

Culture and Its Influence on Socio-Economic Empowerment of Women in Kuria West Sub-County

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Abstract: *Women economic empowerment is a prerequisite for sustainable development for pro-poor growth and the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Unfortunately efforts to attain sustainable development through women economic empowerment are continually crippled by cultural influence which is usually discriminative against women equitable development in most societies in developing countries. In Kuria land, the situation is worse where women's development is discriminated by culture. The purpose of this paper is to identify cultural practices that influence socio-economic empowerment of women in Kuria west Sub County. The study was based on the theories of liberal feminism, Marxist feminism and radical feminism theory. The study employed descriptive research design on a sample size of 317 women who formed the target of the study. Simple random sampling was used while data was collected using self administered questionnaires and interviews. Finding from the study revealed that culture is still held dear in Kuria both by women and the community at large. Traditional and cultural values are used to define role of women in that society and most of the time these values and practices undermine women participation in socio economic empowerment in the area. The study also found that culture negatively influence women health seeking behaviour, education and socioeconomic empowerment. This paper therefore recommends advocacy which will incorporate the re-orientation of health workers, the implementers of gender sensitive programs towards methodology of dealing with culture before implementing some of the reproductive health programmes. The paper also recommends a greater commitment to work, while sensitizing the communities' women empowerment in education, health and economic activities.*

Keyword: Culture, Socio-economic Development, Kuria, Kenya

1. Introduction

Diverse cultures of the world have systems that create an environment of women discrimination (Kamal, 2015). Due to biological differences women are discriminated against as they are influenced by the society from the context of being female. The domineering male factor and stereotypes emanating there from, the female genital mutilations, societal assigned gender roles as well as the boy child preferences over the girl child on matters education are some of the major obstacles standing on the way of women empowerment. In rural Australia, women are taking leadership in community and economic development activities and are often extremely reliant on a range of communication technologies for personal, family, business and networking purposes. Despite often lacking access to good quality infrastructure, technical support and training, rural women have been found to be enthusiastic adopters of new ICTs (Grace et al, 2006). In India, the constitution prohibits discrimination on grounds of sex and India has ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), which makes the country obligated to eliminate violence and discrimination against women (Hatti et al., 2014).

In contemporary Bangladesh, the socio-cultural values and norms have a strong influence on the issue of women discrimination. It is well established that in Bangladesh women or girls are everyday targets of discrimination within their households (Jahan, 2014). Women discrimination is reinforced by various institutions including religious, socio-cultural, economic, political and legal institutions all of

which emphasize women's discrimination in the household. Women accesses to material resources are restricted, leaving them dependent on male relatives (Okojie, 2014).

Informal institutions govern gender relations in different societies of the world, and in many ways justify discrimination against women. India is a patriarchal, patrilocal and patrilineal society (Kamal, 2015). Many cultural and social norms create a situation where women and girls are discriminated. Women are usually restricted to household duties and are not the "providers" of the household needs. Inheritance usually passes from father to son in a patrilineal pattern. Women's empowerment goes hand in hand with gender equality that focuses on women rights not only as human rights but also for sustainable development. Empowerment essentially entails power-the power to redesign possibilities as well as options and act on them. This power has the effect of enabling people to have the courage to do things they never thought themselves to be capable of doing and that power comes from working alongside others to claim the rightful entitlements (Eyben, 2008).

A study carried out in Malawi by Kapakasa (2012) shows that initiation brings several problems for girls. These dilemmas affect their school attendance leading to drop-out. The schedule for initiation ceremonies conflict with the school calendar leading to absenteeism from school. Initiated girls also find it difficult to return to school or concentrate on their studies because their next expectation is marriage. In Kenya, initiation ceremonies were still important because they mark the passage from childhood to

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adulthood. During initiation ceremonies, knowledge and value concerning procreation, morals and sexual skills, birth control and pregnancy were passed to the girls. After initiation it is considered shameful for girls to return to school unlike the boys (Omare, 2007).

