

# Role of Social Work in Minimizing Sexual and Gender Inequalities

Christopher Nkonge Kiboro

Department of Arts and Humanities Chuka University, P.O. Box 109 – 60400 Chuka, Kenya  
Email: kiboro82@gmail.com

Octavian N. Gakuru

Department of Sociology and Social Work, University of Nairobi, P.O. Box 30197 – 00100 Nairobi, Kenya  
Email: ngakuru@uonbi.ac.ke

Josephine Misaro,

Department of Sociology and Social Work, University of Nairobi, P.O. Box 30197 – 00100 Nairobi, Kenya  
Email:jmisaro@uonbi.ac.ke

Samson Wokabi mwangi

Department of Peace Security and Social Studies, Egerton University, Kenya  
Email:swokabimwangi@gmail.com

## Abstract

Gender and sex shapes all aspects of our lives including access to key resources and services such as information, education, employment, health and credit. Being a socio-cultural construct, in terms of socially and culturally ascribed roles of males and females, gender often produces inequalities between sexes. This is because gender determines the way households allocate resources to sons and daughters. Discrimination of certain sex leads to their marginalization and exclusion from mainstream programs and services. The failure to address gender-based inequalities undermines efforts towards the broader goal of achieving social development. Although a number of approaches have been incorporated in the gender mainstreaming programs, social work seems to have been according minimal attention. The focus of this paper, therefore, is to build greater understanding of the potential role of social work in minimizing inequalities stemming from sexual and gender differences. The paper presents a brief review of literature on gender inequalities and at the end makes suggestions of the possible social work interventions which can help reduce gender inequalities.

## I. INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the role of social work in reducing gender inequalities in the society. It is motivated by the concerns that despite various attempts by the government and the relevant institutions to reduce gender disparities, inequalities still persist. While political and legal equality between men and women have increased in most regions, there are still areas where progress in advancing gender equality has not been significant. Before discussing the forms of gender inequalities and other forms of sex discrimination that have persisted in society, it is perhaps important to draw a distinction between the concepts 'gender' and 'sex'.

Too frequently, the two concepts are used interchangeably, yet they mean totally different things. Gender unlike sex is rooted in societies' beliefs that the sexes are naturally distinct and opposed social beings. These beliefs are turned into self-fulfilling prophecies through sex-role socialization where biological sexes are assigned distinct and often unequal work and political positions, and turned into socially distinct genders (Amott and Matthaei, 1991). This denotes gender as socially and culturally ascribed roles of males and females as well as the characteristics that are culturally associated with maleness or females (Chesoni, 2006; Green, 2000). In contrast, sex refers to the biological attributes of being male or female. Sex encompasses the biological characteristics that distinguish someone as either male or female. A person's sex is therefore a function of biology and it is determined according to certain identifiable features which are immutable. However, unlike sex which cannot be changed, gender can be changed over time and across cultures because it is a social and cultural construct.

Sex inequality is the discrimination that arises as a result of one's biological or anatomical identity as a man or a woman. For example, Amott and Matthaei (1991) points out that anthropologists have found that most societies, across historical periods, have tended to assign females to infant care and to the duties associated to raising children because of their biological ability to bear children while men usually concentrate on interfamilial activities, and gain political dominance. Consequently, this has led to political and economic dominance by men. Gender inequality or discrimination emerges as a result of the roles that are assigned, attributed or proscribed to individuals based on their sex. Thus, while the concept of gender is invaluable in understanding gender inequality, it cannot be understood independently of sex.

## II. NOTE ON METHODOLOGY

The arguments in this paper are based on both desktop research and literature review.

## III. PREVALENCE OF GENDER INEQUALITIES

Despite the fact that political and legal equality between men and women have increased in most parts of the world, the same has not been matched by parallel progress in many areas. Hence, gender gap (the differences between men and women) especially in social, political, cultural, economic attainments and attitudes are still pervasive. A more sober assessment of literature shows that women are grossly discriminated against while new policies and legislations are heavily in favour of men. For example, women have less access to, and control of, land, credit, technology, education and health, and skilled work (IFAD, 2001).

