

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/321207230>

The Role of Patriarchy in Family Settings and its Implications to Girls and Women in South Africa

Article in *Journal of Human Ecology* · May 2017

DOI: 10.1080/09709274.2017.1305614

CITATIONS

32

READS

79,886

2 authors:



Tshinanne Mudau

University of Pretoria

10 PUBLICATIONS 54 CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE



Olusegun Samson Obadire

University of Venda

22 PUBLICATIONS 106 CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE

The Role of Patriarchy in Family Settings and its Implications to Girls and Women in South Africa

T.J. Mudau¹ and O.S. Obadire^{2*}

¹*Institute for Gender and Youth Studies, University of Venda, P/Bag x5050, Thohoyandou 0950, South Africa*

^{2*}*International Relations, University of Venda, P/Bag x5050, Thohoyandou 0950, South Africa*

E-mail: segun.obadire@univen.ac.za

KEYWORDS Empowerment. Illiteracy. Patriarchy. Poverty. Women

ABSTRACT This study aims at empowering women to take control over their sexuality in order to change the unrelenting poverty cycle among girls and women in South Africa. Qualitative methodology was used to collect data through semi-structured interviews. Purposive sampling was used to select thirty-five (35) participants from Tshikhudini area in Thulamela Municipality. The study used both primary and secondary data collection methods. At the core of the debates on the system of patriarchy are notions that perpetuate women's suppression around the world and outdated practices that suggest that a woman's role in the family is subordinate to that of a man. It was found that due to patriarchy women were controlled even in the reproductive process. It was revealed that women were not allowed to use contraceptives due to the belief that it makes men feel sick after sleeping with them. Findings revealed that the role of patriarchy deprived women from advancing educationally. Therefore, this study calls for redress so that women would be empowered; in addition to seeking to promote gender equality.

INTRODUCTION

Patriarchy is a system of society or government in which the father or eldest male is head of the family and descent is reckoned through the male line hence, the system promotes male privilege. The attitudes and expectations organized on this basis rank men above women, providing a social structure that gives men uncontested authority. It is an obsession with control as a core value around which social life is organized. Men maintain their privilege by controlling women and anyone else who might threaten their positions. Women are subordinated and treated as inferior because they are culturally defined as inferior. Men however, do not suffer because femaleness is a devalued and oppressed phenomenon (Johnson and Leone 2005).

Women are oppressed by the culture that also believes that they are powerless and de-

pendent on men. Women are also controlled in every aspect of life, for example, in the reproduction process, number of children to bear, and the type of work women should do. According to Bofu-Tawamba (2015), women's position is still far from satisfactory. Their lower status in both industrialized and developing countries is rooted in economic inequalities and discrimination with regard to access to power.

Patriarchy is experienced everywhere in South Africa among all ethnic groups and all racial groupings. According to Stromquist (2014), black women in South Africa suffer a triple oppression in terms of gender, race and class position. In South Africa, patriarchy manifests itself in the way it controls and orders female sexuality and fertility. In most instances, men control women in the private sphere and they are forced to do things they do not want. If they refuse, there is violence and rape in the family. Female fertility is controlled by men in that women are expected to bear many children to satisfy men even though their health may not be good enough to cope with the carrying of many pregnancies. Women do not have rights and their health is not considered at all.

*Address for correspondence:

Olusegun Obadire
International Relations,
University of Venda,
P/Bag X5050, Thohoyandou 0950,
South Africa
E-mail: segun.obadire@univen.ac.za

METHODOLOGY

Research design has been described as a set of guidelines and instructions to be followed in addressing a problem (Thomas 2010). Bless et al. (2006) define research design as a program to guide the researcher in collecting, analyzing and interpreting observed facts. In this study, qualitative research design was used to collect rich descriptive and exploratory data from women based on patriarchy as the root cause of women's oppression and gender inequalities. Participants were given an opportunity to describe the role of patriarchy in their families, during the focus group interviews. The exploratory design enabled the researchers to ask probing questions during the interviews to gain new insights and extensive data on the role of patriarchy in the family situation.

Population is a group of elements or cases whether individuals, objects or events, that conform to specific criteria and to which one intends to generalize the results of the research. The population of this study comprises of thirty-five (35) women from the age of 30 to 45 years who live at Tshikhudini village in the Vhembe District. People who live at Tshikhudini village are Tshivenda-speaking. A purposive sampling procedure was used to select all the participants. This was in line with Creswell's (2009) argument that qualitative research lends itself to selecting participants purposefully without attempting to select them randomly. The researchers selected the participants on the basis of qualities which they as informants possess. In this study all research participants shared the same situation, namely, women oppression through patriarchy. Additionally, participants were selected due to their availability during the time of study. In this study fieldwork was conducted in order to investigate how patriarchy oppresses women in the family situation.

