Patriarchy and the control of resources: Contributing factors to the feminization of poverty in Kenya?

Paper submission

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Abstract

This paper examines the factors that contribute to the feminization of poverty. It is largely a literature review which employs socio-economic data on Kenyan women. The paper is divided into three main sections, first a discussion on the definitions of poverty, patriarchy and the feminization of poverty. The second section employs an African feminist lens to analyse socio-economic data on Kenyan women. Drawing on the analysis the paper provides some recommendations to policymakers and practitioners for the issues raised in the paper.

Keywords: patriarchy, African women, poverty, feminization of poverty

Introduction

Two thirds of Africa’s poor are women (Topouzis, 1990). Yet, paradoxically, African women are also among the most hardworking in the world. A possible reason for this paradox is that African women face many barriers when attempting to access education, careers and economic resources. These barriers often stem from political, social and cultural factors (Shvedova, 2005). Given the prominence and extent of these barriers it is important to not only identify them but to comprehend them as well.

This paper examines the factors that contribute to the feminization of poverty. It is largely a qualitative study which employs data that was gathered as part of a larger doctoral study on the experiences of female political leaders in Kenya. The paper is divided into three main sections, first the definitions and discussion of poverty, patriarchy and the feminization of poverty. The second section analyses data on Kenyan women employing an African feminist lens. Drawing on this analysis the paper proposes some recommendations to policymakers and practitioners regarding the issues raised in the paper.

Definition of terms

Poverty is a contested term, often hard to conceptualize (Jaggar, 2013; Lesetedi, 2001). Scholars have numerous definitions and classifications of poverty (McFerson, 2010). For instance there is a definition of poverty as living on less than a dollar a day (Ngunjiri, 2008). Yet, there are those that maintain that poverty is not just about income, it also encompasses wellbeing (Fukuda-Parr, 1999; Kehler, 2001). In an attempt to synthesize a topic much discussed by researchers, poverty can be perceived not only as a lack of income to support one’s needs, but also difficulty in accessing education, careers and health and welfare services (Fukuda-Parr, 1999; Kaka & Abidin, 2013; Lesetedi, 2001). It is a state of lacking comfort, security and opportunities (Fukuda-Parr, 1999). Ethnicity, tribal affiliation and gender are some of the factors that impact on socio-economic status in society (Kehler, 2001).

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The phrase ‘feminization of poverty’ was conceptualized by Diane Pearce (1976) and suggests that women tend to be poorer than men. Women consist of a majority of the world’s poor, and poverty tends to affect women more persistently than men (Chant, 2007). According to McFerson (2010) the causes of poverty stem from exclusion, lack of opportunities and little to no income or assets. She reports that poverty includes all these four aspects can be the most damaging.

Factors contributing to the feminization of poverty in Africa are complicated (Topouzis, 1990). This is mirrored in recent scholarship on women’s welfare in Africa. Scholars state:

...women are especially susceptible to poverty due to a multiple of factors including inequalities engrained in cultural practices, which favour male control of resources; lack of productive assets; limited economic opportunities; weak attachment to the labor market; lower average earnings; and other gender-based injustices (Lombe, Safadi, Carrington, Mabbike & Lombé, 2014).

African women tend to have a higher life-expectancy than male counterparts yet they experience ‘harder lives’ (McFerson, 2010, p. 57). For instance African women work doubly hard as their male counterparts, for example in East Africa women work upto 16 hours a day on food production, preparation and caring for family members (Topouzis, 1990). Yet women are often excluded from landownership and access to education and economic resources. Women in Africa also have less income and access to services and resources than their male counterparts (Kaka & Abidin, 2013). This lack of access to opportunities and economic resources contributes to the feminization of poverty (Lesetedi, 2001). It is important to investigate the origins and underlying reasons for women’s lack of access to education and economic resources.

