

Chapter 7

Gender and Mindscapes of Patriarchy in Poverty Reduction

ABSTRACT

Is poverty gendered? Feminist theorists suggest that the experience of poverty by any woman is shaped not only by her gender but by ideologies and other systems of social stratification such as race, ethnicity, and class – and that these dimensions are not simply an additional facet of a woman’s identity but do affect her gendered experience as well. The narratives examined in this chapter consist of symbolic patriarchy, inheritance laws, gender socialization, domestic division of labor, and certain accounts pertaining to widows and the subordination of women. A scan of the African cultural landscape revealed a profile of rural poverty that is unproportionate, unequal, and sometimes unfairly affects women more than men. Patriarchal and discriminatory practices are stubbornly unyielding in some rural areas and has inflicted a blow against women the most.

INTRODUCTION

The overarching question that pervades this chapter is how does “rural poverty” perpetrate infringements on women and inflict permanent inequality on the sexes and as manifested socially, culturally, and politically in society? The underlying assumption of inequality is centered around gender differences, particularly around the gendered unequal and unfair daily practices of poverty in women’s and men’s experiences with respect to a vast spectrum of intersecting issues including family, migration, assets, paid and unpaid work, health, sexuality, human rights, and violence (Chant, 2010).

To illuminate these issues, this chapter examines the case of gender relationships in African households to comprehend the roles women play and the challenges they face in the struggle to overcome rural poverty (Rahman, & Westley, 2001). Using feminist sociological perspectives of gender theories, this case exposes the particularly gendered unequal and unfair daily practices of poverty in women’s and men’s experiences in order to better explain the ways in which *gender inequality* and patriarchal ideologies in a society continue to operate, where customary laws are widely practiced (Butler, 1993).

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Concurrently, a scan of the African cultural landscape reveals a stark profile of rural poverty that is unproportionate, and that every now and then, affects women more than men unfairly and unequally. Kiriti and Tisdell (2003) acknowledged that significant and rising incidences of extreme poverty occur in Kenya and women are more likely than men to be in poverty. Women are well-known to face a high level of stress due to the struggle to balance between work and family. And as I recall, my incredibly good third grade teacher stopped teaching us math because she got married while the male teachers continued to work. Collectively, these observations conjure up the views that have driven *gender sociologists* to wonder whether poverty is *gendered* (Sen, 2008).

Gendered poverty is found in many parts of Africa. The practice is cultural, in so far as it is based on culturally and historically specific discourses of gender, the division of labor, notions of public and private spheres, and whether other circumstances happen to be locally relevant. Feminist theorists suggest that the experience of poverty by any given woman is shaped not only by her gender but by other systems of social stratification such as race, class, and ethnicity. See chapter 2. These experiences of poverty are not simply an additional facet of her identity, but also an effect of a woman's *gendered experience* as well (Chant, 2010).

Gendered poverty is an ideological construct that signifies the reproduction of the "heterosexual imaginary" (Ingraham, 1994). The *heterosexual imaginary* in feminist sociological theories postulates that the material conditions of capitalist *patriarchal societies* are more integrally linked to institutionalized heterosexuality than they are naturally linked to gender. Feminists' gender discourse upholds the view that gender is socially constructed; that is, the distinctions and judgments that people make about men and women are based on gender. Thus, gender forms the basis for shared assumptions about heterosexuality and such assumptions are a product of beliefs and understandings of the relationships between women and men. The beliefs, in turn, are part of a heterosexual *ideology embedded in societies* (Butler, 1999; Lorber, 1994; West & Zimmerman, 1987). In short, gender comprises an array of socially constructed roles and relationships, as well as personality traits and values that are applied and held by men and women (Dedovic, et al., 2009). More about heterosexual ideology in the following sections.

To unravel the complexity underlying the assumptions of how "gender" plays into the sexes, we rely on how sociologists have tried to conceive of its expression and effects in society. See chapter 2. Perhaps, women's poverty experiences in this discussion can be seen as a mere picture which is there to portray a story, namely, the story of inequality, containment, isolation, restriction to movement, and so on. In this gender-driven case of unfair and unequal treatment, women are viewed as hopeless, inactive, and excluded from development opportunities (Lupton & Power, 2002; Rahman & Westley, 2001).

Consequently, poverty in rural areas is dire because rural poverty persists and continues to be fueled by lack of non-agricultural jobs and poor infrastructure that hamper development and mobility. Rural areas tend to lack sufficient roads that would increase access to agricultural inputs and markets. Without roads, rural poor women are trapped; are cut off further from technological development and emerging markets found in more urban areas (Kamuzora & Gwalema, 1998).

In the era of post 1995 Beijing women's conference, gender relations have become more subtle and political correctness has crept into the current gender discourse. At its core, the Beijing conference was promoted as a conference on equality, peace, and development, and was about eliminating coercion, discrimination, and violence in the public and private lives of women. Subsequently, governments and international agencies have to acknowledge that (1) economic and employment policies must recognize women's unpaid contributions to the economy; (2) eliminate differentials in pay between men and women

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