AFDB (2010) reports that wage gaps and discrimination against women in labour markets have resulted in fewer women participating in the formal sector, though this is not the case everywhere. In instances where increase in women's participation in labour force is reported, evidence from a number of countries shows that such increase is built on the pre-existing division of labour at the household where women work for longer periods than their male counterparts (UNDP, 2001). Consequently, women end up working for far longer periods than men even in the manufacturing industries. Elson (1999) for example, found out that women working in the garment industry in Bangladesh work on average three hours per week longer than men. The implications of such inequalities in the allocation of labour does not only mean causing severe damage on the health of women as a result of drudgery but it also means they have no time for leisure.

In some sectors, such as export processing zones, women's wages are 20-30 per cent lower than that of their male counterparts in the same industry (Horton, 1999; Standing 1999). Labour markets are also not gender-neutral. They are often segmented with women employed in occupations that are lowly remunerated (Joekes, 1995). Moreover, women workers are clustered in sectors with deplorable levels of employment rights. Although in many countries there are legal provisions to safeguard workers' welfare, effective implementations remains a big challenge. Therefore, it is not unusual for pregnant female workers to be sacked in order for their employers to avoid incurring costs through social insurance contributions (Joekes, 1995). Barrientos (1996) also noted that women's employment is often clustered in environments that expose them to major health hazards such as exposure to harmful chemicals and inadequate fire safety

Access to land by everybody on equitable basis has long been recognized as essential for promoting growth, efficiency, and employment creation (IFAD, 2001). However, gender gap is evident and women are less likely than men to own land. Crehan (1997) found out that the distribution of land ownership especially in developing countries is heavily skewed toward men. Although there have been massive reforms of women's legal rights in many countries, such as inheritance, even entrenched in constitutions, such legal provisions have usually proved slow and ineffective in ensuring land assets get to women. FAO (1996) reported that women produce 50 percent of the world's agricultural output, but only possess about 2 percent of its land. World Bank (2004) further reports that land inheritance among women is limited; therefore, they only hold about 1percent of registered land titles, while 5 to 6 percent of registered titles are held in joint names. Joint ownership of land between a woman and man does not necessarily guarantee the woman full control of the land. IFAD (2001) points out that where women gain land-use rights through male kin, men may still control key aspects of land use; women's rights often end with divorce or even the death of the husband forcing the woman to return to the natal home, often with no access to land.

Engagement in politics and governance also reveals glaring gender disparities. Although the importance of active involvement of women in civic participation has been stressed by UN-Habitat (2008), the number of women holding political positions globally is very small compared to that of men. For example, only in 23 countries of the world do women comprise more than 30 per cent of the lower or single house of the national parliaments (UN, 2010). It has also been noted by UN-Habitat (2008) that taking into account local councillors and parliamentarians, only one in five is female in a wide range of contexts. Where we have female politicians, research findings show that they only serve a single term due to gender discriminatory reasons (Pedwell and Perrons, 2007).

Apart from glaring gender disparities in political and governance domain, literature has also highlighted gender disparities in human capital in respect to education, vocational training and skills. Although many countries have made remarkable progress in closing the gender gap in education, women still constitute approximately two-thirds of 774million adult illiterates worldwide (UN-DESA, 2010). Other studies (Lloyd, 2009; UN, 2010) have also found that girls' completion of education especially at secondary and tertiary level is often disproportionately low. Too frequently, girls are withdrawn from school because their sponsors (parents or guardians) may not perceive girls' education as important or because they are needed to provide labour for household chores.

Gender violence has a strong relationship with gender inequality. Narayan, Patel, Schaft, Rademacher and Koch-Schulte (2000) says that the persistence of domestic violence across many societies is a manifestation that it is

not simply a characteristic of particular individuals but is, at a deeper level, connected to social structures that maintain unequal socioeconomic relations between men and women. Violence against women is a widespread global phenomenon with serious implications. Violence against women is an extreme expression of male dominance. It is one of the most intractable violations of women's human rights (Davies, 1994). Violence against women can result in serious injury, disability or death. According to WHO (2009) abused women have higher rates of unintended pregnancies, abortions, adverse pregnancies and neonatal and infant outcomes, sexually transmitted infections including HIV/AIDS and mental disorders compared to their non-abused peers. According to Narayan et al., (2000), at the centre of gender-based violence are the unequal power relations that limit women's choices and reinforce dependency on men.