Women economic empowerment continues to be of major concern all over the world, it is said that women and girls constitute 52 per cent of the world's population and make up 33 per cent of the official labour force yet they perform 67 per cent of all hours worked (Ehigiamusoe, 2005). Females form over 60 per cent of the illiterates, receive only 10 per cent of the world's income and own less than 1 per cent of the world's real property (Maguire, 2004; World Bank, 2010). Kamal (2015) posits that diverse cultures of the world have systems that create an environment of women discrimination based on different forms of cultural practices. The domineering male factor and stereotypes emanating there from, the female genital mutilations, societal assigned gender roles as well as the boy child preferences over the girl child on matters of education are some of the major obstacles standing on the way of women empowerment.

In contemporary Bangladesh, the socio-cultural values and norms have a strong influence on the issue of women discriminations. It is well established that in Bangladesh women or girls are everyday targets of discrimination within their households which greatly impact on their socio economic empowerment (Jahan, 2014). It is suggested that women education in rural Bangladesh may be attributed to some socio-cultural factors which vary for men and women. Women discriminations are reinforced by various institutions - religious, socio-cultural, economic, and political and legal-all of which emphasize women's discrimination in the household. Women accesses to material resources are restricted, leaving them dependent on male relatives (Okojie, 2014). In Kenya, many cultural and social norms create a situation where women and girls are discriminated. Women are usually restricted to household duties and are not the 'providers' of the household needs. Inheritance usually passes from father to son in a patrilineal pattern. Kuria community presents a patriarchal society where subordination of women determines power relations within households and the bargaining power of household members through the organization of the family, kinship and marriage, inheritance patterns, gender segregation and associated ideologies (Parveen, 2007; Kabeer 2015; Naved, 2010).

According to Brock and Cammish (2011), socio-cultural factors refer to the people's way of life as expressed throughout their attitudes, virtual beliefs, values and pedagogy systems from generation to generation through the community's socialization systems. Girl child network (GCN, 2014) mentioned culture and traditions as inhibiting factors affecting girls' participation in secondary education, and the main aspects being female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and early marriages. This is particularly common in certain Counties in Kenya, such as Elgeyo-Marakwet, Mandera, Narok, Migori, Kisii and Nyamira (Omare, 2007). Mbiti (2011) emphasises that cultural factors influence girl child education and issues on poor attitude or low participation in the system. Mbiti (2011) eludes that there

are four major reasons that lead to girls withdrawal from education system which include greater demand made on girls by their families in connection with household duties, pre-arranged marriages leading to drop-out of girls from school; the girls who are circumcised become rude to teachers seeing female teachers as their equals and uncircumcised teachers (female and male) as children, thus affecting girls' participation in secondary education in Kuria West Sub-county of Kenya.

Balunywa, (2000) observes that in Narok district, a girl who has undergone FGM means many things to many people. To boys it means there is an available wife, to the poverty driven parents she is a source of finance, and if the girl herself continues with education she becomes big-headed as she thinks of herself as "an adult. The plight of the girl in Kuria West Sub-County is increasing with time (Ondiek, 2014). Within and among this community, the girl and the mother have no say in both her life and her destiny. One of the cultural values of the Kuria people is the initiation rite of both boys and girls. The Kuria people whose origin is distinctly spelt out have practiced FGM as far as the elders can recollect from their rich oral history. This is one of the fundamental rites of passage which mark a stage of graduation into maturity and adulthood. FGM practice has been propagated by such numerous factors as empowerment of one's social status and reducing a woman's sexual desires among others (Balunywa, 2000).

Statement of the Problem

Despite the argument that women economic participation and empowerment are fundamental to strengthening women's rights and enabling them to have control over their lives and exert influence in society, many interventions have not achieved a lot in empowering women. This is attributed to the influence of cultural on developmental issues in Kenya. In the Kuria community, women often face discrimination and persistent gender inequalities, with some women experiencing multiple discrimination and exclusion in economic empowerment because of various socio-cultural factors. However not much has been documented on this. Developmental disparities are related to socio-economic differences which have led to the identification of distinct socio-economic classifications of women. Cultural practices such as customary marriages, boy child education preferences, and gender stereotype as well as roles have reduced the woman to all other activities but not economic related. This study therefore, gives a broader lens on the culture influence of women economic empowerment.