Due to a lack of opportunities women are forced into low wages or low status careers, what are described as ‘pink collar jobs’ (Topouzis, 1990, p. 62). Pink collar jobs are careers in teaching, nursing and administration which are often not well-paid professions (Topuzis, 1990). These professions are also described as ‘caring professions’ and further encompass social work, and domestic services (Mirza, 1992, p. 120). Despite African women earning less than men, they are responsible for duties such as caring for the sick, young and old. This supports the assertion that poverty is often a women’s concern in Africa (Kaka & Abidin, 2013).

It has been suggested that African women have been relegated to these professions due to colonial policies which limited opportunities for women and relegated them to ‘pink collar’ jobs, and roles in the agricultural sector where their labour often went unremunerated (Akyeampong & Fofack, 2014). The colonial economy was drawn across racial and gender lines often favouring males and foreign merchants (Akyeampong & Fofack, 2014). Witz (1992) refers to this as patriarchal exclusion whereby structures are orchestrated by men to confine women to certain professions or low paying positions. Scholars have suggested that the status of African women became markedly worse during and after the colonial era (Berger & White, 1999; Akyeampong & Fofack, 2014). The marginalization of African women stems from these colonial polices and has had enduring effects on post-colonial Africa (Akyeampong & Fofack, 2014). Such marginalization has contributed to the under-representation of women in formal employment, public-decision-making as well as inadequate access to financial resources and education.
In this section of the paper the concept of patriarchy is examined, by examining the structures and attitudes employed to uphold this concept. Patriarchy is defined by Walby (1990) as a system of attitudes and structures which men hold power over women. In this paper patriarchy is defined as males holding power over women, and subsequently creating structures that prevent women from accessing power or resources. Kalabamu (2006) suggests that men obtain power from social norms within a given culture. Education, economic resources and political status also provide power (Kalabamu, 2006). This supports the conceptualization of patriarchy as a system ‘under which cultural norms and common laws defining men’s and women’s rights, privileges, status and duties are defined.’ (Kalabamu, 2006, p. 239). Patriarchal attitudes and structures may contribute to African women’s exclusion and lack of opportunities. When males own or control most of the financial resources it contributes to the feminization of poverty (Espey, 2011).

Kalabamu (2006) argues that patriarchal systems and attitudes are prevalent in Botswana due to the absence of women in leadership and policy making organisations. It is the viewpoint of this paper that this absence in Kenya and many African countries is the reason for continued patriarchal systems and poverty among women. However, this is a paradoxical situation as for women to access positions of leadership and decision-making they need economic resources and opportunities which due to their status and existing patriarchal systems they cannot access, thus resulting in further marginalization.

This article suggests that patriarchy in the form of attitudes and structures influence gender inequality and contribute to feminization of poverty. These structures and attitudes hinder women from participating in most aspects of society. As a result women are therefore unable to access certain careers and in particular leadership positions which in turn does not allow them to inform policies that affect women. Additionally, these patriarchal structures tend to be cyclical, that is they create a cycle of perpetual inaccessibility to education and resources for women and subsequently women are prone to and perpetuate cyclical poverty. This is what Chant (2007, p. 1) describes as ‘inter-generational transmission of disadvantage’. It has been suggested that to improve the quality of life in a nation the lives of women needs to improve (McFerson, 2010).

**Women in Kenya**

An African framework is employed to investigate the circumstances of Kenyan women. African feminism is a conceptual framework that seeks to examine the experiences of African women and use these experiences to construct new perceptions of African women (Wane, 2011). The framework employs these experiences to create theory and knowledge about African women (Chilisa & Ntseane, 2010). It also employs a collaborative approach to African gender issues.

