

# Changing Gender Roles in a Declining Economy of Western Region of Kenya

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## ABSTRACT

The rise and establishment of Mumias Sugar Company (1971) and Nzoia Sugar Company (1976) in Western region of Kenya came in with many changes in role performance at household level. Sugar production and industrialization became the basis on which gender roles were informed in the region. However, economic challenges such as low production capacities, lack of clear harvesting schedules, huge debts, managerial inefficiency, cane poaching, unreliable and fluctuating weather conditions, outdated technology, equipment and machinery, facing the sugar industry have led to poor performance of the industry hence changing gender roles at household level. This study therefore aims to assess the changing gender roles in a declining economy of Western region of Kenya. The main objective of the research was to assess gender roles in the context of the declining sugar industry in Western Kenya, and to analyze economic dynamics on gender roles. The study adopted phenomenological study design because it studies human experience and ways things present themselves to us through experiences and thus the meanings things have in our experiences. The study was informed by Social Role Theory of Alice Eagly, (1987). Through the chief's and local administrative office, purposive sampling was applied to identify locations and households whose major income and livelihoods depended on sugar cane farming. The sample size of the research study depended on the level of information saturation. Methods of data collection included in-depth interviews for men and women at household level and focus group discussions. Data analysis was done by using themes which was identified from the data collected in the field notes. The findings revealed that, although men still command respect and dignity as household heads, women have taken over breadwinning and provision roles. Men have compromised their male ego at the expense of their inability to provide for their household members. The study therefore recommended that gender policy makers should re-direct their efforts towards men through empowerment and life skills programs to boost and motivate male ego and restore their status as household providers.

**KEYWORDS:** Gender, Gender roles, declining economy

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## I. BACKGROUND

In most parts of Africa, women's labor is controlled by men household heads that plays a decisive role in the agricultural production (Boserup 1970). Thus, men benefited more in the name of household head while women's work was defined as non-productive (Boserup 1970; Rogers 1980). Moreover, women's contributions to the economy are considered under the category of "family labor that men take the advantage in development activities in the name of household head" (Rogers 1980). This, in turn, according to Rogers (1980), has imposed negative consequence on the status of women. However, many authors such as Rogers (1980), Sachs (1996), Ostergaard (1992), Momsen (2004) argue that cultural ideology about men's and women's role is a critical factor in determining the way gender relations of production are ordered in a given society. According to Odameet *al* quoted by Momsen (2004), twice as many women as men work in an agriculture-related activity in developing countries. In short, women suffer from the hard work of what in gender studies is called 'triple roles' including in production, reproduction and community works. Recently, however, the situation has begun to change for the better (Momsen 2004: 157).

However, under increasing economic pressure, men in many parts of the world have lost their traditional occupations and jobs, and women have been forced to take on additional income earning tasks while continuing with their domestic tasks. (Kabeer1997). Problems such as marital and domestic violence, drug and alcohol abuse have been associated with men's failure to cope with the erosion of power due to their inability to

bring home an income (Ashwin and Lytkina 2004: 196; Kabeer 2007, 52). Even when women take on breadwinning roles, men may feel reluctant to increase their share in domestic work and child care for the fear that their sense of masculinity and self-esteem would be compromised. Worse still, women's labor market participation may threaten men's identity to the point that the latter completely reject household chores (Parrenas 2005, 58). Some research note that wives obliged to support the household because of men's inability to contribute economically may have a relatively high degree of decision-making power (Beneria and Roldan, 1987). This study therefore aims to assess the changing gender roles in the context of a declining economy of Western region of Kenya.

## **II. METHODOLOGY**

This study applied purposive sampling where sugarcane companies in Western region were purposely selected, which also served as the base of sugar belt zones in Western region of Kenya. Through the assistance of the area chiefs and local administration transect walks were made to purposely select households from each location based on their knowledge and understanding of the declining sugar industry in the region. The sample size of the research study depended on the level of information saturation. Data was collected through In-depth semi-structured, focus group discussions, Key informants and observation. Key informants included former retired factory staffs, former retired Mumias out growers cooperative and Nzoia out growers' cooperative staffs, former factory workers and a widow whose husband owned a juggery factory and large scale farmers. These key informants were determined by the chiefs based on his/her knowledge of his/her community members and their expertise and knowledge of critical issues facing the sugar industry in the region. The researcher reconstructed a series of events that have been unfolding in relation to the current declining status of the sugar industry and asked the respondents to share their views, perceptions and experiences. The researcher brought out key turning points of the phenomenon to provide a context within which respondents could give their views and reactions. Data was analyzed using the thematic analysis, where data was coded based on the transcribed and field notes. Themes were identified based on descriptive summaries and interpreted verbatim which provided the basis for theoretical understanding of data collected. Validity and reliability was checked feedback from the respondents as objectivity was achieved through bracketing.