2. Research Methodology

This study employed both quantitative and qualitative research methods using a descriptive survey design. This design was appropriate as it provided the researcher as opportunity to explore and explain information and meanings from data collected from the field (Polit & Beck, 2004). The study targeted a population within 1802 households comprising of approximately 162,857 people in Kuria West Sub-County (GOK, 2011). The target population was women residents of Kuria West Sub-County. The study used a formula to come up with 317 sample size from 1802

households. It used a simple random sampling technique to identify participants for the study. Questionnaires, interviews (structured and non-structured) as well as observation techniques were used for data collection from the field. Questionnaires and interviews for the study were self administered by the researcher with assistance from research assistants. FGDs with community women leaders and women teachers were conducted in groups of between 6-8 people at a time. Qualitative information on statistical data was collected from secondary sources available in the policy documents and research reports by CSOs, the government and research institutes.

3. Findings and Discussions

3.1 Cultural Practices

The study sought to find out some of the cultural practices that affect women in the Kuria West sub-county. Data obtained are as presented in table 3.1.

Table 3.1: Responses of cultural practices

Statement	Frequency	Percentage
FGM	300	94.6%
Polygamy	200	63.9%
Early marriage	250	78.9%
Men ownership of property	290	91.5%
Girl child labour	97	30.5%
Wife inheritance(levirates)	50	15.8%
Dry sex	20	6.3%

Table 1.0 above indicates that majority of the respondents (94.6%) were affected by Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), while 63.9% were affected by polygamy; with the rest 91.5% by men property ownership and 78.9% by early marriages. These were common cultural practices that influence socio-economic empowerment of women in the study area. From the table above, it is also evident that Girl child labour 30.5%, wife inheritance 15.8%, and dry sex 6.3% are cultural practices that least affect women socio-economic empowerment in this community. These findings are congruent with Omare (2007) who posited that FGM was a detrimental cultural practice in ensuring girls acquire education. Similar results were discussed by Kishor (2000) and Balunywa, (2000) in other areas like Narok and Meru, Kenya.

During focus groups discussions it was shared that apart from FGM, patriarchy is another common phenomenon where male chauvinism and domineering frustrates women's pursuit of socio-economic empowerment. Men in this community would always act as a fulcrum, always controlling and determining what women around or under their 'authority' do. No wealth here can be acquired by the woman without the husband or father's knowledge.

Women's economic participation and empowerment are fundamental to strengthening their own rights and enabling them to have control over their lives and exert influence in society. In the Kuria community, women often face discrimination and persistent gender inequalities, with some women experiencing multiple discrimination and exclusion in economic empowerment a condition that is justified as

enhancing cultural practices in the community (Kishor, 2000). Kenya, one of the most populous countries in Africa, has policies and programmes geared towards the improvement of women socio-economic standing and overall development, with little positive result (Amin, 2005).

The lack of education or poor participation of girls in the process of formal education is quite detrimental to national and human resource development in any nation. Available information on enrolment trends by gender (2004 - 2007) from the Sub-County Education Office shows a decline in enrolment trends of girls in primary schools of Kuria West Sub-County (Kishor, 2000). According to the water and sanitation baseline survey of April –June 1996, it was found that the majority of members in households in the former larger Kuria district cannot read or write. About 45% of the respondents could read and write and 43.3% could neither read nor write. The survey further indicated that 22% of the household's members have no formal education, 20% are of standard 1-4 education, 29% are of standard 5-8 education, 14% obtained form 1-2 and 0.3% obtained form 3-4 education. Regarding the heads of households, 50% of the household heads then, in Kuria District, were found to be illiterate (Amin, 2005).

Furthermore, retention and completion rates of girls in primary schools in Kuria West Sub-County are quite devastating. It is a common assumption among Kenyans that one of the causes of low enrolment, poor retention and completion rates among girls in primary schools of Kuria West Sub-County is FGM. The practice seems to have more devastating effects on rural communities whose social and material empowerment are limited. Cultural practices such as customary marriages, boy child education preferences, and gender stereotype as well as roles have reduced the woman to all other activities but not economic related. According to Kishor (2000), women are viewed as the source of wealth but not the possessors of wealth.

