

# NARRATIONS OF HOPE: PHILOSOPHIES ON WOMEN ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT IN THE TESTIMONIES AND ORAL PERFORMANCES BY RURAL WOMEN

Joseph Muleka (Senior Lecturer)  
Department of Literature, University of Nairobi

## Abstract

*In theory, reference to ‘women economic empowerment’ appears high sounding and often conversation on this subject is sometimes, perhaps, inadvertently preclusive of those considered in society as the ordinary women. These are the women in the rural villages and the underprivileged sections of the sub-urban and urban centres, the majority of whom have to deal with poverty – sometimes extreme – and a lack of education to facilitate an enlightened view of life. Indeed, one wonders whether the women themselves envision economic empowerment, but in their own way, they in fact, do. They, too, philosophize on the prospects of economic empowerment. It may not be that sophisticated. Yet a closer look will reveal how this apparently “simplistic” view sometimes resonates with the larger women’s world. There is perhaps no better way of capturing these ordinary women’s philosophies on economic empowerment than listening to their narratives and participating in their oral performances, even without the prescience of any specific expectations. This paper is an interrogation of what and how the women’s perspectives on economic empowerment sieve through their narratives and oral performances. It is the outcome of my interaction with women in the villages of Bukhayo, a location in Busia County of Western Kenya.*

**Key Words:** access and control; factors of production; oral performances and testimonies; rural women; women economic empowerment

## Introduction

From time immemorial, women and the creation of wealth have been synonymous. In the traditional African society, girls (later women) helped supplement the family income by participating in activities that created wealth. These activities were such as working on the farms, tending to livestock (particularly goats and cows), milking the animals, constructing of huts in some communities, and many other activities. Later, the girl would fetch the family big wealth through bride wealth. This pattern still remains, though to a lesser extent. Indeed, the fact that women are the greatest sources and producers of wealth is not in doubt. Koroleva (2017), observes

that women produce upwards of 80 percent of the world’s food. Moreover, women are the chief resource managers for many families across the world. Apparently, therefore, the role of women as producers of wealth cannot be gainsaid. At this point, one question that interests me in this paper is: “*Is the working rural woman consciously aware that her contribution is that key, or that she forms part of the aggregate that produces the 80 percent that sustains lives, which Koroleva (ibid) refers to?*”

As Taylor and Perezniето (2014) posit, women's economic empowerment should be seen as the process of achieving women's equal access to and control over economic resources, and ensuring they can use them to exert increased control over other areas of their lives. This postulate raises another question for this study: In spite of the working women producing upwards of 80 percent of the world's food, do they enjoy 'equal access to and control over economic resources'? Do they use these resources to exert increased control over other areas of their lives such as improving their skills, enhancing, or investing in their entrepreneurial ideas, and so on? The question of women's equal access to and control over economic resources is crucial, given the fact that economic empowerment and factors of production are like Siamese twins. The two are inextricably tied together.

In Kenya the most important natural factor of production is land. In theatrical terms, land would be described as the arena or stage for production on which the actors and actresses perform their acts of production. Going by the estimates by Koroleva (ibid), apparently the majority of the performers on this stage would be women. How much access and control then do the women, as the majority performers on this stage, have on this very stage?

This paper attempts to address this latter question by relying on the narratives and oral performances by the working rural women themselves. But even of greater significance for this paper is how the very rural women view these issues. In addition to outlining the methodology guiding the process of this study, the paper chronicles the stories of the women on economic empowerment as the tool for rating their level of awareness on this subject. The paper then interrogates the women's perspectives to determine their capacity for economic empowerment, and caps up by discussing how and why these rural women should be empowered.

## Methodology

This paper took a qualitative approach and anchored its arguments on the feminist and socioeconomic development theories. In its operation, the former addresses the woman question as concerns examining specifically the social constructs around women, their position in the society and the impact of development processes on women. It aims to understand the nature of gender equality or inequality. On the other hand, the latter focuses on economic development and considers increases in democracy and human choices as a direct outcome of economic development. In relation to women, the socioeconomic development approach holds that economic development is central to increasing the pool of women eligible for positions of social power. The two theories worked hand in hand as the paper navigated the question of access to and control of economic resources for purposes of production and the aggregate impact on the quality of life for the society in general and women in particular, especially in the emergent global concerns of gender equity and economic empowerment.

