Muslim women leaders in post-Cold War Kenya have been using the space opened up by the 1990s democratization momentum to bring about important transformations in critical private and public domains in society while also reclaiming their citizenship rights within their communities of faith, within regional and national organizations and movements, and within the secular postcolonial nation-state as members of a minority constituency. Moreover, expanded opportunities for girls in secular and Islamic education in the post-independence era and the new forms of information technologies that accompanied post-Cold war globalization quickly multiplied the networks of contacts and relations between Kenyan Muslim communities and Muslims in other parts of the world where both male and female students were exposed to and influenced by new ideas and politics that challenged their insularities within the nation-state. These influences galvanized Kenyan Muslims to new forms of activism that required new kind of social, cultural and political engagement within their own local communities and with other non-Muslim communities in the nation. In their gendered effects, these influences which included the re-reading of Islam, became yet another force inspiring creative agency on the part of Kenya Muslim women rights activists. This struggle over meaning of doctrinal texts is taking place in Kenya, as much as it is elsewhere in the world. In Kenya, however, one also cannot overlook the fact that the Kenya Muslim society as a whole is under increasing pressure to come to terms with the new politico-economic dynamics in the nation through a new understanding of Islam. In the process, and against the backdrop of the continuing challenge to male interpretive hegemony, new political and cultural-material conditions have propelled Muslim women rights activists into new leadership positions of public visibility in a wide array of social domains. My objective in this presentation is to focus on the leadership role of Kenya Muslim women in the legislative and constitutional review movement in the country that began to pick up special momentum in the early 2000s. I will demonstrate not only how the political circumstances “forced” patriarchal organizations like the Supreme Council of Kenya Muslims (SUPKEM) and the Muslim Consultative Council of Kenya (MCCK) to
turn to Kenya Muslim women for leadership at a critical point in the country’s history, but also how the emergent Muslim women leaders themselves used the space creatively and strategically, sometimes seeming to negotiate with patriarchy, to achieve ends that would be in the best legislative and constitutional interests of their constituents.