
CULTURE AND GENDER IN KENYA: THE CONCEPTUAL CONNECTION AND THE AGENDA FOR CHANGE

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Introduction

Culture is one of the most complex and dynamic phenomena in human society and one that gives its members their identity but is also shaped by its male and female bearers as they adapt to a constantly changing environment. The concept of culture is so broad and all-encompassing that some variations do obviously exist in its precise definition. There is now an evolving consensus that the definition of culture, as that of gender, has been systematically politicized by individuals and groups who represent diverse social and political ideologies and development paradigms. Despite the diversity in its definition, there are, however, a number of common threads which run through the various strands of culture and constitute its defining features.

At a general level, culture may be defined as a set of learned beliefs, attitudes, values, norms, customs, behaviour patterns, symbols, myths, language usages, principles, experiences and skills which members of a society or community share as a framework for interpreting the social world, including patterns of gender roles and relationships (Robertson, 1981; Ember and Ember, 1990; Rosman and Rubel, 1992). Culture also consists of all the physical objects and shared products which women and men create, give meaning to, incorporate into their environments and use in their everyday lives. In essence, therefore, culture is an entire and distinctive way of life which is learned, shared and shaped by women and men and forms the basis for understanding the diversity in gender systems. These systems are constantly transformed and redefined to reflect new and emerging socio-economic and cultural situations.

During the past three decades of active gender debate, there have been major shifts in conceptual language which have led to a growing practice of using the term **gender** as a substitution for the word **woman**. Gender does not refer to women or men as is usually misconceived. On the contrary, the concept of **gender** refers to the relationship between men and women, to the ways in which the roles of men and women are socially constructed and to the cultural interpretations of the biological differences between men and women (Wood, 1999). Gender roles, relations and identity are therefore socially constructed through the process of socialization. During the socialization process, society's ideas and ideals about what is considered appropriate gender roles and relations in a given cultural context are defined, demarcated and transformed in different cultural situations. Thus, gender relations are power relations which are socially distinct and culturally defined but constantly adapting to changing circumstances. The fact that socialization is a lifelong process means that people are continually encountering new situations and learning new ways of adapting to changing environments. Gender is therefore an inclusive concept which

not only entails what men and women do and how they relate socially but also embraces cultural ideas about 'maleness' and 'femaleness', and the structural inequalities which emanate from those differences (Commonwealth, 1995:14; Stolen, 1991:4).

Gender as a concept is also relational. From a gender perspective, the focus of analysis is no longer on women but on the relations and the social distinction between women and men; how they are constituted and how they have changed across historical time and cultural space. What is equally important are the implications of gender relations for the individual and collective well-being of women and men within and between cultures.

Inherent in the conceptualization of culture and gender are the notions of diversity and dynamism. Gender analysis recognizes the diversity among women and men as heterogeneous groups of social actors who are divided along class, ideological, racial, ethnic, age, religious and regional lines. There are also variations in cultural ideas about the roles and responsibilities considered appropriate for women and men in all cultures and societies. Some of these cultural ideas about gender roles have actually undermined women's social and economic power in relation to men. The perception which women and men have of themselves is also culturally defined and diverse although not necessarily gender-specific as they are sometimes shared by both genders.

The most constant thing about culture and gender is change. Two obvious sources of cultural change are contact with other cultures, and human action. One example of collective human action is the women's movement which is as diverse and global as it is national and local. Both variations and alterations in cultural patterns have offered many women in different Kenyan communities new opportunities which they are able to use to improve their lives and even to challenge existing structures, practices and attitudes which deny them their human rights (Stolen, 1991). The diversity in cultures and the configuration of gender relations are among the reasons it is important to have an adequate understanding of the cultural context in which gender relations are embedded. However, one should be careful not to use cultural relativism and distinctiveness to de-emphasize or justify gender disparities which characterize most relations between women and men across cultures. A more constructive and pragmatic view of gender-power relations stems from the notion of human agency, which defines women not as victims of patriarchal oppression but as social, economic and political actors and culture bearers who are far more creative and productive than has previously been acknowledged in the earlier generation of Women-in-Development Studies which were informed by modernization theory. This means that asymmetrical gender relations can impose certain constraints on women and deny them their human rights, but it cannot translate into absolute control of women by men. Although gender disparities still persist and women are treated as subordinates to varying degrees in virtually every Kenyan community, more women and men now seem to be working together to challenge and change oppressive gender systems which are characterized by gross inequalities.