In the process of collecting data, I asked the women to tell me how they functioned within their communities and with their families. Some of the information I sought was to help gain answers to the hypothetical questions on awareness, access, control and investment. The answers to the said questions were to be derived from observing how the rural women negotiated through their life situations as well as listening to their views about the lives they lived, as narrated through oral testimonies, and/or as revealed through organized as well as impromptu oral performances. In other words, apart from engaging individuals and groups in a one on one oral testimony through which the respondents narrated their experiences, expectations and perspectives, I also got much information from group oral performances, especially songs and dances.

## The Working Rural Women's Perspectives on Economic Empowerment

The essence of this paper was to rate the level of awareness of the working rural woman on matters of economic empowerment. From my interviews it transpires that the majority of these women working in their communities are illiterate or semi-literate, the latter category comprising the younger generations, some of whom dropped out of school early in life, while the former comprising the more elderly members. Apart from majorly working on the farms as their primary occupation, some, in addition, engage in small scale businesses such as making and selling porridge, hawking small items at the shopping centres, selling *omena*, vegetables, and many other sellable items. Back at home, the majority prepare basic meals such as potatoes, cassava, *ugali* and green vegetables, or *omena*, and so on. Besides, while some have been exposed to modern cooking *jikos*, over 95 percent depend on the traditional cooking hearths that use firewood.

Seeing how simple the life of these women is, one begins to wonder – just as I did – whether they ever get any access to the big terms we apply out here such as Women's Economic Empowerment, and/or if they do, whether it means anything to them. In trying to get answers to these questions, it made true the common maxim that says that you may deny your neighbour the meat but you won't deny them the aroma. Perhaps these women do not get the rare opportunity of hearing lessons on women economic empowerment, but somehow, the aroma has evidently reached them. I reached this conclusion when I heard some of the messages in their folk performances, a common activity for which some have even formed regular dance groups. One song, for instance, seems to remind each of them to work hard for self-empowerment:

<b>Soloist:</b> <i>Eliuba elio, neliuba elio</i>	This time, is the time
<b>All:</b> <i>Nawe khola emirimo</i>	For you to work
<b>Soloist:</b> <i>Eliuba elio, neliuba elio mubakhaye</i>	This time, is the time, fellow
<b>women All:</b> <i>Nawe khola emirimo</i>	For you to work
<b>Chorus:</b> <i>Ee, ee!</i>	Eh,eh!
<i>Eliuba elio nawe khola mirimo</i>	This time, is the time for you to
<i>work Nonadong'e musiguri</i>	To keep afloat
<i>Nawe khola emirimo.</i>	This is the time for you to work.

The song above is a common song sung among women's groups. It could be interpreted as an exhortation by women to fellow women to rise up and work: "*This time, is the time for you to work, to keep afloat*". It makes sense to interpret the "*keeping afloat*" as a state of managing oneself, or simply managing life. It is perhaps the keeping afloat that comes with economic empowerment and the ability to be self-reliant. Whatever the working to keep afloat means, this song is a demonstration that the women understand their position in life and they recognize the value of work as a means of economic empowerment. Indeed as one woman remarked: "*If we didn't work day and night, our children would go hungry.*" This reminded me of another remark that I had heard from another woman earlier: "*A family stands only if the mother is a worker and standing.*"

The exhortation of the women performers to fellow women to work, as well as the observations by the two women cited above, elicit another curious question of where the work is to be carried out. Being majorly workers on the farms that they keep for growing food crops and some cash crops, their place of work is the farmlands.

This is in line with an analogy I gave earlier of land as the stage and the women as actors on that stage. The substantive question is: How much do they control this farmland as their stage of operation? Does the land belong to them? Can they use it at will? As a matter of fact, anyone familiar with matters of land ownership in Kenya may not waste time trying to investigate these questions. Statistics of the state of land as far as women are concerned are well known, as I show below:

The Kenya Demographic and Health Survey, gender disaggregated data analysis report of 2014 indicates that land under women-alone ownership is about 7%. Meanwhile, the Kenya Land Alliance Progress Report on Land Ownership shows that between 2013 and 2017, out of the 10,129,704 hectares of land titled, women only got 163,253 hectares while men got 9,903,304 hectares. This ratio represents approximately 1.63% for women compared to 97.76% for men. These figures reveal that land ownership is almost entirely a preserve for men. (Muleka, 2021:13).