## **III. LITERATURE REVIEW**

Women comprise half of the total population in the world of which most of them are living in the rural areas. They play a greater role in agriculture throughout the world than is generally imagined. Indeed, they constitute a big percentage of the labor force, with 428 million women working in the agricultural sector around the world according to the International Labor Organization (ILO), compared to 608 million men in 2009. However, many authors such as Rogers (1980), Sachs (1996), Ostergaard (1992), Momsen (2004) argue that cultural ideology about men's and women's role is a critical factor in determining the way gender relations of production are ordered in a given society. Again the unreliability of statistical evidence on gender roles in agriculture particularly in African countries hinders to know the precise number of women participants in agriculture. In many societies in the world particularly in Africa, a women's work in agriculture is largely unremunerated and is so undervalued and often unrecorded (Ibid).

According to Odameet *al* quoted by Momsen (2004), twice as many women as men work in an agriculture-related activity in developing countries. The importance of women in the agricultural workforce is increasing in developing countries. The proportion of women workers has steadily increased from 38.59% in 1950 to 43.83% in 2000 and is predicted to rise to 44.44% by 2010, whereas in developed countries the proportion of female agricultural workers has declined and was 36.13% in 2000 compared to 43.77% in 1970 (FAOSTAT cited by Momsen 2004). In short, women suffer from the hard work of what in gender studies is called 'triple roles' including in production, reproduction and community works. First and foremost women have to produce food for their families' subsistence on land they don't own, secondly carry out reproduction role and in the African setting children belong to a man and thirdly carry out all household chores and participate in community activities on behalf of the family. Recently, however, the situation has begun to change for the better (Momsen 2004: 157).

Although women do as much or even more work than men, it is men's work that is accorded higher status. It is the type of work, and the social relations in which the work is embedded, that matters (Connell 2005, 78). While a large part of women's work takes place within the confines of the household, men's work is almost exclusively done in the context of the commodity economy (Holter 2003). Returns on men's labor are materialized in money form while returns on women's labor in the domestic sphere usually of an intangible nature. Money has been found in various to be an important sign of economic success and masculinity (Hacker 1957; Osella and Osella 2000; Thai 2008). Structural changes in the economy, however, have led to greater participation in paid women as well as increased under- and unemployment among men. This has severely undermined if not displaced men's identities as family providers (Clever 2002, 3; Edwards 2006; Kabeer 2007).

A well-established limitation to women's economic success in developed countries is their greater involvement in household task and childrearing activities. In recent times there has been increased attention focused on trends in domestic or household labor patterns and the gender participation and contribution. This increasing attention stems from the implications that the substantial changes in family formation and dissolution and the changing gender distribution in paid work, may have had on the distribution of work between men and women in the home.

Most research tend to suggest that women's hours on housework are declining as a result of involvement in paid employment but there are mixed views about whether men's hours on housework have changed (Hochschild, 1989). Women continue to perform a greater proportion of domestic tasks than men do. Various studies consistently reveal that women do most of the housework and childcare within the family, but the explanation for gender inequity within the home is not well understood. Three theoretical perspectives on the process of domestic labor allocation dominate the literature: (1) the time availability perspective, (2) the relative resources perspective, and (3) the gender perspective.

The time availability perspective suggests that the division of labor is allocated according to the availability of household members in relation to the amount of housework to be done. Hence, women's and men's time in housework should be strongly related to time spent in market labor and family composition. Shelton's (1990) research documents that time constraints, measured by employment status, marital status, and parental status, account for a large amount of variation in household labor. The association between these indicators of time constraints and household labor differs markedly by gender, however, with women's time more affected by these factors. The relative resource perspective argues that the allocation of housework reflects power relations between men and women: the level of relative resources partners bring to a relationship determines how much domestic labor is completed by each partner. Higher levels of education and income relative to one's spouse, for example, are expected to translate into more power, which is used to avoid doing domestic tasks.