Seven focus group interviews were conducted with thirty-five women who live at Tshikhudini village, with each group comprising of five participants. The times, dates and venues of the focus group discussions were organised in advance. A semi-structured interview was used. Focus group interview enabled the women participants to share their experiences with regard to the role of patriarchy in their family situations and reach some consensus about the problem.

Probing as a communication strategy was used as a clarity seeking method (Strydom 2013).

Permission was sought to audio-tape interviews in order to capture information accurately and notes were also transcribed and where necessary translated from Tshivenda to English. Referential adequacy by using a tape recorder to record the interviews provided a suitable authentic record. Credibility was ensured by prolonged engagement wherein the researchers had more than one contact session with the group participants.

The narrative data from unstructured interviews were analyzed qualitatively by using open coding method as described by Creswell (2009). The method included the following steps: Reading through all the transcripts to get a sense of the whole; after the researchers had completed the task for all the interviews, a list was made of all similar topics and data were grouped according to the themes and sub-themes (Maxwell 2005). Coding involves getting a sense of the transcribed data and therefore, picking emerging themes and making a list of various topics (Braun and Clarke 2006).

In keeping with the researchers' ethical obligations, an ethical clearance certificate was issued by the university committee. Permission was sought from the Chief of Tshikhudini through written letters and submitted to the Chief's kraal at Tshikhudini village. Permission was granted both verbally and telephonically and also through letters. The participants were informed about the aims and procedures of the study. Permission was sought from women under study. Participants were informed about the use of the audio-tape. They were also informed about voluntary participation as they were made aware of the fact that they are free to terminate participation in the study at any stage without fear of being punished. Confidentiality was also emphasised in this study. The researchers ensured the participants that the information shared during the interviews would remain confidential.

RESULTS

Data collected through semi-structured individual interviews were intensely studied and narrowed through coding. Thirty-five women were interviewed and their background information is summarized below. The respondents were grouped into five people per group. This process yielded six themes.

Theme 1: Decision-making Process on the Size of the Family

The majority of the women in the study said that men decided on their family size, specifically on the number of children they give birth to. The results are supported by what Johnson and Leone (2005) found that due to patriarchy, women are controlled in every aspect of life like the reproductive process, number of children as well as the type of work that they should do. According to Sonfield et al. (2013) education makes women socially and economically independent and makes them command respect both at the workplace and in the family. Education informs women on decision-making matters. That is why it is imperative that they should attend school and be educated, which will in turn empower them.

Theme 2: Cultural Beliefs on Marital Issues Concerning Arrangement of Marriage

Some of the women said that elders from the family select the family where their daughters should marry, because they knew the family background and their lifestyle. The elders will send *lobola* (bride price) and marry for their young man. Few women said that if the family is poor, they may borrow money from a rich family. In such a context, they will then arrange marriage for the girl child without her consent while she is very young, because they would have failed to repay the loan extended to them. According to Venda culture, the practice is known as “*U fara tshikunwe*” which means a girl will be married while still one or two years old and this is done without her consent. This cultural practice is likely to continue as long as the girl child is not empowered through education. Once educated, young women will decide when and who to marry. When asked for their views on the issue, some negative reactions were expressed by respondents as follows:

“I was very shocked when my parents informed me that, there would be people coming for my hand in marriage, even though I didn’t know the people. I was very disappointed, right now I am staying with that man and he is very traditional, I cannot do anything before informing him. He is very obsessive of controlling and likes marginalizing me. I don’t think there is anyone today who can allow the practice of an

arranged marriage for her child, because you end up not continuing with your studies.”

Theme 3: Communication between Husband and Wife

The majority of the participants said that, the *auntie* of the family is the mediator in the family. She is the one to take all decisions and communicates these to members of the family. However, few women disagreed and said men communicate decisions taken on behalf of the family. According to the women, men say communication is their responsibility because according to tradition women must not voice their feelings or concerns. Men take women as part of their property as they pay *lobola* to the in-laws; and while there were no problems in the past, times are changing. Culture needs to change with time. Because of enlightenment brought about by access to education for the girl children, major issues are likely to be raised to challenge these cultural practices. An obvious explanation for this scenario is that education empowers the women to voice their concerns.

Some of the women mentioned that, it is very difficult in the family where sisters-in law have power. One of them indicated that,

“My child was two years old; then the aunts (Makhadzi) came and informed me that the child had grown up; therefore, I needed to fall pregnant. Because of the tradition and culture and the laws of the family, I had to follow what had been said.”