From the quote above, facts are quite clear: the women workers who produce up to 80 percent of the food consumed by families as cited in Koroleva (ibid) work on land that belongs to other people. This means that they cannot use it at will. Even though the 80 percent is an average representing the practice the world over, Kenya's case could be said to be a representative cell of the rest of the world. Indeed it goes without saying the situation, as I have shown earlier, will not facilitate meaningful economic empowerment for the women involved. Their situation falls far below what, for example, CARE International (2016:7) stipulates as the conducive environment for possible economic empowerment for women:

Women's economic empowerment is the process by which women increase their right to economic resources and power to make decisions that benefit themselves, their families and their communities. This requires equal access to and control over economic resources, assets and opportunities as well as long-term changes in social norms and economic structures that benefit women and men equally.

What are the possibilities of women in Kenya in general, and rural women in particular, of gaining equal access to and control over economic resources such as land, for optimum production, that CARE suggests? Perhaps this can only remain a hypothetical question. I guess that the majority of adult Kenyans today are familiar with the furore that followed the promulgation of the Constitution of Kenya (2010) that mandated girl children and women for that matter to inherit ancestral land. Indeed one of the most passionate arguments for wanting to shoot down the preceding Kenya Draft Constitution during the 2005 Referendum by a good section of Kenyans was on the question of inheriting of ancestral land by women. A clause in the draft constitution addresses gender parity in society suggested that girl children, or women, for that matter, be constitutionally mandated to inherit ancestral land, as was the case for boy children and men. Many saw this as contravening the land and property ownership conventions among many Kenyan ethnic groups, the majority, if not all of whom are patriarchal in their social setups, in which only men officially own property. Women then benefit from these privileges by virtue of being married to the male owners. On the other hand, society expects girl children to go away and get married when they come of age. Evidently, this state of affairs has not changed much. What do the women have to say about this?

One song from one of the performances that I attended seemed to give me a hint on the women's opinions on land acquisition. I would perhaps interpret the song as the women's hopes and aspirations:

<b>Soloist:</b> <i>Bakhaye boMundika</i>	Women residents of Mundika
<i>Khwenyanga obweruki</i>	We seek to govern ourselves
<b>All:</b> <i>Lero bakhayire</i>	Despite resistance
<b>Soloist:</b> <i>Bakhaye boMundika</i>	Women residents of Mundika
<i>Khwenyanga obweruki</i>	We seek to govern ourselves
<b>All:</b> <i>Lero bakhayire</i>	Despite resistance
<i>Lero bakhayire</i>	Despite resistance
<i>Muche mulole bakhaye</i>	Come and see the women
<i>Bakhenga iyeka</i>	With a claim to land
<i>Lero bakhayire.</i>	Despite resistance.

This song appears to posit the women as seeking to govern themselves, or perhaps, demanding for space to make their own decisions, despite the resistance they are sure to face and already facing. It, of course, goes without saying that the possibility of the women governing themselves could open greater opportunities for a greater claim to land ownership and more economic empowerment. "If we own the land, we will have a say over the same," one woman leader points out like a fortune teller. Indeed, the optimism of the performers in the song above is unmistakable. They sound as if their wish is already acceded to by those expected to resist, the women go ahead to invite onlookers to come and see how they (women) go on to acquire land.

Obviously this is without doubt a very controversial idea, since it could be seen to shake the very core of the hitherto patriarchal setup and beliefs. The controversy is further heightened by the fact that this is a performance by people at the grassroots, women, perhaps without much education. These are not the elite women who have often been associated with independent thought. I termed the latter song, simply as revolutionary and idealistic. Indeed one man I talked to at the sides termed the suggestion, 'wild imagination'. Far-fetched as the man described it though, this is quite possible and it is perhaps already happening.

This is what I observed in my previous research:

Land ownership by women has a close relationship with women governing themselves. A woman who owns her own land is always likely to make decisions on how the piece of land will be utilized without facing the restricting control of the man. On the other hand, a woman who has also built on the land she owns is almost always likely to be free to make her own decisions on how to run her home.

Notably, it is becoming less and less surprising today that women are now buying land and building. This, as a result, is beginning to open greater possibilities for the women to make their own decisions. While such possibilities demonstrate the women's economic abilities, they also open space for continued economic growth that results from the freedom for the very women to control the proceeds from their farm labour. Of course it should not sound like women's economic empowerment must hold hands with "women alone" establishments. What the realization actually means is that women's access to means of production such as land and the freedom to decide on how to utilize it are significant considerations for their possible economic empowerment. It is then true when CARE International (quoted above) suggest that, women economic empowerment requires equal

access to and control of economic resources, assets and opportunities as well as long-term changes in social norms and economic structures that benefit women and men equally.