The gender perspective argues that housework is a symbolic enactment of gender relations and explains why there is not a simple trade-off between time spent in unpaid and paid labor among men and women in either marital or cohabiting relationships. Early formulations of the gender perspective focused specially on gender role ideologies formed through childhood socialization about appropriate adult male and female roles (Coverman, 1985). More recent formulations have combined gender ideology with the theoretical construct of "doing gender" (Berk, 1985; West and Zimmerman, 1987). South and Spitze (1994) demonstrate how housework is an enactment of gender - controlling for other factors, they find that women and men in marital households, compared with other household types, have the greatest gap in housework time, indicating the power of the roles "wife" and "husband". Gupta (1999) shows that after marriage, women's housework hours increase while men's housework decline. Brines (1994) argue that husbands' housework contributions do not follow "logical" rules of economic exchange. Rather, the more a husband is dependent on his wife economically, the less housework he does, most likely as a way to reassert his masculinity. In other words, wives and husbands display their "proper" gender roles through the amount and type of housework they perform.

Connell (1987) argues that gender relations are organized by gender structures such as those of labor and power that situationally constrain the play of practices in different spheres such as work, home, and community. Families are central agents of social change and therefore knowledge of changes in the family division of labor is critical to understanding shifting gender ideologies in society. The gendered division of labor that attaches the breadwinner's role to men and the caregiver's and nurturer's roles to women continues to shape gendered spheres in powerful ways. Therefore the focus of this research study on how gender relations are being reconstructed due to declining sugar industry in Western Kenya is of great importance because in many societies there is an unwritten and enduring gender boundary between public and domestic spheres occupied by men and women respectively (Adams and Coltrane 2005, 231; Taga 2005, 130).

As much as masculinity is defined by what men do, it is just as fully defined by what they do not do, as well as the ways they do labor (Edley and Wetherell 1995, 121). Doing household labor is equated doing gender: women do it and men do not (Adams and Coltrane 240). Men's identity is structured by their participation or nonparticipation in domestic work and child care. While it is common in most societies that women are expected to take a share in providing for the family through their engagement in paid work, similar expectations of men concerning reproductive work are not so strong. Caregiving in particular remains women's work because, as argued by Gerstel and Gallagher (2001, 213), not only do women spend more time providing care but men's caregiving is also contingent on women. This, however, does not mean that women do all the work. In fact, the idea of the excessive labor burden of women expressed in the term "triple roles" in Gender and Development (GAD) approaches has been criticized as oversimplified (Cleaver 2002, 13). Men do engage in domestic work and child care but when they do it, it is often considered as "helping out." However, gender norms and practices pertaining to family division of labor are not uniform across different cultures, social

classes, and ethnic groups. It has been pointed out that the extent of men's participation in domestic work and the notions of masculinity associated with it vary depending on where they live and the class to which they belong. Generally, men from poorer and less privileged groups are least able to live up to hegemonic models of masculinity that exclusively assign them to bread winning in the public sphere (Kabere 2007, 52). When facing a decline in their economic options, men are forced to define their gender identities in new ways. Indeed, Gutmann and Vigoya (2005, 117) found that it was not rare for men in Mexico with lower educational achievement and few economic resources to care for small children while child care in families of upper classes was mostly performed by maids and nannies. It has also been argued that the smaller the wage gap between partners, the more willing men are to participate in domestic work, and the more authority status women have (George 2005, 27). However, this is somehow contradicted by research in Russia and the United Kingdom that shows marginal change in men's contributions to housework when they become unemployed or economically inactive (Ashwin and Lytkina 2004; Waddington, Critcher, and Dricks 1998). These observations shed light on this research study to investigate how men are changing their behaviors due to the declining sugar industry in the region.