The next section examines the socio-economic data on Kenyan women. To begin this section the demographic data on Kenyan women will be discussed. Not only with this provide a socio-economic context but it will also provide insight regarding the status of women in Kenya. Firstly, women make up a little over half the Kenyan population. Female life expectancy is relatively high and has been on the rise from 57.6 years in 2013 to 64 years in 2014 compared to Kenyan males 55.4 years in 2013 to 60 years in 2014 (World Bank, 2013; Population Reference Bureau, 2014). This is consistent with assertions made by McFerson (2010) that African women tend to have a longer life than their male counterparts.
In terms of education, female rates of enrollment are lower than males particularly in the tertiary sector with a 43 percent participation rate for women (Odero-Owuor, & Wilmot, 2014). Secondary school enrolments are also higher for males at 63 percent compared to 57 percent for females (World Bank, 2013). A socio-economic profile of Kenyan women indicates that only 0.7 percent of women have a University qualification as their highest level of education, with women more prominent in arts courses (Institute of Economic Affairs, 2008). University completion rates for Kenyan men also remain low at 1.6 percent (Institute of Economic Affairs, 2008). There appears to be a significant drop in the number of women enrolled in tertiary institutions. This may be attributed to Kenyan cultural perspectives that hinder sending girls onto higher education (Institute of Economic Affairs, 2008). Other factors such as female circumcision and early marriage are also contributing factors. Recent data indicates that the rates of female circumcision in Kenya are declining at 27 percent but remain high in nearby Somalia at 98 percent (Feldman-Jacobs & Clifton, 2014). The high percentage of female circumcision rates\(^2\) indicates the deeply entrenched patriarchal attitudes among the pre-dominantly Islamic and pastoralist culture of Somalia and Northern Kenya. Female circumcision\(^3\) represents some of the patriarchal structures that prevent girls and women from furthering their education and subsequently accessing certain careers.

In the political sphere, women are again under-represented. In 2002, the representation of women in parliament was 9.8 percent (Inter-parliamentary Union, 2014). The current representation of Kenyan women is 19.1 percent for the National assembly and 26.5 percent at the Senate level (Inter-parliamentary Union, 2014). Despite the rise in female political representation, the number of Kenyan women in political leadership is under the 30 percent quota required. Such low numbers can be attributed to the educational qualifications required for this sector, and the often conflicting domestic duties of Kenyan women (Institute of Economic Affairs, 2008; Karani, 1987). Yet many Kenyan women are engaged in the informal sector, leading small businesses, cultivating and working on family owned tracts of land in the rural areas (Karani, 1987).

The representation of Kenyan women in formal employment is low at 30 percent. Most women are concentrated in what are defined as ‘pink collar’ jobs (Topuzis, 1990, p.62). Women are least represented in professions such as construction and manufacturing (Institute of Economic Affairs, 2008). The under-representation of Kenyan women in the workforce is not isolated to Kenya alone, the same issues can be found in other African countries, with women largely in the informal sector or in low or unpaid positions within the domestic and agricultural sectors (Walters & Mason, 1994). Analysis of the above data suggests that although Kenyan women live longer and represent a large proportion of the population, they are disadvantaged when it comes to education and career opportunities. This is consistent with the literature that African women have less opportunities and access to education and career advancement which in turn contributes to the feminization of poverty (Espey, 2011; Kehler, 2001)

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\(^2\) This refers to a cultural practice that takes place across Africa often performed as a rite of passage from girlhood to womanhood. Girls who undergo the rite together often form age-sets. In communities that practice female circumcision there is a belief that those who do not undergo the rite are unclean. Njoh (2006) provides a good account on the types of female circumcision practiced including the context and countries that still practice it.

\(^3\) Female circumcision takes place in the teenage years; however it does impact on women’s career development as after circumcision girls often drop out of school and get married. Therefore, through this disruption of schooling girls/women who undergo this practice are not able to advance in their education which limits their career prospects.
Discussion

Having examined the socio-economic context in which Kenyan women operate, this section will now examine the roots of the gender inequality as revealed by the data. This study found similar findings to other researchers (Kassilly & Onkware, 2010; Kamau, 2010, Nzomo, 1997; Walters & Mason, 1994). These studies found that male dominance and control of presents a significant hindrance for women. More specifically, culture represents an overarching inhibiting factor that is manifested in patriarchal structures and attitudes. This is consistent with arguments advanced by other scholars that the barriers women face are orchestrated by men to restrict women to their perceived appropriate roles and area of operation (Kareithi, 2014; Tamale, 2000).