#### **IV. RATIONALE FOR GENDER EQUALITY**

Gender is a basic determinant of social relations and rights in households and other resources like access to and control over land. Gender determines to a great extent a person's overall well-being in terms of access to and control over resources and other opportunities. World Bank (2000) points out that if the rights of men and women are flagrantly unequal; it becomes very difficult to establish a democratic and participatory socio-political order and an environment of equal opportunity. Thus, apart from its intrinsic value, gender equality is fundamental in realizing social development.

Whitehead and Kabeer (2001) indicated that ignoring gender inequalities comes at great cost to people's well-being and countries' abilities to grow sustainably and thereby reduce poverty. Not taking gender issues into account may result in programs that are technically successful but that negatively affect women and supplement social and economic stratification

Gender equality has the potential to bolster productivity. For example, discrimination of women in labour force participation and preventing women from enjoying equal remuneration as men or when their labour is underused or misallocated, the result is huge economic losses to the country. Also, when women are not allowed to have full access to and control over land, they are less likely to have access to credit and other inputs which are critical for increased yields.

Women, often put up with the burden of bearing and caring of children. When therefore they are deprived of education, the human capital of the next generation is impacted on negatively. Women without education encounter serious difficulties in rearing healthy and productive children. Too frequently they end up having more children than they wish, exacerbating the pressures not only on themselves but also on their family. On the contrary, women who are better educated are able to communicate with their husbands on matters of family size, use of contraception, and are able to follow up the health requirements (such as immunization) of their children.

Gender equality in all sectors has a crucial role for the increasing agricultural products, to improve income of households, ensuring food security, and sustainable development of the nations at large.

#### **V. SOURCES OF GENDER INEQUALITY**

Significant causes of gender inequalities can be found in customary gender norms and values that perpetuate political, legal, economic and educational inequalities. Social norms and values can sometimes become barriers that contribute to deprivation of essential resources for human development. The beliefs and practices that comprise the local culture can be detrimental in reducing gender inequality. For example, Communities or lineages allocate land to their constituent families; that land, in turn, is allocated within the family and handed down to heirs through marriage and inheritance practices and beliefs. These allocation and transfer (inheritance) practices are generally determined by kinship systems. Patrilineal kinship societies trace the family line through the paternal side, whereas matrilineal kinship systems trace the family line through the maternal side (FAO, 2002).

Inheritance practices are patrilineal, matrilineal, or bilateral. In patrilineal inheritance, land is generally handed down from father to son; if a man does not have any sons, his brother, nephew, or another man relative of his lineage often inherits his property. Daughters do not inherit land from their fathers, even though they are of the same lineage. The cultural norm is that daughters leave the community in which they were born when they marry to live in their husband's community. Because wives are under the responsibility of their husband and family, it is believed that if they inherited land, their husband's family and lineage would obtain control over it (Tripp, 2004).

Customary marriage practices include the determination of marital residence (where the spouses lives after marriage) and asset transfers. Both sets of practices often results to gender discrimination because they determine how family assets such as land are allocated and who has rights to family assets. In most patrilineal societies, residence after marriage is patrilocal (the woman has to move out of her natal home to live in her husband's community). In patrilocal residence family assets are handed down from father to son. Women who get married and move into another community do not have rights to their husband's family land or community land. When a woman has the right to inherit from her birth family, the move to her husband's village reduces her

ability to manage inherited land; this is one of the reasons why daughters give up their inheritance rights in favor of their brothers. Separated and divorced women leave their husband's house with no claim to any of his property. A widow, particularly if she has children, is generally permitted to stay on and operate on her dead husband's land until her sons can assume their management.

World Bank (2000) blames legal systems as constraining women from becoming independent economic actors. The report says that in many countries family laws are heavily stacked against women, restricting their rights in divorce and in inheritance of land and other productive resources.

Gender identity, i.e. a person's sense of self further influences gender inequality. Gender identity is a relational concept based on social differences. It is a complex concept with both fixed and changeable aspects. For example, age and race are immutable while career, place of residence and the degree of involvement in social networks are changeable aspects of identity. Arkerlof and Kranton (1999) establishes the psychology and sociology of identity to economic behaviour. The psychology and sociology of identity influences the formation of stereotypes about men and women that are further used by the society in determining who does what and where and who gets what and how much. For example, women are identified and identify themselves as homemakers while men are identified and identify themselves as breadwinners. In this way, gender identity determines how power and duties are organized in the family through division of gender roles.

