

Gender Inequalities, Power, and Patriarchy in Sub-Saharan Africa

Author

Odile Mackett, *University of South Africa*

Sub-Saharan Africa is one of the poorest and most unequal regions in the world, and this inequality is most notable among middle-income countries (IMF, 2015). Women are often theorized as a homogenous group, although evidence continually suggests that this is not the case as gender inequalities are in fact on the decline in the region (Mackett, 2023; Parreñas, 2000). Not only are there discrepancies in the circumstances of women within individual countries but also across borders—feeding into the capitalist notion of exploitation, which requires an unequal distribution of resources and encourages class disparities.

Understanding the constituent parts of patriarchy and viewing it through a social reproduction theory lens can prove useful for understanding why class gender inequalities are so persistent within societies and economies. Sylvia Walby (1989) introduced six structures of patriarchy, which should be understood to be interlocking. In other words, patriarchy should not only be viewed as the functioning of one or two of these pillars, but rather be understood as being mutually reinforcing pillars. These include: (1) the patriarchal mode of production; (2) patriarchal relations in wage labor; (3) the patriarchal state; (4) male violence; (5) patriarchal relations in sexuality; and (6) patriarchal culture.

The paper used the six structures to answer the following questions:

- How have patriarchy and capitalism manifested in Sub-Saharan Africa and how do they persist today as systems of oppression?
- How have these systems of oppression undermined women's social, economic, and legal freedoms in Sub-Saharan Africa?
- Which persisting elements of these systems of oppression hinder/encourage economic transformation in the region?

The paper starts with a historical overview of how the imposition of the patriarchal state, encouraged by the advent of colonial rule, has undermined the role of women in leadership in Ghana. The second section of the paper analyzes the contemporary economy—and the role of women in it—in Sub-Saharan Africa. It provides both quantitative and qualitative data to highlight women's positioning in the labor market and presents three case studies showing how women's reproductive responsibilities and gendering of work and roles in the private and public spheres are key to maintaining gender inequalities in the region. It also highlights that, despite the growing economic contributions women are making to the productive economy, they are still subject to patriarchal relations in wage labor and victims to patriarchal culture. The third section of the paper explores the unequal distribution of non-remunerated, domestic responsibilities, exacerbated by a lack of adequate infrastructure in many

African nations. The paper then concludes with policy reform suggestions based on the challenges and opportunities identified.

Policy reforms are presented using Walby's framework. The first pillar is the patriarchal mode of production. To fully understand how this pillar operates, one must get a better understanding of how households work. The household, which is traditionally understood as a "black box" in the economy, remains largely invisible in many public policy debates. With the exception of time-use surveys, which have become a useful tool to enumerate how people spend their time, most datasets do not provide an overview of how resources are used and distributed within a household. Opportunities exist for this data to be collected more broadly and regularly in the region. One example is appending time diaries to existing surveys, as has been done in the Tanzanian Integrated Labour Force Survey 2020/21.

The second pillar is patriarchal relations in wage work. There is overwhelming evidence demonstrating women's subordinate positioning in the labor market, not only in the region, but globally. Broader social protections are an important way of ensuring that the relationship between workers and the labor market need not be so intimately intertwined. Reducing women's vulnerability in domestic work through the universal provision of services, among other mechanisms, is key to undermining the structural power imbalances between workers and their employers.

Many countries in the region are working to dismantle power structures that perpetuate women's subordination. These policy interventions are only useful to the extent that people are aware of them. Information on policy is as important as the policy itself. Beyond just implementing policies, the state must be seen to be implementing those policies. The state can further act by reducing pressure on the time of women. Limitations on hours of work can be legislated by the state, where necessary, although a reduction in wage work time can only benefit people if they reduce their need to work through comprehensive social security provision and investment in appropriate infrastructure to reduce time spent on unpaid work within households.

The persistence of patriarchal culture is a key stumbling block to the advancement of gender equality on the continent. This is demonstrated through a variety of issues, including women's key responsibilities for unpaid work within their household, rendering many interventions aimed at ensuring their equal representation in the productive economy ineffective or only mildly effective. Dismantling this culture can be achieved by advancing women in leadership and increasing the number of women role models as prominent and powerful actors in society. Legislating mandatory reserved seats for women in parliament is one such way. Furthermore, encouraging and supporting traditional leadership structures that elevate women in leadership positions, such as the reemergence of the importance of queen mothers in Ghana, is another avenue.

Another key stumbling block, underpinning much of what has already been discussed, is male violence. Male violence in both the public and private sphere impeded women's ability to actively participate in activities according to how they best see fit. In the public sphere, safety is a key issue. Investment in infrastructure, such as ensuring that public spaces are well-lit and that public transport is accessible and operational beyond traditional working hours, can further enable women to move around public spaces as they need to.