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Who is a "real woman"? Empowerment and the discourse of respectability in Namibia's Zambezi region

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SYNOPSIS

The third Millennium Development Goal expresses a commitment to promoting gender equality and women's empowerment. We use respectability discourse as a lens for understanding constraints and opportunities for women's empowerment. A case study of Kwandu Conservancy, located in Namibia's Zambezi region, generated 49 interviews with women. We also collected data through participant observation, document review, and twenty key informant interviews. Our analysis revealed that a "real woman" construct embodies feminine respectability in Kwandu. While the construct reinforces a woman's power to provide a livelihood through educational achievement, hard work, and collaboration with supportive community members, spouses, and children, its narrow definition of respectability also disempowers. Fear of losing respect and access to resources restrict strategic choices like choosing to divorce or remain single, saving rather than sharing resources, valuing and pursuing informal knowledge, and directly challenging limitations, uncertainties, and inequalities that can deter women from achieving a 'better life'.

Introduction

The third Millennium Development Goal expresses an international commitment to promoting gender equality and women's empowerment. However, patriarchal structures like predominantly male traditional governance systems and unequal access to education continue to pose major obstacles to achieving the 2015 target in southern Africa. Patriarchal structures can devalue women in relation to men and limit women's access to resources. While the enduring colonial legacies and forces of global homogenization necessitate sensitivity to local norms and histories, opponents of women's rights have employed claims of unchanging "culture", "custom", and "tradition" to rationalize women's subordination (Becker, 2007; Hubbard, 2007). Similarly, notions of "respectability" have curtailed women's opportunities while legitimizing abuse of women (Hungwe, 2006; Jefremovas, 1991; Mungwini, 2008). These and other forms of patriarchal discourse fuel unequal relationships between men and women at multiple levels of society. Using the context of Kwandu Conservancy in eastern Zambezi[1] region, Namibia, we aim to (1) examine how women in Kwandu frame respectability; (2) show how those respectability norms impact women's opportunities for exercising choice; and (3) identify spaces in which women challenge respectability discourse. We conclude the paper by highlighting implications for empowerment theory.

Namibia's case illustrates the intersections among gender-based inequality, poverty, gender-based violence, and the HIV/AIDS pandemic. One in three women in Namibia's capital city has experienced intimate partner violence (Garcia-Moreno, Jansen, Ellsberg, Heise, & Watts, 2006), and an estimated 18.8% of pregnant women visiting ante-natal clinics in Namibia tested HIV positive (MOHSS, 2010). Over 41% of Namibia's population is ranked as poor or severely poor (CBS, 2008). The Zambezi region is a politically contested region with complicated geo-politics. The South African occupation under apartheid contributed to a

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post-Independence secession attempt in 1999, and tensions about national and ethnic identity persist (Kangumu, 2011). Male control over women, reproduction and marriage tightens in situations of political and ethnic disruption (Aengst, 2013; Giles & Hyndman, 2004; Mayer, 2004; Smith, 2014).

To promote gender equality and women's empowerment, we need to understand how patriarchal discourse, particularly norms of respectability, perpetuates gender inequality. How does patriarchal discourse influence women's awareness of opportunities and their ability to exercise choice over their own lives? We also need to understand what empowerment is and how it relates to women's motivations in particular contexts. How can empowerment be conceptualized in a way that honors cultural differences without excusing women's subordination (see Kabeer, 2012; Kabeer, Khan, & Adlparvar, 2011)? Should women's autonomy or status be a central aim of empowerment? We explore these questions in the following three sections.

Drawing from our case study of Kwandu Conservancy, we sought to understand how women frame their own wants, needs, and values and how their orientations reflect engagement with patriarchal structures. We found that the local construct of a "real woman" embodies local respectability norms. We sought to further understand how the "real woman" construct impacts women's opportunities for empowerment, and subsequently identify where women can resist and reform respectability discourse.

