

## URBAN UNEMPLOYMENT AND THE PHENOMENA OF 'FEMINIZATION OF MANUAL LABOUR' AT THE KENYAN COAST: THE CASE OF KILIFI COUNTY, KENYA

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### ABSTRACT

Recently there has been much discussion, in both academic and development policy circles, of urban youth unemployment. However, there is little clarity about its link to feminization of manual labour, or about whether such a trend can be empirically verified. The main objective of the study will be to identify analyse the concept of feminization of manual labour at the Kenyan coast. Specifically the study will establish the causes of increased feminization of manual labour at the Kenyan coast and to understand how women perceive manual labour at the Kenyan coast. Results of the study will widen understanding on urban youth unemployment and the phenomena of feminization of manual labour at the Kenyan coast. The research type will be in qualitative form to enable in investigating the reasons for feminization of manual labour. The unit of analysis will constitute females working in construction sites in Kilifi County. Purposive and convenience sampling procedures were used to gather together 6 to 12 people with a moderator for focus group discussion. Using the focus group discussion research technique, the respondents were informally "interviewed" in a group-discussion setting. Data was analysed using content analysis. The study found that women do manual work as a result of both social and economic factors.

**Key words:** *Feminization, Manual Labour, Poverty, Urban Youth*

### Introduction

In the second decade of the new millennium, poverty and social marginalization continues to be an endemic problem in Kenya with a strong gender dimension that is exacerbated by increasing unemployment. Despite enormous expenditures by national governments and international aid agencies, to tackle poverty, there efforts have not kept pace with population and economic growth. Their policies have in some situations, like the Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) been blamed for worsening the situation for many countries. In addition, large amounts of resources are wasted or are dissipated in very low value uses and corruption. The question

becomes, is there enough employment to go around? According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), in its analysis of regional trends, it shows that women have higher unemployment rates than men in Africa (International Labour Organization 2012). One of the consequences of unemployment in Kenya is the increased poverty.

According to the The Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (KNBS) and ICF Macro, employment creation is the most effective strategy for halting increasing poverty (KNBS and ICF Macro 2010). The conventional approach to meeting new employment demands has been in the informal sector. One of the most striking phenomena of pre-independence Africa has been the extent to which women have increased their share of the labour force.

The turn of the century was said to mark the end of the century of the laboring man in a literal and real sense, in that women were to account for almost as many of the ``jobs" as men in the new century (Standing, 1999). He notes of the changing character of labor markets around the world leading to a rise in female labor force participation and a relative if not absolute fall in men's employment, as well as a ``feminization" of many jobs traditionally held by men. He further notes that the era of flexibility is also an era of more generalized insecurity and precariousness, in which many more men as well as women have been pushed into precarious forms of labor.

In industrialized economies, he notes, numerous statistics show that the relative and absolute growth of temporary, casual, contract and part-time labor have been widespread, substantial and sustained, so that in some countries, a majority of all jobs are non-regular. In addition he states that some of the most rapidly growing forms of flexible labor are increasing feminization in both senses of the term and that they are absorbing more women than men and involve less secure working conditions.

Standing notes that Feminization arises because available employment and labor options tend increasingly to characterize activities associated, rightly or wrongly, with women and because the pattern of employment tends to result in an increasing proportion of women occupying the jobs. He decomposes feminization into two constituents. First, he states that a type of job could be feminized, or men could find themselves in feminized positions. Secondly, that more women could find themselves in jobs traditionally taken by men, or certain jobs could be changed to have characteristics associated with women's historical pattern of labor force participation. He notes that the characteristics include the type of contract, the form of remuneration, the extent and forms of security provided, and the access to skill. The proposed study is interested in this second aspect of feminization, especially the feminization of manual labour. This is because recent empirical work at the cross-country level on the study of labour by gender has been inconclusive as far as the feminization of manual labour is concerned (Barrientos et al., 2004; Maeda-Machangu, et al. 1999 & Maeda-Machangu, et al., 1995 as cited in Hill, 2002).

Before we discuss the concept of feminization of manual labour, let us examine one of its major causes the ‘feminization of poverty.’ There is some evidence of a link between female headship and poverty. Since the 1980s, studies on the proliferation of female-headed households and research into the social impacts and gender-specific effects of structural adjustment policies have led to increased attention to what has become known as “the feminization of poverty” (Moghadam, 2005). The perception is growing around the globe that poverty is becoming increasingly feminized, that is, that an increasing proportion of the world’s poor are female. The rise of female participation in low return, urban, informal sector activities is considered evidence of the feminization of poverty. Due to household survival strategies during economic restructuring, there is an increasing reliance on informal sector employment for both men and women.