Women's presumed "inferiority" is also used to justify discrimination not only at the family level but also in public institutions. This kind of presumption is internalized and strengthened through the process of socialization such that both men and women take it as "normal" and "natural".

## **VI. ROLE OF SOCIAL WORK IN REDUCING GENDER INEQUALITY**

Social work professionals can reduce gender inequalities by facilitating women to have access to formal education. The liberating nature of education is essential in promoting women's capacity to challenge and act on the conditions of their lives that impede them from enjoying the benefits of society. Through education, women are able to acquire knowledge and ideas that will help them to effectively challenge those conditions that inhibit their progress. Apart from having enhanced capacity to question the conditions of their lives, generally educated women on average delay marriage and childbirth, are less vulnerable to HIV/AIDS, exercise more power in their homes and in public and have fewer children who tend to be healthier and better educated. Social workers can also introduce non-formal education programmes for training in technical skills. These programmes can empower women by offering them practical skills and an opportunity of increasing their confidence and courage that are essential in challenging the entrenched oppressive aspects of the social structure.

Social workers can also enhance the capacity of women through empowerment programs that seek to remove the barriers that work against them. In so doing, women are able to participate in political processes and local decision making. For example, social workers are capable of tackling the social barriers such as the traditional, religious, and social attitudes that undermine women's progress. Social workers can endeavour to identify the root causes of women's subordination. They can initiate activities that are geared towards reducing gender-based barriers by changing the deep-rooted beliefs about appropriate gender roles, as well as lobbying for greater gender equity in the operations of public institutions. Unless the root causes of women subordination are identified and addressed, programs aimed at improving women's status may not yield the expected results.

Professional social workers can further get involved in raising gender awareness through use of participatory methods of gender analysis such as the preparation of daily activity calendars for both sexes. This approach and other gender-sensitisation activities such as organizing workshops, mass meetings, film shows and cross-cultural exchanges can help in overcoming numerous patriarchal biases that promote gender discrimination. In addition, social workers can engage in gender training with the aim to show the benefits of involving both men and women in public life.

Social work has great potential for reducing gender inequalities especially against women by targeting their activities where majority of women participate. Literature has highlighted that women are mainly engaged in agricultural activities. Therefore, social work programmes can focus on the activities in which women participate directly. For example, programmes and projects for enhancing productivity in agriculture and livestock sector could have large payoffs in terms of empowering women.

Social workers, through the research role, can also significantly contribute in the reduction of sexual and gender discrimination by systematically gathering and analyzing information on gender differences and social relationships in order to identify, understand, and resolve inequities based on gender. Through research, social workers can develop useful and descriptive tools that are crucial for gender mainstreaming programs. Social workers can also play an active role in shaping gender and development policies. Connected to the social policy role, they can also get involved in awareness creation and strengthening people's capacity to scrutinize the impact of development policies on gender relations.

## **VII. CONCLUSION**

In reviewing the evidence presented in the robust literature on gender inequality, this paper points the way



towards the actions needed to reduce gender inequalities around the world. Over the past few years, gender mainstreaming has become the preferred approach for achieving gender equity. However, a close examination of the process of implementing gender mainstreaming policies and programs, it is apparent that social work has either been overlooked or given little attention. Yet, among the main goals of social work profession is to eliminate all forms of discrimination and to promote equality between men and women. It is therefore the contention of this paper that to accelerate the pace of achieving gender equality by 2015 and beyond, deliberate steps must be taken to integrate social work into development policies and programs at all levels.