Culture, Gender and Work

The roles women and men play in public and private life vary with social class, personal ability and culture. Work and gender identities are therefore closely interrelated.

The basis for this relationship is cultural. What women and men do and how they relate socially are important aspects of a gender system and reflect cultural interpretations of male-female differences (Adepoju and Opong, 1994). Some of the work Kenyan women and men do are traditionally ascribed to them. As Elson (1989) has pointed out, most working class Kenyan women are secretaries, teachers, nurses and clerks, with an increasing number who are involved in the informal sector in a wide range of micro-enterprises. Among this category of women and many of their rural counterparts, traditional authority structure, patterns of family decision-making and gender divisions of labour have tended to persist, primarily because they have not been openly challenged on a sustained basis. A further plausible explanation is that a substantial number of Kenyan women still derive their gender identity through marriage, motherhood, the basic process of reproduction and other self-actualizing roles whose values are still deeply ingrained in many Kenyan families and cultures, especially those in the rural communities where old traditions are more strongly safeguarded.

Although female labour force participation in Kenya has increased rapidly in the past decade or so, the majority of women are concentrated in a small range of occupations, mostly at the lower niches of the occupational ladders. Most senior-level positions in almost all sectors of the Kenyan economy are held by men. Structures and cultural factors still inhibit women's entry into the labour market. The labour market is segregated by gender and the higher one looks the fewer women one sees. There are, of course, a few exceptions to this rule represented by a few women who have broken a range of cultural and structural barriers and are in senior management positions, but these exceptions only serve to confirm the rule because more men than women are in high-level public decision-making positions in Kenya (Abagi, 1999).

In a number of Kenyan cultures, women are responsible for a disproportionately large share of reproductive and productive roles within and outside the home. Both in private and public life, many productive and reproductive roles are culturally defined and gender-based. Women's heavy reproductive workload is often detrimental to their physical and emotional well-being. It is also incompatible with the principles of equitable sharing and denies women the opportunity to participate fully and effectively in public life and in decision-making at all levels (UN, 1988; UN, 1995). One of the greatest challenges and dilemmas facing many women in the labour force is how to reconcile their family responsibilities with their market work. From the point of view of female labour force participation, the role conflict experienced by women presents problems of supply and demand:

Women's roles as mothers not only limit their availability for employment on the supply side but also reduce the demand of employers for women workers and their status in the labour market (UNESCO; 1995:138).

In dialectical terms, gender division of labour is frequently a cause and a consequence of gender disparity. Thus, gender role-differentiation is closely linked to gender division of resources, including land and income (Kibiti, 1996). This is primarily due to the fact that women's reproductive work and caring roles in the domestic service and their productive labour in agriculture, trade, micro-enterprises in both formal and informal sectors have traditionally been assigned less social and economic value than "men's work".

Women's participation in the unpaid economy has often remained unaccounted for and devalued. This differential reward pattern does reflect a definite gender bias and also ignores the fact that gender roles and the benefits of women's and men's work ought to be equitably distributed on the basis of ability and other valid criteria (INSTRAW, 1993).

The key to real equity between women and men is a fundamental transformation of persistent stereotypes and socio-cultural attitudes which are antipathetic to the advancement of women. The most important thing is to alter both women's and men's perceptions and behaviour, and to recognize each other's potential, capability and creativity. Another important step in bridging gender gaps is to resolve structural imbalances which have denied women equitable access to quality education, training, health care, and jobs as well as productive resources such as land, technology and credit. The bulk of these structural barriers are built around cultural traditions and reinforced by social attitudes.