Power, patriarchy, and discourse

To understand how gender-based inequality persists, we examine how discourse, power, and patriarchy interact. Discourse is a system of representation in which meaning and meaningful practice are constructed (Hall, 1997). Power produces discourse, so social elites can impose their consciousness—beliefs about what is 'true'—on other people (Freire, 2009; Foucault, 1977a, cited in McHoul & Grace, 1993: 194; Foucault, 1977b, cited in Rabinow, 1984: 72–75). Oppression is then enacted through the internalization of an oppressor's consciousness, an acceptance of innate inferiority to an oppressor (Freire, 2009). With only a single, or dominant, definition of reality, existing power relations seem entirely natural and unquestionable (Bourdieu, 1994). A view of power as a productive force suggests that women's subordination is an outgrowth of pervasive 'truths' imposed by more powerful social actors, frequently men and elite women. It also reveals that differentiating between women and men involves more than a biological determination of sex, as gender is culturally constructed and mutually constituted (Charmes & Wieringa, 2003; Hodgson, 2000). Societies produce gender through the distribution of resources, social value, and power (Goetz, 1995), and in patriarchal societies, an asymmetrical distribution favors men.

Women are not without agency (Alcoff, 1994) nor are they a homogenous group undifferentiated by age, class, race, ethnicity, or access to resources (Charmes & Wieringa, 2003; Sharp, Briggs, Yacoub, & Hamed, 2003); however, their relatively limited endowments, greater constraints, and exposure to risks in patriarchal societies restrict their autonomy (Kabeer, 1997). Women who choose to forgo autonomy for the provisions and protection offered by adherence to patriarchal parameters enter into what Deniz Kandiyoti (1988) has termed a "patriarchal bargain" (see also Kabeer, 1997). However, losing autonomy can lead to a situation in which women are dependent upon men who fail to deliver their share of the bargain (see Kabeer et al., 2011).

Respectability discourse

The nature of discourse suggests that culture is a set of socially-constructed norms that changes over time (Sharp et al., 2003), so we can best address gender inequality by deconstructing messages about women's 'natural' roles, rights, and responsibilities. Feminist and gender and development scholars have shown that norms of "respectability" reinforce gender inequality (e.g. Fernando & Cohen, 2014; Hungwe, 2006; Radhakrishnan, 2009). Such respectability discourse (or "respectable femininity", e.g. Radhakrishnan, 2009) can reinforce men's control over women by inducing shame and social ostracism of women who fail to conform, while providing acclaim and resources to women who perform the prescribed "respectable" roles (Fox, 1977; Hungwe, 2006; Jefremovas, 1991; Johnson-Hanks, 2006; Mungwini, 2008). Respectability discourse also provides a structure through which women can oppress or alienate other women (Giles, 1992; Guérin, Kumar, & Agier, 2013). While different opinions about respectability exist within a single culture, dominant social constructions mask complexity and create an assumption that there is a consensus (McPherson, 1994). Unlike two primary strategies of control over women—seclusion and protection—respectability discourse requires no direct, external control, and it endures throughout a woman's life cycle and affects women of all ages and socio-economic classes (Fox, 1977).

In parts of Sub-Saharan Africa, women access resources, earn social status, and gain a sense of womanhood by acting respectably (Jefremovas, 1991; Mungwini, 2008). For example, Hungwe's (2006) study of the Shona, found "respectable" women remained in or returned intermittently to rural areas and submitted to the authority of elders. Marriage and motherhood, submission to husbands and his kin, industriousness, hospitality, and altruism earn Shona women the accolade *uyo ndiye mukadzi chaiye*, meaning "that one is a real woman" (Mungwini, 2008). Jefremovas (1991) found women who submitted to a Rwandan script of respectability—acting as "good wives" or "timid virgins"—could gain temporary access to family resources. Johnson-Hanks (2006) describes a similar pattern among the Beti women of Cameroon, where women negotiate a modern form of respectability and honor made possible only through the careful and strategic management of marriage, child-bearing, education and the new economy.

In contrast, some Sub-Saharan societies have tended to label autonomous women as "unrespectable". In Namibia, the political elites' emphasis on procreative heterosexuality portrays sexual minorities as national and racial ("un-African") traitors (Currier, 2012). Women's mobility has been equated with being "unrespectable" because women who move around, whether migrating to cities, riding bicycles, or engaging in cross-border trade, are seen as a threat to male control (Hungwe, 2006; Jefremovas, 1991). Mobility may offer women a degree of economic independence at the price of being branded a "prostitute", "*femme libre*" ("a loose woman"), or "*pfambi*" ("one who walks"), regardless of her mode of economic activity (Hungwe, 2006; Jefremovas, 1991). The