The term, the ‘feminization of poverty’ originates from the United States of America (USA) debates about single mothers and welfare, dating from the 1970s (BRIDGE -development gender- 2001). The feminization of poverty has been linked to firstly, a perceived increase in the proportion of female-headed households (FHHs) and secondly, the rise of female participation in low return urban informal sector activities, particularly in the context of the 1980s economic crises and adjustments in Sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America. According to BRIDGE, it has been used to mean three distinct things: that women have a higher incidence of poverty than men; that their poverty is more severe than that of men; that there is a trend to greater poverty among women, particularly associated with rising rates of FHHs.

Statistics show that the informal sector is a larger source of employment for women than for men (United Nations, 2000) as cited in BRIDGE. The greater insecurity and lower earning capacity in the informal sector is therefore seen as another reason for the feminization of poverty. Moreover, because of the concentration of women in casual labour of informal sector work, legislative measures have either excluded or not been enforced in relation to most of their economic activities. While there is a large literature on the feminization of poverty, very little is known about the feminization of manual labour. The study therefore looked at the causes of feminization of manual labour at the Kenyan coast. This paper seeks to fill this gap and investigates the impact of urban unemployment on labor force participation of women.

### **Literature Review**

According to Gituto (2007) Kenya is one of the poorest and most unequal societies. He notes that it is also one of the most socially exclusivist states globally. To him poverty, inequality and social exclusion are deeply-rooted structural and historical phenomena in Kenya. Individually and in combination, poverty, inequality and social exclusion are grave threats to social cohesion and overall state viability. They threaten economic development, democratic consolidation, peace, security and sustainable development. Poverty, inequality and social exclusion matter for

economic growth and development. It is difficult to achieve and sustain high levels of long term economic growth in conditions of extreme poverty, social exclusion and inequality.

He reports that at the individual level, socially-excluded persons such as single parents, children born to single parents, orphans, etc. are more likely to sink into poverty. Similarly, the extreme vicissitudes visited upon women, coupled with an unyielding patriarchy, also expose women as a group to extreme gender based oppression characterized by constant physical, psychological and material abuse, extreme want and culpable to manipulation and oppression.

Women's rising economic activity is an ongoing phenomenon across advanced and many developing countries (Gaddis & Pieters 2012). Over the past three decades, rising female labor force participation largely occurred against the backdrop of globalization (Barrientos et al., 2004). The behavior of female labor supply has important implications for many other phenomena, including marriage, fertility, divorce, the distribution of family earnings and male-female wage differentials (Killingsworth & Heckman 1986). The labour force participation rate is influenced by changes in both employment and unemployment (ILO 2012). It reflects demographic and behavioural change, indicating very importantly, increase or decrease of different age groups' participation in the labour market.

The ILO reports that women also suffer from a difference in the quality of employment in comparison to men. Vulnerable employment, which comprises contributing family workers and own account workers (as opposed to wage and salaried workers), is more widespread for women than for men. It further, reports that women are more limited in their choices for employment across sectors. In addition it notes of segregation in employment, with women moving out of agriculture in developing economies. Moreover, it states that in developing countries, men are over-represented in crafts, trades, plant and machine operations, and managerial and legislative occupations. In contrast women are over-represented in mid-skill occupations, like clerks, service workers, and shop and sales workers.

Similar trends are reported at the continental level in Africa. It is known for its high rate of female labour force participation and for its high rate of informal employment, so much so that underemployment in low-end informal activities is a greater problem in the region than open unemployment (Chen, 2008). Women are overrepresented in the informal sector, which is characterized by poor wages, insecure working conditions. He notes that in sub-Saharan Africa (excluding South Africa), informal employment accounts for nearly 80 per cent of non-agricultural employment and an even higher percentage of total employment. "Formal employment accounts for an estimated 13.6 per cent of all employment in Kenya, 8.7 per cent in Ghana, 10.9 per cent in Mali, and 6.8 per cent in Madagascar" (Heintz & Valodia 2008) in *ibid*. He further notes that across sub-Saharan Africa, the agricultural sector remains a critical source of employment opportunities and cannot be easily disregarded.

