

Chapter 42

African Women and Economic Development: A Tale of Contradictions?

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ABSTRACT

There is a recognition that African women are amongst the world's poorest; however, they are also the most industrious. As such, African women's lives present a contradiction. This chapter examines the contradictory nature of African women's lives using a case study of Kenyan women. A possible reason for this contradiction is that African women face many barriers when attempting to access education, careers, and economic resources. These barriers often originate from political, social, and cultural factors. Given the prominence and extent of these barriers, it is important to not only identify them but to comprehend them as well. The chapter examines how these factors contribute to the feminization of poverty in Africa with a particular focus on Kenya.

INTRODUCTION

In Africa women are counted amongst the world's poorest, at the same time African women are also the most industrious, in this way African women present a paradox. This book chapter will discuss the nature of this paradox using a case study of Kenyan women. It is suggested that a probable reason for this contradiction are the many barriers African women face when attempting to access various resources and opportunities such as education, and selected careers. These barriers are rooted in political, social and cultural factors. With this said, it is important to not only identify the aforementioned barriers but to comprehend them. As such this chapter will explore how these factors contribute to the feminization of poverty in Africa with particular focus on Kenya.

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This chapter employs a largely qualitative approach which utilizes data that was gathered as part of a larger doctoral study on the experiences of female political leaders in Kenya. The chapter is divided into three main sections; the first section conceptualizes the feminization of poverty. The second section analyses data on Kenyan women employing a case study methodology. Drawing on this analysis the author proposes some recommendations to policymakers and practitioners regarding the issues raised in this chapter.

BACKGROUND

Poverty as a term has numerous definitions and is often hard to conceptualize (Jaggar, 2013; Lesetedi, 2001). For instance, there is a definition of poverty as living on less than a dollar a day (Ngunjiri, 2008). Yet, there are scholars that maintain that poverty is not just about income, it also encompasses wellbeing (Fukuda-Parr, 1999; Kehler, 2001). In this book chapter 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 also contribute and impact on an individual's socio-economic status in society (Kehler, 2001).

MAIN FOCUS OF THE CHAPTER

Women experience poverty differently from men. Scholars have often used the phrase 'feminization of poverty' when referring to women. The phrase 'feminization of poverty' was first employed 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). McFerson (2010) suggests that poverty originates from exclusion, lack of opportunities and little to no income or assets. She reports that poverty which includes all these four aspects can be the most damaging.

The factors that contribute 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 labour market; lower average earnings; and other gender-based injustices (Lombe, Safadi, Carrington, Mabbike & Lombe, 2014).

In the African context, women tend to have a higher life-expectancy than their male counterparts yet they experience 'harder lives' (McFerson, 2010, p. 57). For instance, African women work twice as hard as their male counterparts, yet women are often excluded from land ownership and access to education and economic resources. In East Africa for example, women work upto 16 hours a day on food production, preparation and caring for family members (Topouzis, 1990). 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

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