## The Prospects of Rural Women for Economic Empowerment

As already hinted at, the possibility of ignoring the rural women during the women's economic empowerment dialogues is quite high. Often one may wonder whether the rural women have the capacity to digest economic empowerment ideas and ideals, some of which are, of course, lofty and high-sounding. As a matter of fact, an attempt to bypass the rural women would be tantamount to locking entire communities and locations out of their means of existence. As alluded to earlier, women literally feed the world. Indeed, the fact that families and homes depend on women for the day to day running of the household is beyond question. It appears that the women themselves are surely aware of their worth in the family and how much their influence is spread. And perhaps if nobody wanted to be reminded about this fact, the women themselves express the same through their narratives as cited above and group performances. A leading performance group in one of the villages performed the following song for us:

<b>Soloist:</b> Mukhasi alandire alandire mudala	A woman has spread spread in the homestead
<b>All:</b> Ngeinderema	Like the creeper weed
<b>Soloist:</b> Mukhasi alandire alandire mudala	A woman has spread spread in the homestead
<b>All:</b> Ngeinderema	Like the creeper weed
<b>Soloist:</b> Mukhasi alanda	A woman spreads
<b>All:</b> Alandanga mudala khukhira inderema.	Spreads in the homestead more than the creeper weed.

The creeper weed is known to have the capacity to survive in any conditions and to dominate all the plants within its environment. Furthermore, it is a vegetable that saves the community because when all other vegetables have been scorched and died, inderema, the creeper weed survives because it is very resilient. The likening of the woman to the creeper weed, one may argue, could never be more apt and accurate. The resilience of women in whichever facet of life cannot be gainsaid. Therefore, the significance of this song need not be overemphasized. It may be said to point to where one should invest for the future. The song further delves into the debate of social empowerment of women, which indeed is a pre-requisite for economic empowerment. The argument here is that for one to negotiate for economic empowerment, their position in society must be recognized, secure and appreciated.

Still staying with the rural women, their performances further reveal that they, in fact, not only see the need for visibility in society but they also negotiate for that visibility. As another of their songs appears to state:

<i>Ndi mukhasi wayera khuloma</i>	I am a woman who qualifies to speak
<i>Ndi mukhasi wayera khuloma</i>	I am a woman who qualifies to speak
<i>Oweing'ombe yarera</i>	One for whom a cow was paid
<i>Ndi mukhasi wayera khuloma</i>	I am a woman who qualifies to speak

The woman in this latter song declares that she qualifies to speak. This is because she has a right to be where she is. A cow was paid for her which traditionally makes her a bona fide occupier of where she is. This serves her in two ways: being a rightful member in this space, she qualifies to give her opinions or make decisions on matters

concerning her life. Consequently, the power to voice her concerns, and/or make her own decisions has the potential to increase her right to economic resources and economic empowerment. Otherwise, whether the rural woman succeeds in winning herself the space to express herself or not; achieve economic empowerment or not; what is important for this paper is the realization that she is aware of what is her right.

## Why and How Should the Rural Women be Empowered?

Estimated to be the producers of up to 80 percent of the world's food, women deserve a majority say over the means of production such as land. This would surely ensure greater food security in the world. Yet as Sylvia Tamale (1999), points out, *“the patriarchal legacy relegates women to the lower rung of the social ladder and denies them space to talk or participate in public activities”*. Apparently, this is the kind of treatment that the women singers in the latter song above appear to be petitioning for. Being bona fide members of their communities, women demand to be allowed space to have a say on family resources. Who, for example, controls the proceeds of what is earned from the sale of excess food produce? From the women's own narrations, the husbands in most cases will, say, sell the excess maize, keep the money and possibly 'reward' their wives with a kilogram of sugar, or beef, or both if the spirit of generosity is the one dictating the situation.

One sometimes wishes that it were the women controlling the finances that come from the sale of excess family produce, for the sake of the family's economic stability, because it is true what the women stated, that is, they had to work day and night to feed their families, or that a family's stability depended on the stability and hard work of the mother.