In sum, informal employment – both agricultural and non-agricultural – provides the largest share of economic opportunities for both men and women. He notes that, in terms of differences between women and men, men tend to have greater access to wage employment – both formal and informal – compared to women and most women in Africa are engaged in informal self-employment. For example, he reports that in Kenya, where wage employment is somewhat more prevalent, these categories of employment accounted for 27 per cent of men's non-agricultural employment and 47 per cent of women's.

On urban informal sector, he notes that cities in Africa are not only growing in size but also changing very rapidly – and a few seek to become modern world class cities. In the process, the urban working poor are being excluded from the plans – with the result that their livelihoods are being undermined: street vendors are evicted from the central business districts; waste pickers are not included in modern waste management schemes; and small home-based producers are not allowed to work in residential areas or do not receive the basic infrastructure and services that would make their workplaces more productive.

Kenya like many other developing countries has experienced rapid urbanization in the last few years (Odhiambo & Manda, 2003). They report that while the natural growth of population has been the major contributor to urbanization, migration from rural areas to urban centres has been the major factor. Rapid urbanization in Kenya is associated with a number of development challenges key among them being unemployment. They further state that urban labour markets in developing countries are dichotomous, that is, there is the formal labour and the informal labour segment, which is in many ways is a result of failure of the formal segment to create sufficient job opportunities for the urban population. They note that in Kenya, the failure of urban employment in the modern private sector has led to a rapid expansion of the informal sector, with the share of urban employment in the informal sector estimated to be around 75%.

Although Kenyan women have joined the labour force in large and increasing numbers over the last two decades due to increased access to education, the majority of them are still concentrated in traditional "female occupations" and the informal sector (Suda, 2002). She notes that most of the urban poor in Kenya are in the informal sector and the majority of them are women. She reports that the over-representation of women in the informal sector is variously explained by the inability of the formal sector to generate enough jobs to absorb a large and increasing labour force, the use of simple technologies, women's inadequate education and skills training, ease of entry and exist, low capital investment and the relative compatibility between informal sector employment and household work, among other factors. This study there sought to find out the causes for the increased involvement of manual labour in Kilifi, Kenya.

## Methodology

The Republic of Kenya is located on the eastern coast of Sub-Saharan Africa. According to KNBS and ICF Macro, the country lies between 5 degrees north and 5 degrees south latitude and between 24 and 31 degrees east longitude (KNBS and ICF Macro, 2010). In addition, it is almost bisected by the equator. Kenya is bordered by Ethiopia (north), Somalia (northeast), Tanzania (south), Uganda and Lake Victoria (west), and Sudan (northwest). It is bordered on the east by the Indian Ocean. Further, it has a total area of 582,646 square kilometres of which 571,466 square kilometers form the land area. Approximately 80 percent of the land area of the country is arid or semi-arid, and only 20 percent is arable.

The country falls into two regions: lowlands, including the coastal and Lake Basin lowlands, and highlands, which extend on both sides of the Great Rift Valley. Rainfall and temperatures are influenced by altitude and proximity to lakes or the ocean. The climate along the coast is tropical with rainfall and temperatures being higher throughout the year. There are four seasons in a year: a dry period from January to March, the long rainy season from March to May, followed by a long dry spell from May to October, and then the short rains between October and December.

According to the 2009 population and housing census, Kilifi County has a population of 1,109,735 (Republic of Kenya, 2010). As is indicated in the Commission on Revenue Allocation (CRA) population with primary education is 67.5%, compared to 66.6% at the national level, while that with secondary education is 7.1% compared to 12.7% at the national level (CRA, 2012). The poverty rate is indicated to be at 71.4% against a national level of 47.2%. This places the county at position 39 out of the 47 counties in the entire country. The urban share of the population is 25.7% against a national level of 29.9%.

According to the Kenya Transitional Justice Network (2013) Kenyan Coast has suffered due to lack of adequate security and landlessness resulting from historical dispossession schemes. Land injustices started during the colonization of the Coast by Arabs and were followed by the British. All post-independence government regimes failed to honestly and adequately address these injustices. Land-related injustices have affected the whole country, but communities at the Coast, especially the Mijikenda, Taita and Pokomo, have suffered the longest and most severe injustices. Land-related injustices at the Coast are one of the key reasons for under-development in the area, and have caused the emergence of the Mombasa Republican Council (MRC).