Agbalajobi (2010) suggests that men have a financial advantage over women due to more career opportunities based on their gender. She adds that the gender based separation of labour places women at a disadvantage. Dulin (2008) credits societal norms as the reason males and females obtain different skills which results in gender inequalities. This is confirmed by the statistics of Kenyan women in the formal workforce which is 30 percent (Institute of Economic Affairs, 2008). These statistics support the concept that only a small number of women with access to financial resources can afford to access education and attain management or leadership positions (Agbalajobi, 2010). If women do not have access to an independent source they would have to rely on loans or funding which can prove problematic for women. Financial barriers are linked with the significant barriers of male control over resources and subsequently gender disparities within the society.

Central to the discussion above is the control of resources by males. Male domination and control of resources appears to be a recent event. Robertson (1998, p. 197) states ‘male privilege that was carried to the colonies’ may be the cause of this situation. Economic disparities across gender were not always the case in African society. Evidence suggests that pre-colonial African women were largely economically independent (Akyeampong & Fofack, 2014; Okonjo, 1981). They were involved in market trading, including long-distance trade and the distribution of farm produce, which enabled them to acquire wealth (Berger & White, 1999). Additionally women in pre-colonial African societies provided informal banking services to their families, supplying funds and resources (Acholonu, 1995). Among the Kikuyu in Kenya, women were in charge of their produce and were able to dictate how these resources were allocated (Clark, 1980). Amadiume (2009) found that pre-colonial African women operated farming and commerce industries and were able to translate the wealth from these activities into political and social influence. From this we can surmise that pre-colonial African women had pockets of influence especially in the economic sphere. The current situation of Kenyan women is not as autonomous as her pre-colonial sisters. Kenyan women constitute 60-70 percent of those living in poverty (Ngunjiri, 2007). Patriarchal attitudes and structures manifest in a lack of access to education and finances are contributing factors to the plight of Kenyan women (Ngunjiri, 2007). The economic situation of pre-colonial Kenyan women appears in sharp contrast to the current situation of African women where resources are controlled and distributed by males.

The recent lack of financial resources available to Kenyan women, and the control of such resources by males reflect the patriarchal and specifically Victorian ideals imparted by colonialism. Taiwo, Abayomi and Bashiru (2013) suggest that colonial export policies marginalized African women by excluding them from their traditional roles as traders and instead developed the capacity of African males and foreign merchants. In the Kenyan context, foreign merchants were Indians who came over to build the railway (Coquery-
African women were also denied access to loans which further restricted them from participating in the colonial economy (Taiwo, Abayomi & Bashiru, 2013). The denial of loans was on the basis that women belonged in the domestic sphere according to Victorian ideals.

As was discussed earlier, the concept of African masculinity and femininity was largely constructed by colonial powers based on their own Western concepts. Akyeampong and Fofack (2014) argue that African post-colonial culture is largely a construct of colonial administrators and their African chief collaborators. These constructs were introduced to control women who acquired their own resources and headed homesteads independent of elder input. This independent lifestyle threatened the authority of elders and colonial powers. This threat made the elders and the colonial administration forge an alliance which resulted in customary laws and subsequently the introduction of ‘African patriarchy’ (Akyeampong & Fofack, 2014, p. 61). It can be inferred from the analysis of the socio-economic data that the introduction of colonization and certain patriarchal attitudes assimilated into post-colonial African societies have contributed to the current economic disempowerment of African women.

It appears that the current role of African women is derived from the European image of womanhood, yet African women are still expected to fulfill traditional responsibilities of working on land and caring for family members (Robertson, 1998). This dual expectation creates a significant burden on African women.

Policy recommendations

Feminization of poverty in Kenya appears to be rooted in patriarchal structures and attitudes. Some of these patriarchal structures and attitudes seem to emerge from colonial policies and legacies. It is important to investigate and tackle the roots of such attitudes and structures.