Taylor and Perezniето (2014:40), in listing why women's economic empowerment is important argue that:

When women have the right skills and opportunities, they can help businesses and markets grow. Women who are economically empowered contribute more to their families', societies' and national economies. It has been shown that women invest extra income in their children, providing a route to sustainable development. Empowering women is the key to economic growth, political stability and social transformation.

The interpretation of the above observation then is that women are more prudent spenders. Consequently, empowering them economically would, in fact, be empowering society in general. Indeed, CARE (2016) observes that throughout history, the central role of women in society has ensured the stability, progress and long-term development of nations.

Meanwhile, before I conclude this paper, I would like to revisit a question that I had earlier foregrounded: “How can women be empowered?” The answer to this crucial question had been hinted at by the women themselves through their song quoted earlier, in which they demand for the liberty to govern themselves as well as own land, much as they were aware of the resistance mounted by the society. Indeed, the issue of land ownership would not come out more vividly than it did from one woman leader in one village:

As girls in our ancestral homes, we cannot have land. This is to be left for our brothers. We are literally evicted from our ancestral homes because our land – as it is promised – will be found in our marital homes. But once married, we now live as squatters without any particular rights to our marital land. When our

brothers-in-law share the family land, we are left out just as it happened when our brothers divided the ancestral land.

This scenario as described by this woman leader places the women in a state where they cannot make decisions over land use, which consequently jeopardizes their economic empowerment. Decision making is a key ingredient in economic empowerment and comes top in Hirschmann's (2001) prescriptions of how women can be empowered globally. These include placing women as leaders and giving them decision making roles; creating more job opportunities for women; investing in women's entrepreneurial ideas, emotionally and financially; taking action against unpaid labour; and mentoring women personally and professionally.

If Hirschmann's suggestions were anything to go by, then the rural woman is far from being empowered. To go by the list, placing women as leaders and allowing them decision making roles seems to be a mirage in the largely patriarchal setups that the women inhabit, as we have already seen. On job opportunities for women, the rural woman already has her job – the farm. This is often dictated by their level of education that sometimes leaves them with no choice but to labour on the farms. While farm labour is a decent occupation which cannot be demeaned, the fact that the woman worker on these farms has no access to and control over what the farm produces, as already noted, makes it a thankless endeavour, unpaid labour, to be exact. Besides, often their entrepreneurial ideas go to waste because the decision and power to invest in the ideas reside with somebody else: the male owner of the means of production. In a way then, the work that the rural woman worker does on the farm, if not just to feed her family, may pass as unpaid labour because it is the man, in the majority of cases, that takes charge of the sales that may occur in the event of excess. Most of the women that shared their experiences with me

confirmed that their husbands were in-charge of the money in the family, and more often than not, would rather bring an item that was felt to lack at home than hand cash to the women for the same.

While one appreciates the efforts such as affirmative action, or two-thirds gender rule and other actions initiated every now and then, that target to bridge the gender gap between men and women, these efforts may at the most benefit the women elite. As it stands the rural woman worker is likely to remain at the periphery and to only continue praying for a dawn that will come with a revolutionary swipe that could then enable economic empowerment for them. What is, however, of significance for this paper is the realization that the rural women workers – as revealed in their sometimes very revolutionary songs – are aware and conscious that another world exists out there which is different from the one they are occupying and that it is that other world to aspire for. Perhaps, using the metaphor popular among Kenyan politicians, the women are fully aware that there is a Canaan which only requires a Joshua to lead them to.

## Conclusion

This paper set out to find out what the rural women, commonly called the ordinary women, knew about women economic empowerment. This was to happen through oral testimonies from the women as well as the oral performances that were done without any set expectations. For the women, they knew that they were simply entertaining me as well as my friends who accompanied me. So, the songs that they performed, some of which I found quite revolutionary were actually what I would consider an unconscious self-revealing. While I had hypothesized a community that was unexposed and unaware of their rights, the findings proved otherwise. From the performances and testimonies, I came to the conclusion that much as the women lived a life of poverty and deprivation; they were fully conscious



of the fact that they women needed and were ready for economic empowerment. In the songs, they go on to pronounce what they would aspire to do to achieve economic empowerment. Apart from encouraging one another to work hard to make it, they also declare their wish to be heard and to be allowed to make decisions that concern their economic empowerment. They also aspire to own land. Besides, they vividly see the relationship between their low economic status and their limited access to land.

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