The Kilifi County which is in the former Coast Province is characterized by overcrowding, landlessness, squatting and immense poverty which is in tandem with the unsympathetic demonstration of affluence by the leaders, tourists and some of the settlers and visitors from up country. The fishing industry, agriculture and tourism are vital to the economy, creating employment and contributing to poverty alleviation in the county. While the living conditions in the region are not “noticeably worse than in other Kenyan regions, the contrast between its

poverty and the more obvious wealth there has sparked vocal dissent. This has led to the emergence of separatist movements like the Mombasa Republican Council (MRC). Closely related to this is the allegation often leveled against the state that it is not taking any interest in the socio-economic development of the region from where they obtain revenue through tourism and the port in the neighboring county of Mombasa. The people in the county complain that the abject poverty in the region belies the enormous amount of money that the state extracts from these two areas.

The study used focus group discussions to collect qualitative data. Purposive and convenience sampling procedures were used to gather together 6 to 12 people with a moderator for focus group discussion. English-language and Kiswahili-language focus group discussion guides were developed. Three construction sites in Kilifi town were selected as the focus group sites because of the presence of female workers. The focus group sites were in Mnarani, Kibaoni and Mabirikani. Content analysis entails examining qualitative and/or multiple responses from individuals or groups to establish cross-cutting themes and attributes that may not depend on absolute numbers or definite proportions of the sample (Republic of Kenya, 2008).

The study was faced with certain limitations but efforts were made to ensure that they were adequately addressed so as to limit their impact on the findings. The study was restricted to residents of Kilifi, Kenya. This excluded the population that commutes to the town every day for work. Respondents were reluctant and suspicious at the beginning but after explaining the study objectives they were receptive and provided the information. In addition, the study was limited by the self-reporting accuracy of the participants. Ethical issues in social science research were considered including the importance of voluntary and informed participation and the preservation of the participants' anonymity.

## **Research Results**

Focus group discussions with women working in the construction sites were held. The focus groups were conducted in the month of August. Participants provided information in two ways: written responses and group discussion. The discussion was designed to gather information from the respondents in regard to the following outcomes: to establish the causes of increased feminization of manual labour at the Kenyan coast; and to understand how women perceive manual labour at the Kenyan coast.

## **Participant Demographics**

A total of 26 participants took part in the focus groups:

1. 26 took part in the FGDs women.
2. 10 women were 15-20 years old; 8 were 21-25 years old; 4 were 26-30; 4 were 30-40 years old.

3. 16 women identified themselves as married, 3 as widowed; 4 as separated; 3 were single.
4. 6 of the women had primary education certificate; 3 were secondary school drop outs; 3 were secondary school certificate holders; and 13 were primary school drop outs; 1 was a college drop out.
5. All the 26 women have children or other dependents living with them.

### **Why are Women in Manual Labour**

1. Lack of higher education.
2. Lack of training for a specific job area.
3. To learn new skills for work/apprenticeship.
4. To broaden their social circle and gain opportunities for networking.
5. They were encouraged by spouses.
6. To support their spouses by working together/ to increase or add to the family income.
7. They were encouraged by friends.
8. To pay bills.
9. Spouse is invalid/incapacitated.
10. Widowed.
11. Single mother.
12. Orphaned.
13. Spouse in drug and alcohol abuse.
14. Deserted by partner.
15. Location close to home.
16. Family responsibilities.
17. Spirit of adventure and the need to attend part-time while working elsewhere.

### **How Women Perceive Manual Labour**

#### **Positive Features of Manual Labour**

1. They are able to earn a living.
2. Gives them an opportunity to have an honest source of livelihood.
3. They get company from friends.
4. They are readily available.
5. Prompt payment.
6. Require no previous experience.
7. Requires no academic training.
8. Wide range and varied manual jobs are available.



### **Negative Features of Manual Labour**

1. Labour intensive.
2. Long hours of work with little or no breaks.
3. Not a permanent job or lack of job security.
4. Irregular and erratic payments.
5. Little pay.
6. Frequent injuries and no health cover.
7. Harsh weather.
8. Lack of appropriate working gear.

### **Discussion**

From the FGDs the study was able to identify some of the reasons given for the increase of feminization of manual labour and the perception of women on manual labour at the Kenyan coast. The reasons given by the women working in the construction sites on their involvement in manual labour are both social and economic in nature.