Silberschmidt, (1991; 1992; 1999; 200) reveals that even if men are benefiting from patriarchal structures, a majority is caught in a paradoxical and frustrating situation where their male roles are being seriously undermined. On the one hand, men are the acknowledged heads of households, and they have the formal authority. On the other, lack of employment or low/insufficient income prevents men from fulfilling their expected roles as men, husbands, and in particular as providers of the needs of wife, children and other dependants. In this process, many men have become "figure" heads of household. A provider/breadwinner ideology has emerged both in rural and urban areas and so has a new type of social value system whereby men's social value is most readily measured in economic terms. Faced with unemployment and with a general tendency for men to use whatever income they may have on investments outside the household (often on alcohol and casual sexual relations) deference and respect from wives are decreasing. With many men not being able to afford a proper marriage (which still requires the transfer of a bride price), marriage is increasingly being replaced by temporary cohabitation. Such unions are often characterized by antagonism and violence, and more and more households end up being headed by single mothers. In order to survive with their children, women have taken on new roles and responsibilities and most importantly control. Many men are faced with contempt from women who have no illusions about husbands as responsible providers and fathers

#### **IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

The construction and re-construction of gender roles in a declining economy of Western region of Kenya.

The findings revealed that there is a relationship between cultural ideology and gender performance and therefore cultural ideology informed gender roles at household level. Men's ownership of land and possession of financial resources determined power relations between men and women, it indicated that men were household heads, providers and that they held ultimate powers in role division at household level. As men exploited their cultural value as household heads and providers, women worked extensively on the sugar plantations but gained very little. Sons got some share from the household sugarcane returns as a compensation for their work invested, as daughters only benefited through clothing and food provided at household level. This indicated that sons were valued as heirs of the households' wealth while girls were socialized by their mothers to take up 'triple roles' in their new homes to be. It also indicated that men regarded women as their own property and therefore whatever women produced belonged to a man.

The study also revealed that agricultural intensification reduced men's roles in sugarcane production, as women carried out weeding role in the sugar plantations which is labor extensive in nature. Women organized and mobilized themselves into groups to win weeding contracts in the sugarcane factories' nuclear estates to meet household needs like sugar, salt, cooking oil and kerosene for lighting at night, as men exploited their household labor force to realize maximum income and profits. Women multitasked during the weeding process for household subsistence use. They also practiced dairy farming whereby they milked and sold the milk to factory workers in the morning and evening hours to meet household needs which supplemented men's role of provision. Alongside farming and production roles women carried out their female ascribed roles of baby care and household chores based on gender stereotypes attached to men and women's roles. Women were not to be heard but perform household chores such as baby care, cooking and serving their husbands at all times. This implied that women were overwhelmed and overburdened with household chores. Although women participated more in household production and home keeping their contribution was not valued compared to their male counterparts who worked less but commanded a lot of honor and dignity as a result of their owned wealth and financial resources hence their ability to head, provide and control their household members.

However, the findings also revealed that the declining status of sugar industry in the region has deprived of men their wealth and major source of income hence their inability to provide for their household needs. Men have lost their jobs as cane cutters and casual laborers in the sugar factories which have exposed

them to poverty. Men have been forced to invest into their physical strength at an average daily wage of Ksh. 200 per day, which is not able to meet and sustain their household needs and livelihoods. It was revealed that most men remained in the domestic sphere where they engaged in subsistence farming and household chores as women spared some time out of their homes to carry out small microenterprise activities to meet daily household needs. Men's working time in subsistence farming has doubled as they spent most of their morning hours in the farm and cattle herding in the afternoon hours. Men also carry out business related activities that can be performed in the domestic sphere, such as brick burning, stone quarrying, sand digging along the river banks and basket weaving for sell during marketing days; however it takes time for a customer to come by. Furthermore market days are conducted once in a week which means that sometimes a day ends without making enough sells to meet household needs. It also implies that income accrued from men's income generating activities cannot meet immediate household needs like food, salt, cooking oil and kerosene.

The study further found out that women have taken over provision and breadwinning roles over their men's inability to provide for their household needs. It was revealed that men have allowed their wives to carry out business outside their home environments to meet household needs. Women carry out their businesses in the public sphere and across the border in Uganda where they purchase tomatoes, cabbages, onions and eggs for sell to local traders. Some women cross over to Sio-Port where they trade in fish for sell to fish mongers in local markets across the region while others sell tomatoes, onions and cabbages for large-scale businessmen/at a commission during market days. Other women have developed into potential employers as they own motor-bikes (boda-boda's), where they have employed young men for an income to support major household needs like school fees and maize farming activities which are now common in region.

