's global dominance in long distance running has engendered scholarship about what Kenyan men have accomplished and how they have achieved it. However, there is a paucity of research on the experiences of female Kenyan distance runners. The question addressed in this paper is how to account for and interpret both the absence as well as the later emergence of female runners in Kenya.

Distance running presents a useful lens through which to investigate how social change in an African context has operated over time. The training of a distance runner is possible almost everywhere, and it is one of few sports in which men and women compete side-by-side in the same venue. This permits systematic comparative analysis. Moreover, the emergence of Kenyan women within the world of elite-level athletics provides an effective lens through which to observe social change within local communities of the Rift Valley. By focusing on this specific context, it is possible to observe historical change and continuity through the impact that elite-level female runners in Kenya have had, particularly on their communities, as their athletic and economic successes have increased.

In order to conduct this analysis, a dual focus will be taken: firstly, examining how changes in the global structure of athletics created opportunities for female runners to bring global resources to the local level and secondly, looking at the extent to which their athletic and economic success generated changes in local social relations. Modelled in this way, women's running presents a prism through which to investigate the relationship between economic and social structures (a) in terms of how these structures shape the chances of athletic success and (b) the extent to which success then transforms these structures. The argument of this paper will be to show how situating the historical narrative of women's running within this analytical framework not only has wide application for other questions and contexts but also will permit a systematic evaluation of the absence and emergence of women's running in Kenya. More specifically, the consequences of tension among global, national and local contexts in the lives of female runners will be considered, which will lead to the conclusion that critical developments occur when contradictions exist among and within these levels.