Theme 4: Beliefs of Men Regarding Contraceptives

Most of the respondents in the study said that men do not accept the use of contraceptives because they would like to select the method of prevention which suits them. Men practice withdrawal method, which is, referred to in Tshivenda as “*u tambela nnda*”. This is the withdrawal of the penis just before ejaculation of semen in the vagina.

Some of the respondents said that men prevent pregnancies by separating from their wives for many years without coming home. These are migrant labourers seeking jobs in the cities, like Johannesburg, in order to work for their families. Traditionally women practice the method

called “*Ufhahea*” which is performed by a traditional healer and some elders. This is a way of pregnancy prevention in Venda culture. Menstrual blood and herbs are mixed and the prepared concoction is hidden somewhere unknown to the woman but known by the practitioner, unless she promises not to open the container until the woman wants another child. This method is done without the knowledge of the husband because they do not agree on the western practice of prevention, which is the use of family planning pills and injection. One of the participants had this to say;

“I have nine children, prevention is not accepted in the family, my husband usually said to me, I paid lobola for you and what is expected from you is to give birth to as many children as you are told in this family. It is painful because I am not working; I cannot give my children what they need in time because the number is big.”

Theme 5: Favoured Sex of the Child in a Family

Some of the participants interviewed said that men prefer a boy child more than a girl because according to them the boy keeps the name of the family ticking over. They believe that he will ultimately be the head of the family. If a woman fails to get a boy child culturally, a man will marry another wife so that a baby boy will be born. If the second woman fails, a third woman would be married. A boy child is the heir of all the property of the house. A boy was preferred because he will add to the number of the family, by having children, unlike a girl who will be married off to another family. However, in some families, girls were preferred more than boys because they believe that girls will take care of their aged ones.

Such families seem to encourage their daughters not to marry at all, the reason being that they will look after their grandparents. Some support their children to get married because of *lobola*. These families fail to attach value to their girl children. The families fail to interpret the meaning of the bride price paid correctly. According to Sonfield et al. (2013), payment was a legal bond uniting the two families. The practice should signify the legal transfer of the rights of parents to their groom and his family, while the completion of the payments of the bride price confers to the husband the sexual and repro-

ductive services of the wife. One of the women said that,

“I have five girls, because my husband was in need of the boy child, another woman was married and she gave birth to four girls and a boy child has not been born in the family until today.”

Theme 6: Patriarchal Practice in a Family Setup

All the women in the study agree that patriarchy disadvantages women, as they are not encouraged to go to school to further their studies or acquire entrepreneurial skills. Women see patriarchy’s role as that which emphasizes that women must be pregnant and give birth to children. Patriarchy encourages young men to propose love and when pregnancy is conceived, they refuse responsibility. In support of the argument on male dominance in the study one woman gave testimony that she was divorced for failing to conceive. Patriarchy does not contribute in raising children but the women or mothers will take the responsibility of providing food, shelter and education for the children. Those children mostly end up in the streets. In a patriarchal society, a man cannot rely on one woman, however that practice spreads diseases. Women who are studying often do so through corresponding with universities such as the University of South Africa so that they develop themselves academically. Most men in patriarchal societies do not need educated women because they need women who will depend on them and give them the opportunity to control them. They also decide on the number of children they want. Women in the study said men do not allow their women to pursue full-time studies because they are afraid that they will become leaders, be valued, and end up occupying positions of power.

DISCUSSION

Previous authors have defined patriarchy as being characterised by current and historic unequal power relations between women and men whereby women are systematically disadvantaged and oppressed. This study revealed some of the contributory factors to girls and women conditions of a vicious cycle of poverty attributable to patriarchy. This takes place across almost every sphere of life but is particularly no-

ticeable in women's under-representation in key state institutions, in decision-making positions and in employment and industry. The system does not allow girls and women to take important decisions for themselves as it may be seeing as usurping men's authority through cultural beliefs. It is unclear what the revolutionary feminist conception of a non-patriarchal society would be and how such a society would reproduce itself (Mackay 2015). It is assumed that men have an innate biological urge to subordinate women, how could women possibly be freed from male power and control sufficiently to struggle for such a non-patriarchal form of society?

An alternative form of analysis of patriarchy called materialist feminism has been developed (MacNevin 2007). The analysis of production must be located within the social relations of production as a whole, and the position of all categories of labour cannot satisfactorily be understood without reference to the family and the state. According to Kuhn and Wolpe (2013), women remain defined by kinship structures while men enter into the class-dominated structures of history. This argument does not provide any satisfactory theory of the foundations of patriarchy, since it rests on the poorly formulated theory which Freud develops in *Totem and Taboo* and on Levi-Strauss' account of exchange relations lying at the foundation of human culture and the subordination of women (Schneider 2011; Mackay 2015). Male violence against women is also a key feature of patriarchy. Women in minority groups face multiple oppressions in this society, as race, class and sexuality intersect with sexism for example.