Lack of higher education has condemned some of the women to manual labour which is ordinarily considered a male activity. Most of the women were school dropouts. They either dropped out of school due to lack of school fees or due to pregnancies and early marriage. They further lack training on specific skill area to enable them work in particular fields other than the construction sites. Women labour participation in specific skill oriented employment is determined by education. Skill-biased technological change works towards rising female employment and rising female education also contribute to the surge in female labor force participation (Gaddis & Pieters, 2012).

Some of the women, were working at the construction sites for apprenticeship purposes. They would like to get certain skills that pertains to the construction industry to enable them obtain jobs elsewhere or in similar places in future. Closely related to this, is the ability to widen their social job network. They are able to get to know people who will be able to inform them of the availability of similar or other job offer at other places when the current one runs out.

Some of the respondents reported that they were encouraged by their spouses to take up manual labour and to work together to earn 'double' wage for the family. This is to enable them add to their household income. Some reported of being encouraged by friends to join them in the work. Some of the respondents stated that their spouses were either invalid or incapacitated and hence not able to work. Some of them are single, widowed, single mothers, or orphaned hence they are the sole bread winners for their households. They are faced by numerous family responsibilities which they must meet, hence they take the only available work for them. Some of the women reported of being separated or deserted by their spouses hence they have to fend for themselves and their children. Alcohol and drug abuse was also reported to have taken a big toll on the lives

of some of their spouses. Due to addiction on drugs and alcohol, some of the men are not able to work efficiently for the household. They spend their day drinking traditional liquor in the readily available liquor dens.

Some of the respondents stated that they reside near the places where a particular construction is going on. They decide to join other women working in such places as well in order to avoid being idle or to pass time. Some invoked the spirit of adventure and the need to have part-time work that enable them have some extra source of income to supplement what they earn from other sources like small businesses.

On the perception of the women on manual labour, they had both positive and negative perceptions. From the start they were glad that they are able to earn a living through an honest way for their livelihood. Others talked of seeking company from friends. Other than the ready availability, wide range and variety of the jobs, prompt payment was also mentioned as a one of the merits of the jobs. Given that manual jobs do not require any previous experience or rigorous academic training, the women reported that they were attracted to them.

Similarly, the respondents were able to give some negative features they experience in manual labour. They see manual labour as labour intensive; having more long hours of work with little or no breaks at all with no regular and fixed working hours; they lack job security and are not regular, not full-time jobs and are non-permanent and insecure; other than payments being little, it is irregular and erratic They are further exposed to frequent injuries with no health insurance cover; they work in harsh weather and lack appropriate working gear.

## **Conclusions**

Whereas it is commonly understood that men are more likely to be hired in core or regular and better remunerated positions, women are hired in the peripheral, insecure, less valued jobs as home-based workers, casual workers and temporary workers. This is true for Kilifi as well. More women are getting into casual work that is labour intensive. Most of this works were previously considered a male domain. However, today most of the men are not taking over those jobs because of either alcoholism, drug and substance abuse and the culture of over reliance on tourism. Increased access to education for both males and females will enable them obtain proper training for particular employment. Lack of education has made most of the women to go for jobs that do not require academic training. Most of these are casual work in construction sites. The wider societal problems of alcohol, drug and substance abuse needs also to be tackled. Though the women have a number of positive perceptions on manual work, it is important to note that women are forced to do manual work as a last resort. They would prefer to be doing non manual works which are perceived to be for males.

## Recommendations

Following the findings from the study the following recommendations can be made. Firstly, in order to get women out of manual labour and to increase their participation in formal employment and relevant informal employment, access to education for longer periods in their lives should be encouraged. The women should be supported not only to obtain basic education but college education as well. They should have training in specific areas to widen and increase their chances and opportunities for employment. Low education or lack of it is what drives women into doing manual work previously associated with men.

Secondly, mechanization of manual labour at the construction sites will be an important step in making work easier and lighter for most of the women. If work is mechanized, the women will be able to gain skills in operating the machines as well as be more effective at work. The national and county governments should tackle the problem of alcohol, drug and substance abuse at the region. Many men are addicted to the traditional liquor and other hard drugs that are easily available in the county because of the heavy presence of tourists.

Thirdly, the men should be specifically targeted as well. The boy child should be encouraged to go through education open their lives to various jobs other than relying mostly on tourism. A high number of the young men end up being beach boys. As a result women are left to handle every other work in the community including manual work.

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