Although many forms of inequalities cut across lines of class, ethnicity, race, creed, age and region, Kenya is a gender-structured society and its cultures are male-dominated. Double standards abound in the discussions of cultural foundations of gender hierarchies. Some forms of gender inequality are perpetuated in the name of cultural diversity and relativism. A number of cultural values and practices in Kenya are defended, and persist not necessarily because they promote women's human rights but because they protect male power and privileges. Some examples of such practices include polygyny, widow inheritance, female genital mutilation, gender violence, early marriage, women's minimal political participation and their under-representation in leadership positions where they could participate in decision-making and seek what they need.

Polygyny as a cultural practice is a dominant feature of African marriage and family life. Although there are signs that formal polygyny may be on the decline among the young and educated urban men, it is still a preferred form of marriage for many of the uneducated, the elderly and local leaders particularly in rural areas where cultural traditions are still relatively strong. Decision-making around marriage and family forms is a complex issue, influenced by gender relations, education, age, economic status and religion. Plurality of wives was, and still is, associated with wealth and it persists largely because it confers power and prestige to men although it is also viewed as an important social support mechanism (Kilbride, 1994; Kibiti, 1996). Despite its social and economic advantages, polygyny in its traditional and present forms, is viewed as an oppressive practice which does not work very well for some women in the sense that it reinforces male power and patronage. Polygyny is one of the many cultural practices in Kenya which illustrate how men's social prestige is validated by female attributes such as chastity and fertility.

Rapid cultural and socio-economic changes have led to significant transformations in the gender system thereby opening up a wide range of social, economic and political options for women and men in many different cultures, and in ways that had previously been unknown. In Kenya, many of the changes in the traditional structure of gender division of labour have been prompted by local and national-level processes such as women's movements, migration, urbanization, integration of rural households and local communities into a market economy, and intra-household dynamics. The globalization of culture as a result of advances in information technology and an increasing trend towards multiculturalism, regional co-operation and interdependence have also contributed to the

restructuring of the socio-cultural context and gender roles.

There are continuing efforts everywhere in the world to bring about equitable distribution of opportunities, responsibilities and resources between women and men in culturally-sensitive ways. One of the grounds for these efforts, and a strong argument in favour of change, is *efficiency*. When women and men share responsibilities, including those in the family which are believed to be in the female domain, more women may be able to contribute more fully and effectively in other spheres of life, and in the process realize their full potential for sustainable development. From the efficiency standpoint, gender discrimination and under-utilization of female labour resource is a loss to society and the economy. This point has forcefully been made by the United Nations as follows:

Discrimination promotes an uneconomic use of women's talents and wastes the valuable human resources necessary for development..... Ultimately, society is the loser if the talents of women are under-utilized. (UN, 1988:5).

In many African countries, the removal of cultural obstacles and fundamental structural changes are needed to secure gender equity and efficiency.

Women and Men as Partners in the Development Process

Continuous changes in culture, socio-economic conditions and gender perception have led to redefinitions of the roles and reciprocal relationships of males and females in Kenya, as elsewhere in the world. The traditional view of women as victims of patriarchal oppression is gradually being replaced with a more positive and pragmatic view of women as partners with men, and as active participants in the development process. Implicit in this framework is the assumption that what women do is complementary to, and not in competition with what men do. The emphasis is on co-operation between women and men rather than confrontation. Based on this framework, recent analyses of gender relations have focused more attention on a constructive and enabling view of power, without, of course, ignoring the fact that gender relations are power relations and may be repressive in some cultural situations. However, one should be careful to contextually define such repressive power relations and the situations under which they occur, rather than assume that they exist in all situations and at all times.