It was also revealed that women have ventured into micro-finance schemes where they have accessed loans to improve on their households' livelihoods hence their ability to perform major household responsibilities. While some have joined Table Banking micro-finance scheme common in the region to access specific loans for their improved livelihoods others have joined intensive agricultural schemes and programs like One Acre Fund and One Cow initiative for maximum maize and dairy production respectively. Furthermore it was revealed that some of the loans taken by men are paid through their wives earnings from the micro enterprise activities. However based on observation, it was observed that men have compromised their human nature as jealousy creatures at the expense of household provision roles and benefits gained from their wives earned income.

The study found out that men's perception and views that women belong to the kitchen is quickly fading away as it was revealed that men's economic dependency on their wives has forced them to take over women roles such as baby care and home keeping as a livelihood strategy. Men argued that it is the availability of opportunities that determines who should carry out household roles hence the changes that are being experienced in most households. However based on observation, men have over compromised their masculinity and male ego as household providers and therefore the only option left for them is to accept and abide by the changes as a form of their contribution to household needs and livelihoods. Men's argument that availability of opportunities one is exposed to, determines who should provide for household needs is a cover up for their persistent failure to provide for their household needs.

It was realized that women have gained power over their husbands as they can afford to spend most of their time in the public sphere without any questions from their husbands, as it has been assumed that they are carrying out micro enterprise activities to provide for their household's needs and livelihoods. The findings revealed that women headed household hold power compared to their counterparts in married households, as they hold ultimate power and control over their household resources and therefore can spend out of their households for days in search of livelihoods without questions from other household members, they also plan and manage their timeframes and roles based on their household needs. The study revealed that some widows saw no difference in role performance and household income in comparison to when their husbands were alive as other women preferred to be regarded as widows as they carry out household provision roles from their own income without their husbands' support. This means that women have gained powers and self confidence over men, in household role performance hence their ability to provide for their household needs with/without their husband's support.

However, although women have taken over breadwinning and provision rules, it was revealed that, they still perceive and value their husband's income for household needs and livelihoods. Men are still compelled to provide for their household needs despite their low and insufficient income as women's own earned income is valued for their own prioritized needs like dressing and their maternal home care. It was found out that other factors that motivate men to continue providing for their household needs despite the hard economic times placed on them was that, men's ego and cultural ideology holds them accountable to their households' provision role as they regard women's efforts and income as merger to sustain household needs and livelihoods. Men still hold on to their perceptions that women are their property and therefore whatever they accrue from their small income generating activities also belongs to them. This means that, although men know

that they are unable to provide for their household needs, they still hold onto the traditional cultural ideology that holds men accountable as household heads and providers for household needs hence their continued reference to women as a commodity that they own in totality.

Despite the fact that men have lost their wealth and financial resources, the study found out that, women still accord their husbands the dignity and respect they deserve in their homes according to patriarchal ideology. Women still acknowledged and respect their husbands as heads of their households despite their inability to contribute to household needs. According to observation, women seem to have understood the implications of a declining economy on their husbands' income hence their willingness to support and cover up for their husbands' inability to perform their expected roles. The study revealed that other factor that may have contributed to women's upheld dignity and respect for their husbands is religious beliefs, according to religious books women believe that men are the heads of their households and that woman should be submissive to their husbands. Women expressed their perceptions that religious books call for their perseverance and endurance to inherit the kingdom of God, this explained their continued respect and dignity they upheld to their husbands despite their inability to meet and sustain household livelihoods.

## V. CONCLUSION

Gender roles in western region of Kenya were formerly based on hegemonic ideology where men and women learned their roles based on their cultural values and socialization process. Men carried out breadwinning and provision roles while women domestic roles such as subsistence production, reproduction and household chores. However, the declining status of the sugar industry has led to changing gender roles in the region; men have been deprived of their major source of income, wealth and power hence the changing gender roles at household level. This has directly and indirectly caused negative implications on men's self-ego. Women on the other hand have taken over household headship and provision roles; however they still accord respect and dignity to their husbands despite their inability to provide for their household family members. This study therefore recommends that urgent measures should be put up by gender policy makers to come up with empowerment programs that will empower men and train them in life skills in order to motivate and restore their self ego as household heads and sole providers.

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