

Book Reviews

Rose W. Gaciabu, *De-feminization of Poverty in Africa: Are We Keeping the Promise?* Nairobi, Catholic University of Eastern Africa, 1996, 43p.

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THE TITLE OF THE TEXT, *De-Feminization of Poverty in Africa*, suggests that poverty has been associated with femininity in the economic relations of individuals. Consequently, the condition should be reversed if equity is to be ensured in gender relations.

To an ordinary reader the concept, 'feminization of poverty' is ambiguous. Therefore, clarification of the concept entails the identification of the intensity of economic exploitation based on gender, the outcome of which is the marginalisation and perceived subordination of women. This situation is manifest at the household and global levels where, also, the division of labour is based on biological attributes of individuals. The economic disempowerment of women leads to feminization of poverty.

Divided into three broad chapters, this small book attempts to explain the process of feminization of poverty and how it can be deconstructed. This is as it should be, given the need to enhance positive gender relations in the global political economy. The author introduces the reader to the debate, utilising the introduction to problematize the tilted gender relations world-wide. She explores issues in the debate historically, quoting extensively the *Letter of Pope John Paul II to Women* (1995). However, the author does not discuss the role of the church in the process of feminization of poverty. Indeed, most secular literature of radical feminists posits the view that the dominant world religions among them Christianity, Islam and Buddhism, have a tendency to marginalise women. Man is the mode of reference whose world-view predominates.

The second chapter examines the patriarchal development nexus. It is generally recognised that patriarchy defines the social and economic relations of individuals. However, the degree and nature of male domination has varied considerably. The author asserts that changes in modes of production and their

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effects on the institution of the family (household) led to the contrary tendencies affecting position of women. The spilt between the home and work place helped foster an association between women and domesticity (p. 5). But, the idea that the place of the woman is in the home is contested, considering that the affluent ones enjoy the services of maids, nurses and servants.

Chapter Two, entitled 'Cultural practices and feminine poverty' examines African culture and tradition and how they have generally exacerbated poverty among women. The emphasis is on the excesses of patriarchy. The assertion is that in indigenous African societies women were brutalised — wives were battered by husbands. Also dealt with in this chapter is the issue forced marriage, clitoridectomy and polygamy. However, the author emphasises polygamy. This issue is extensively discussed with citations from various writers in Africa. In a polygamous union, avers Gaciabu, the first wife is deprived the essential emotional support to meet her children's emotional needs, a threatened livelihood, a decline in provision of food to the children, medicine and other products for self-sufficiency (p.18).

Feminization of poverty is also brought about by the inequality in the provision of educational opportunities to children continentally. Whereas at lower levels of the educational system parity seems to prevail between boys and girls, the situation changes as they move up the educational ladder. According to studies conducted by the World Bank, for instance, females generally account for 44 per cent of primary enrolment in Africa, only 34 per cent in secondary schools decreasing to a mere 21 per cent in tertiary institutions.

In fact, repetition and wastage rates are somewhat higher for females than males. It should be noted, however, that the most critical attrition are as a result of the decision made at the individual family level. It is considered economically viable to educate sons than daughters, because in the patrilineal set-up, parents eventually have greater claim in their sons income than daughters (p. 27). Daughters, it is presumed, would be married off.

Furthermore, within the educational system itself subjects in the curriculum are either feminized or masculinized. For example, the arts are considered womanly subjects while the sciences are manly.

In the conclusion, the author advocates the de-feminization of poverty by examining the existing cultural practices and discarding the redundant ones. Moreover, discriminative legislative provisions in the social, economic and political spheres should be re-examined with the view of making them gender-sensitive.

The text has underscored a very important point, being that feminization has equally a devastating effect on men in the extent to which men identify their

sense of worth in the work they do. Stress is created on them stemming from the power derived from the 'breadwinning' role they are socialised into accepting and fulfilling.

This is a very analytical study which should have been developed into a larger work to fully grapple with the issues there-in. Although it is pedantic, it nevertheless constitutes an important text in the historiography of gender.