The next section examines some possible strategies to counter patriarchal structures as a contributing factor to the feminization of poverty. The barriers that Kenyan women face are complex. It has been suggested that strategies to eradicate poverty on the African continent need to include women (McFerson, 2010). Scholars have proposed that reducing gender inequality and empowering women economically and socially can assist with eradicating poverty in Africa (Kalabamu, 2006; McFerson, 2010). In order to address gender inequality, it is proposed in this paper that an education awareness programme combined with an investigation of colonial legacies and policies needs to take place.

Male educational awareness programme

Providing training for men is an important element for increasing the opportunities available for Kenyan and African women. Such education programmes need to be organized at the community level with families and individual male heads of household to emphasize the importance of sending girls to school and supporting women’s empowerment within the community. Such a male educational programme needs to be undertaken with the collaboration of respected male members of the community. These education programmes could work towards the eradication of cultural beliefs and patriarchal attitudes that inhibit women and contribute to the feminization of poverty.

Educational access remains a concern, especially for tribes that have been historically marginalized. As such, ensuring that all tribes and genders receive access to education is
another challenge for Kenya and other African states. In pastoralist areas, where there are entrenched attitudes regarding the it is important to work together with the community to emphasize the significance of encouraging girls educational and career advancement.

Another recommendation involves the eradication of cultural practices that undermine women’s and erode girls’ opportunities for further education and career advancement. Cultural practices such as female circumcision and subsequent early marriages are also prevalent in other African countries and hinder the progress of women. Appropriate strategies need to be identified and implemented to gradually eradicate such practices. The barrier of female circumcision is a significant one which has far-reaching implications. It is a complex matter which intersects across the issues of culture, patriarchal attitudes and education. There is no straightforward solution; however, it requires concerted and collaborative effort from parents, community members, women’s associations and government. This matter is an important one to address as it impacts not only a woman physically, but emotionally and ultimately affects her career advancement.

**An investigation of colonial legacies and policies**

The theme of colonial policies and legacies has been discussed throughout this paper. There is a suggestion that post-colonial African culture needs to be examined in order to understand the origins of gender inequality and the feminization of poverty in African states. It is important to investigate and subsequently examining ways to address harmful legacies such as patriarchal attitudes/structures which manifest in uneven educational access, harmful cultural practices and a lack of economic empowerment for women. There is a strong motivation here for academics and policy makers in Kenya and the wider Africa region; to conduct studies that examining pre-colonial women’s financial resources and status in comparison to the current status of post-colonial African women. Such a comparative study may assist in identifying the impact of colonialization. Not only is it important to investigate colonial legacies, but it is also important to address such vestiges. There is an incentive here for Kenyan and African governments in collaboration with female policymakers and academics to review laws pertaining to women. These legacies need to be changed for the current status of Kenyan and African women to be altered.

**Conclusion**

This paper started off with a discussion of key terms used in this paper. The concepts of poverty, patriarchy and the feminization of poverty were outlined as it pertains to this paper. Patriarchal structures and attitudes were found to contribute to the feminization of poverty. Such structures and attitudes were found to have been compounded by colonial policies which tended to favour African males and not take into account the diverse roles that African women played in precolonial Africa. There appears to have been a re-construction of African male and female identities to conform to European concepts of men and women. With this reconstruction came the exclusion of African women from activities that they had engaged in pre-colonial times such as trade, and participation in public decision-making.

This paper has made some recommendations regarding countering the factors which contribute to the feminization of poverty in Kenya. It has been proposed that educational programmes for males would assist with gradually phasing out of patriarchal attitudes/structures that inhibit women from accessing education and thus furthering their
careers. Additionally, investigating colonial legacies and addressing such legacies or policies is important.

For these strategies to be effective a collaborative approach is important. It is important for men and women to work together. This will ensure that men are aware that such structures and attitudes are unfavourable and need to be eradicated. The involvement of women is equally important as their input and participation will determine whether the strategies will be sustainable and effective. A collaborative approach is also consistent with the African feminist framework employed in this study. African feminist framework advances a collaborative approach working together with men to address gender inequalities.

References