Re-thinking Gender Roles and Relations

The view of women and men as significant social actors stems from the notion of human agency and points to the diversity of ways in which women from different cultures and regions of the world have gained and retained decision-making power through their qualitatively different contributions to the development process. The "non-victim" approach to the gender debate not only challenges the basic premises of the earlier feminist writing, but also underscores the centrality of co-operation and equity between the genders. The focus of the empowerment approach is on equitable distribution of resources between women and men, the incorporation of women's issues and concerns into the development process, and increased participation of women in the decision-making process. The emphasis is not

on female oppression and subordination, although cultural barriers frequently encountered by women in their personal and professional lives are highlighted. Rather, the accent is more on the dramatic positive changes that are taking place in the lives of women and men as a result of new opportunities in education, labour force participation, women's group activities, policy reforms, legal reforms and a variety of other initiatives both at local and national levels. The basic premise of the empowerment debate is that the contributions of women and men are unique and important, and that what is needed are equitable access to opportunities and resources to enhance women's capacities for efficient, effective and sustainable development (Blumberg and Knudson, 1993). The realization that there have been substantial changes and improvements in gender roles and relations in some countries, partly as a result of their own internal cultural socio-economic and political dynamics, and partly due to the implementation of some of the resolutions of the four major United Nations Conferences on Women between 1975 and 1995, puts culture at the core of gender analysis and underlines the importance of searching for culturally-sensitive approaches to gender equity.

The critical thing in the establishment of partnerships between women and men and the achievement of gender equity is the redistribution of resources, status and power, from men to women. However, this whole enterprise has been the subject of concerted male opposition in Kenya, and this is why gender has remained a major issue of contention (UNESCO, 1995). At the centre of the controversy is the issue of power which is controlled by men in a skewed pattern at all levels in all sectors. However, the growing support for a pragmatic and partnership view of gender relations calls for the promotion of women's rights as a joint venture between women and men, and not only as something which concerns women's organizations, female researchers and a network of activists. The pragmatic view also involves looking at culture through the eyes of women and men. The call for this inclusiveness and a participatory approach is based on the recognition that women's rights are human rights and that no culture or country can develop if half of its citizenry is left out of or behind that process.

Beyond the equity debate is the issue of efficiency. There has never been any question that women are an important resource, and that their contributions are critical to the development of any culture or nation. What has, however, been contested are the bases for current and recurrent gender biases in most Kenyan cultures which deny women and girls equal opportunities in education, health, employment, welfare, law, politics, marriage among other domains. The persistence of gender biases in all sectors of private and public life contribute to the underutilization of women as a resource, to the detriment of all. The reason for this assertion is that the denial of women's full participation in the development process ignores the real and potential value of women's labour, their talents and skills, and the richness of their cultural knowledge, and inevitably leads to inefficient use of resources (Chambers, 1997).

Given the centrality of gender issues in culture and development and the heightened visibility of women's contribution to society's well-being, it is almost universally accepted that sustainable development needs women and men as equal partners, now and in the future. This goal is to be secured through culturally-sensitive changes and policy measures directed at both Kenyan women and men, through dialogue and negotiations rather than confrontation.

Conclusion

Gender remains a central and pragmatic issue in the cultural identity of any society. The diversity that characterizes Kenyan culture is also a defining feature of gender roles and relations which are in the process of dramatic transformation, but itself lies at a crossroads of change and continuity. The evolving scenario is a tapestry of Kenyan culture which is seen both as an obstacle to gender equity and a phenomenon created by women and men that can be redesigned to meet their development goals.

The dynamic view of culture and gender offers new insights into the range of opportunities denied or availed to women and the ways in which women have acted as individuals or groups at local and national levels to break cultural barriers for the benefit of society. The key to a long-term improvement in gender roles and relations in Kenya is male-female partnership. Kenyan women and men should work together as partners to reverse retrograde social attitudes, and eradicate cultural practices which undermine their human rights and dignity. These changes must be based on genuine structural reforms within families and communities, and at the national level. One of the ways to secure sustainable improvements in cultural and gender systems is to formulate development policies with a gender perspective and a national gender policy, with a cultural outlook.

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