An interview with key informants revealed that polygamy ensures that women suffer as they are left with the burden of raising their children as the husband entices a new catch. Early marriage was cited as detrimental on women empowerment as it ensures that women do not have a voice in the home as they are married when they are very young and do not have enough skills of running a home which leaves the man at the top of all decision making in the family. Men property ownership was discussed in most group discussions as the key in undermining women socioeconomic empowerment. In one discussion the informant cited that: *Wanawake hatuna chochote: kila kitu ni cha baba watoto, ama watoto wake wa kiume. Huwezi panda mboga kama hujapewa ruhusa; na huwezi uza chochote kama mzee hajasema* (We literary do not own anything: everything belongs to the children's dad, or his sons. One cannot plant vegetables in the family's orchard without the husband's nod; neither can one sell any produce without his consent). From these sentiments it is revealed that women only rely on the mercies of men when it comes to control and sale of property and thus cannot move up the ladder economically.

The table also reveal FGM as the common and highly accepted cultural practice in the area of study. These results concur with Ondieki (2012) who observed that the Kuria people have practiced FGM for years and being conservatists as they are, they do not easily give in, into emerging modern trends and changes in the world despite all the efforts being undertaken by various advocacy groups to stop the cruel practice. Due to this rigidity, the Kuria community has lagged behind in terms of their children accessing formal school education especially the Kuria girl child.

3.1.2 Marital Status

The study sought to examine the marital status of the informants. The findings are shown in table 3.2.

Table 3.2: Marital Status

Marital status	Frequency	Percentage
1. Married	219	69
2. Single	38	12
3. Widowed	32	10
4. Divorced	28	9
Total	317	100

The results in table 3.2 above show that majority 69% of the respondents are married while few 38(12%) are single, 32(10%) are widowed and 28(9%) are divorced. These results imply that majority of the women are affected with culture since they are under the subordination of men who are considered the heads of the family. The researcher further conducted an interview to investigate if ones marital status had any effect on the influence of socio economic empowerment. The informants revealed that married and widowed women are highly affected by culture than the single and divorced. This they attributed to the power, single women make in deciding what to do without seeking permission from husbands. The same applied to the divorced that are in a better position to make decision and live the lives they want to live.

In an FGD it was revealed that most Kuria married women have to act as it fits their husbands but the divorced are considered tough headed and nobody associates with them therefore they are in a better position to make their own decision even when they have little resources. During the interview it was however revealed that it was very hard to get a divorce from a Kuria man because culture again has many strategies to ensure that women stay in their homes. Some of the strings that tie marriages even when they are abusive are children, dowry and submissiveness that women are trained to have during the initiation period.

3.1.3. Cultural Influence on Women Access to Education

The study sought to find the influence of culture on women access to education. Data obtained from the field is as discussed below. To answer this, the researcher sought the response of informants on their education level. Findings from the field are as shown in table 3.3.

Table 3.3: Academic Qualifications of Respondent

Qualification	Frequency	Percentage
1. P1 Certificate	220	69
2. Diploma	33	10
3. Degree	46	15
4. Masters and PhD	18	6
Total	317	100

Table 3.3 above indicates that a majority of the respondents are P1 certificate holders, commanding a whopping 220 (69%); followed by the undergraduate degree holders at 46 (15%); Diploma holders at 33(10%) and then the Masters and PhD holders at 18 (6%). The results show majority of women dominating basic education level that is holders of certificate. Very few have advanced their education levels to PhD. An interview with key informants revealed that culture and cultural practices greatly influence the education of a woman. Some informants revealed that women culturally are supposed to take good care of the home and those who put most of their time in education especially the PhD women are considered home breakers and thus a social misfit in their community. These results imply that women have low education skills which affect their empowerment and development in the Kuria west community. The findings have been supported by Kamuli and Katahore (2003) who asserted that the level of training and education of a person influence their skill power and ability to adjust to new methods and ideas in economic development. Oloo, Wanjiru and Newell-Jones (2010) also reveal that a cultural practice such as FGM affects the girl child of school going age.