CONCLUSION

The study showed that women who are forced into early marriages find it difficult to break the cycle of poverty because of lack of education and life skills. They are totally at the mercy of their husband who often has many other wives and children to cater for with limited resources at his disposal. Not being able to contribute meaningfully especially financially to the upkeep of their children makes women vulnerable and renders them powerless. Many of the respondents in the study agreed that the cultural practice of patriarchy system is oppressive and should be abolished. The study concluded that cultural norms that value women as second class

citizens have no place in the modern world orders. Traditional authority structures need to be seen implementing a shift from male-dominated institutions to one where women are represented in all structures meaningfully.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations were made to facilitate women's access to decision making processes in the family. The majority of respondents were old women who are in the age group 45-50 years, and are experiencing poverty in the rural area. Therefore, government should give them funds to start small projects to alleviate poverty. Furthermore, it emerged that the widowers who participated in the study are also vulnerable to poverty. Therefore, the government must consider them for a social grant to alleviate their plight. There is a large proportion of respondents who only reached grade 8. There is a need to introduce adult schools so that they can further their education. Most of the respondents were housewives without skills. There is a need for skills development and training in entrepreneurship.

Society should influence boys to accept the girls' views to improve communication and decision making in the family so that when they get married they will have the skills needed in the family. Society needs also to be informed that both girls and boys should be valued the same and be given equal opportunities to education so that both can earn a decent living. Both girls and boys should be sent to school so that they may not be discriminated against. Society should be well informed on the need to accept women's views. Women must not be taken for granted, as if they are minors, but must be empowered to initiate things on their own. Society needs to be reminded that polygamy leads to a larger family which leads to poverty and illness and illiteracy. Poverty is a challenge to most families, let alone big families. Poverty hinders development in the lives of many people and it impacts negatively on the economy of the country.

LIMITATIONS

This study was conducted in one District of the Limpopo Province and cannot be genera-

lised to other districts in the Province. Focus group may have limited the extent of information sharing by participants. Future studies should endeavor to involve more villages around the district in the province as well as explore other methods of data collection.

REFERENCES

- Bless C, Higson-Smith C, Kagee A 2006. *Fundamental of Social Research Methods: An African Perspective*. 4th Edition. Cape Town: Juta and Co.
- Bofu-Tawamba N 2015. Awake to the Challenge: African Women's Leadership at Beijing+20. From <<https://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/ndana-bofutawamba/awake-to-challenge-african-women's-leadership-at-beijing20>> (Retrieved on 12 January 2017).
- Braun V, Clarke V 2006. Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2): 77-101.
- Creswell JW 2009. *Research Design: Quantitative Approaches*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications.
- Johnson MP, Leone JM 2005. The differential effects of intimate terrorism and situational couple violence findings from the national violence against women survey. *Journal of Family Issues*, 26(3): 322-349.
- Kuhn A, Wolpe A 2013. *Feminism and Materialism (RLE Feminist Theory): Women and Modes of Production*. New York: Routledge.
- Mackay F 2015. The Biggest Threat to Feminism? It's Not Just the Patriarchy. From <<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/mar/23/threat-feminism-patriarchy-male-supremacy-dating-makeup>> (Retrieved on 15 January 2017).
- MacNevin S 2007. Understanding Materialist Feminism. From <<http://www.feministezine.com/feminist/philosophy/Materialist-Feminism.html>> (Retrieved on 12 January 2017).
- Maxwell JA 2005. *Qualitative Research Design: An Interactive Approach*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Schneider DM 2011. Some muddles in the models: Or, how the system really works. *Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, 1(1): 451-492.
- Sonfield A, Hasstedt K, Kavanaugh ML, Anderson R 2013. The Social and Economic Benefits of Women's Ability to Determine Whether and When to Have Children. From <<https://www.gutmacher.org/report/social-and-economic-benefits-womens-ability-determine-whether-and-when-have-children>> (Retrieved on 16 January 2017).
- Stromquist NP (Ed.) 2014. *Women in the Third World: An Encyclopedia of Contemporary Issues*. New York: Garland Pub, P. 567.
- Strydom H 2013. An evaluation of the purposes of research in social work. *Social Work Journal*, 49(2): 149-160.
- Thomas PY 2010. Towards Developing a Web-based Blended Learning Environment at the University of Botswana. From <<http://uir.unisa.ac.za/handle/10500/4245>> (Retrieved on 12 January 2017).

Paper received for publication on July 2016
Paper accepted for publication on December 2016