## References

- African Development Bank (2010). *Gender, Poverty and Environmental Indicators on African Countries*. Tunis: African Development Bank.
- Amott, T. L. and Matthaai, J. A.(1991). *Race, Gender and Work: A Multicultural Economic History of Women in the United States*. Boston: South End Press.
- Arkerlof, G. A. and Kranton, R. E. (1999). *Economics and Identity*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institute.
- Barrientos, S.(1996)'Social clauses and women workers in Latin America', *New Political Economy* 1(2), London: Carfax.
- Chesoni, A. (2006) 'Ethnic Chauvinism, Xenophobia and Gender Inequality in Kenya', In SID., *Readings on Inequality in Kenya: Sectoral Dynamics and Perspectives*, Nairobi: Society for International Development.
- Crehan, K. (1997). *The fractured community: landscapes of power and gender in rural Zambia*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Davies, M. (ed.) (1994). *Women and Violence: Realities and Responses Worldwide*. London: Zed Books.
- Elson, D.(1999)'Labour markets as gendered institutions: equality, efficiency, and empowerment issues', *World Development* 27(3): 611-27.
- Food and Agriculture Organization (1996). *World Food Security*. World Food Summit, Rome 13-17 November.
- Food and Agriculture Organization (2002). *Gender and Access to Land*. Land Tenure Study 4. Rome: FAO.
- Green, J.(2000) "Introduction", In Currah, P. and Minter, S. (Eds.), *Transgender equality: A handbook for activists and policy makers*. The Policy Institute of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. pp. 2-12.
- Horton, S.(1999)'Marginalisation Revisited: women's market work and pay, and economic development', *World Development* 27(3): 571-82.
- International Fund for Agricultural Development (2001). *Rural Poverty Report 2001: The Challenge of Ending Rural Poverty*. New York: Oxford University Press Inc.
- Joeques, S. (1995). *Trade Related Employment for Women in Industry*. Geneva: UNRISD.
- Lloyd, C. B. (2009). *The power of Educating Adolescent Girls: a girls count report on adolescent girls*. New York: Population Council.
- Narayan, D., Patel, R., Schaft, K., Rademacher, A. and Koch-Schulte, S. (2000). *Voices of the Poor: Can Anyone Hear Us?* New York: Oxford University Press, Inc.
- Pedwell, C. and Perrons, D. (2007). *The Politics of Democratic Governance: Organizing for Social Inclusion and Gender Equity*. London: One World Action.
- Standing, A. (1999)'Global feminisation through flexible labour: a theme revisited', *World Development* 27(3): 583-602.
- Tripp, A. M. (2004) 'Women's Movements, Customary Law, and Land Rights in Africa: The Case of Uganda.' *African Studies Quarterly* 7 (4): 1-19.
- United Nations Development Program (2001). *Choices for the poor: Lessons From National Poverty Reduction Strategies*. New York: UNDP.
- UN-Habitat (2008). *Gender Equality for a Better Urban Future: An Overview of UN-Habitat's Gender Equality Action Plan (2008-2013)*. Nairobi: UN-Habitat.
- United Nations (2010). *Millennium Development Goals Report 2010*. New York: United Nations.
- United Nations Department for Economic and Social Affairs ((UN-DESA) (2010). *The World's Women 2010: Trends and Statistics*. New York: United Nations.
- Whitehead, A. & Kabeer, N. (2001). *Living with uncertainty: gender, livelihoods, and progrowth in rural sub-Saharan Africa*. Briton: University of Sussex, Institute of Development Studies, Working Paper No. 134.
- World Bank (2000). *World Development Report 2000/2001: Attacking Poverty*. New York: Oxford University Press, Inc.
- World Bank (2004). *Monitoring and Evaluation: Some Tools, Methods, and Approaches*. Washington, DC: World Bank.
- World Health Organization (2009). *Women and Health: Today's Evidence Tomorrow's Agenda*. Geneva: World Health Organization.

The IISTE is a pioneer in the Open-Access hosting service and academic event management. The aim of the firm is Accelerating Global Knowledge Sharing.

More information about the firm can be found on the homepage:  
<http://www.iiste.org>

## CALL FOR JOURNAL PAPERS

There are more than 30 peer-reviewed academic journals hosted under the hosting platform.

**Prospective authors of journals can find the submission instruction on the following page:** <http://www.iiste.org/journals/> All the journals articles are available online to the readers all over the world without financial, legal, or technical barriers other than those inseparable from gaining access to the internet itself. Paper version of the journals is also available upon request of readers and authors.

## MORE RESOURCES

Book publication information: <http://www.iiste.org/book/>

## IISTE Knowledge Sharing Partners

EBSCO, Index Copernicus, Ulrich's Periodicals Directory, JournalTOCS, PKP Open Archives Harvester, Bielefeld Academic Search Engine, Elektronische Zeitschriftenbibliothek EZB, Open J-Gate, OCLC WorldCat, Universe Digital Library, NewJour, Google Scholar