From the above evidence it is clear that the level of education amongst the Kuria women has robbed off women, their due share of authority, recognition and influence. As noted earlier, the community having been heavily patriarchal favours the boy child to the girl child. Schooling is skewed towards the boy child than the girls. Most of the time this skewness is a trickle effect of cultural practices that positions girls and women at the bottom of the society and assigns them more manual duties. This literally spirals to later into the lives of women in this community, where the number of them who can stand to be counted, as having been well educated and empowered enough to pursue their socio-economic aspirations are very few (Adinma, 2011).

3.1.3 Influence of Culture on Health Seeking Behaviour among Women

The study also sought to understand the influence of culture on health seeking behaviour of women. The following questions were asked and the data obtained presented as follows.

Table 3.4: Distribution of response on health seeking behaviour among women

Statement	Agree	Disagree
Are women voluntarily allowed to choose family planning methods?	37	290
Do their men allow them to visit health care facilities?	217	100
Do their men make follow ups on their wives healthcare statuses?	170	247
Does culture affect their healthcare seeking decisions?	300	17
Do husbands facilitate their wives with funds for their medical care in health institutions?	100	217
Do they normally work when they are sick?	300	17

Table 3.4 reveal that most (290) women are not allowed to chose family planning methods discussed above Dry sex are some of the cultural practices that brings about this situation. While this is the case women therefore are not able to control the number of children they have thus they do not have enough time to build economically as most of their time is on domestic chores of raising children and ensuring the home is running well.

When asked if men allow them to visit health care facilities majority 217 agreed. This imply that reproductive health program sensitization in the area is effective. Although

during the interview key informants reveled that men just allow their wives to visit the health care facilities when they are pregnant to ensure the health of the children.

Most women 247 disagreed on the statement that men make a followup of their wives health status and this implies that men are not keen on their women’s health and this could influence the level of participation of women in socioeconomic activities especially when they are sick. Majority (300) women agreed that culture affected their health seeking behavior and pattern. During an FGD, women shared that culturally, women are supposed to care for the family even when they are sick, and some of the health problems they face especially reproductive health problems, are not supposed to be revealed, but visit a traditional healer first, before proceeding to formal hospitals.

More women – 300, agreed that they indeed work when they are sick. An FGD with women reveled that they had to ensure the family is well fed has enough water and firewood for use even when they are sick.

3.1.4 The influence of culture on social economic empowerment

The study was interested in investigating the influence of culture on social economic empowerment. Data collected from the field was analyzed and presented in table 3.5.

Table 3.5: Correlation between culture and socio-economic empowerment of women

		Correlation	Women economic empowerment	Women social empowerment	Women Improved Social Living
Pearson correlation	Culture	Correlation coefficient	-0.321	-0.314	-0.331
		Significance	0.043	0.049	0.040
		N	317	317	317

The results in table 3.5 show that culture significantly and negatively influence women economic empowerment, women social empowerment and women improved social living at ($r = -0.321, p < 0.05$), ($r = -0.314, p < 0.05$), ($r = -0.331, p < 0.05$) respectively. Calculating the coefficient of determinant R culture contributes 10.3%, 9.9% and 11.0% variability to Women Economic Empowerment, Women Social Empowerment and Women Improved Social Living respectively. In total culture contributes 31.2 % variability to women socio-economic development.

These findings are in agreement with Girl child network (GCN, 2004), who mentioned culture and traditions as inhibiting factors affecting girls’ participation in secondary education and the main aspects being Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and early marriages. Kamal (2005) argues that many cultural and social norms create a situation where women and girls are discriminated. Women are usually restricted to household duties and are not the “providers” of the household.

Table 3.6: Response on influence of culture on Women social empowerment

Statement	Mean	Std. Deviation
1. Am the head of the home	4.00	1.034
2. I freely make decisions on what investment to pursue	3.211	0.908
3. I freely manage funds in my household	3.423	1.045
4. I am allowed by my husband to own my property	3.421	0.764
5. I freely make decisions on any purchases in my household	3.231	0.9786
6. I am at liberty to freely hold any leadership position	3.432	0.876
7. I am centrally involved on crucial decision-making powers, in areas such as family planning, a daughter’s marriage, children’s schooling, and the buying and selling of property	3.245	1.652
8. I decide on spending my own income although I often consult my man.	4.232	1.976

The results in table 3.6 show that most women are actually the heads of the family in terms of financial support, but they disagree that women have an increase in decision-making power in areas such as family planning, a daughter’s marriage, children’s schooling, and the buying and selling of property. Women decide on spending their own income although men were often consulted. The respondents also

disagreed that any woman who is married can freely make decisions on what investment to make, liberally manage funds in households, freely own property; on her own makes decision on the purchase of necessary items in the household or allowed to hold any leadership position without the consent of the husband. These findings are in line with the argument of many scholars.

According to Kabeer (2001), it is possible to think empowerment in terms of the ability to make choices. Thus disempowerment means the lack of choice. For her, empowerment is a process where disempowered persons who have been denied the ability to make choices acquire such an ability. Women's inferior situation may seem to result from their own choosing or not choosing. Women have internalized their status as persons of lesser value and they lack power to make choices (Kabeer, 2011).

Thus the ability to make choices is required in addition to mere choices in order to empower women. An enabling environment and the conditions for women's empowerment are also required; they include participatory democracy, critical self-reflection and collective action (Bisnath & Elson, 2009). Women's empowerment includes: acquiring knowledge and understanding of gender relations and ways in which these relations may be changed; developing a sense of self-worth, a belief in one's ability to secure desired changes and the right to control one's life; gaining the ability to generate choices and exercise bargaining power; and developing the ability to organize and influence the direction of social change to create a more just social and economic order, nationally and internationally (UNIFEM, 2000).

Women's increased consciousness or a change in perceptions is also often highlighted as a substantial outcome of empowerment (Lazo, 2015). The list could be completed with women's right to have access to opportunities and resources, and women's increased income and positive change in business performance. Mere access to opportunities and resources is not sufficient; more often than not, access and control, over key resources is underlined. The "ability to influence the direction of social change" refers actually to the same as "participation in decision-making", which is commonly used when discussing empowerment Rowlands (2008) refers to people's own participation, remarking that empowerment necessitates it that women are encouraged to set their own goals and to take responsibility. But the demand for change does not often begin spontaneously from the condition of subjugation; empowerment must be externally induced in terms of consciousness raising (Batliwala 2014). Hashemi *et al.* (2006) argues that female-headed households have become common in the Third World countries; they are especially common in Kenya. Among the very poor, women tend to be the major income earners. Poor families are highly dependent on women earnings thus reinforcing the cultural attachment the community has on women's earnings; their relative and absolute contribution tends to be higher within the poorest households. The subordination of women is a consequence of the existing patriarchal social system which determines power relations within households and the bargaining power of household members through the

organization of the family, kinship and marriage, inheritance patterns, gender segregation and associated ideologies (Parveen, 2007; Kabeer 2005; Naved, 2000). Due to biological differences women are discriminated against as they are influenced by the society from the context of being female.

4. Conclusion and Recommendation

This paper therefore concludes that the women in Kuria still hold dear some traditional and cultural values which define their roles as women in the society. These have affected their social-economic growth. It is thus concluded that culture significantly and negatively influence Women Economic Empowerment. In total culture contributes 31.2 % variability to woman socio-economic development.

The findings of the study reveal that culture significantly and negatively influence Women access to education in the Kuria west community. The study also found out that culture significantly and negatively affects women health seeking behavior by contributing a variability of 29.3 % to women socio-economic empowerment. The study therefore recommends that the National Government, the County governments, and the Civil Society Organizations should promote women participation in decision-making to reflect women need priorities, influence to policy formulations and resource allocation. The government should ensure that for financial management to be managed prudently, its accounting officers should make impromptu visits to women initiated projects to ensure close monitoring and evaluation so that these projects are sustainable and can survive the test of time, hence improve women's economy within their communities and the entire country.

The study recommends the sensitization of cultural meanings in schools to ensure that cultural practices such as FGM does not affect school going girls and they are able to continue with studies even when they are circumcised. Finally the study recommends advocacy to incorporate the re-orientation of health workers, the implementers of reproductive health programmes, towards a greater commitment to work, while sensitizing the communities, the beneficiaries of reproductive health services, towards the acceptability of reproductive health services brought to them, and greater patronage to the reproductive health facilities in their communities.

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