

Gender and Poverty in Mozambique



Gender equality and women's empowerment are high on the government and donor agendas in Sub-Saharan Africa, but have largely failed to have an impact. Rather than 'mainstreaming' gender, more attention to the variations in the position of women is necessary. In a series of three studies on gender policies and the feminisation of poverty in Mozambique, significant differences were found between the north and the south as well as between rural and urban areas. Such variations are essential to understand in order to design relevant policies and interventions for improving the conditions for women in the country.

Gender equality and women's empowerment have long been on the international development agenda, and have become integral parts of most development plans and poverty reduction strategies as 'cross-cutting issues' – ostensibly affecting policies and interventions in all areas of national development. However, neither national governments nor donors have managed to make the transition from policy statements and legal frameworks to significant progress for women.

Women in Sub-Saharan Africa still have heavier domestic responsibilities, inferior employment and lower income, inferior access to land and lower agricultural production, and lower levels of education and health than men. In addition, domestic and sexual violence are grave problems continuously facing women. At the same time the proportion of female headed households – commonly used as a standard indicator of the feminisation of poverty – is on the rise



and represents an increasing percentage of the poorest sections of the population.

Having said all this, there is a curious incongruity between the often broad and sweeping statements about gender inequality on the one hand, and the great variations and complexities of the lives of real men and women on the other. The ‘mainstreaming’ or ‘essentialisation’ of gender policies, largely pushed by international agendas and feminist scholars, implies a risk of designing policies that do not relate to national economic and socio-cultural realities of real women living real lives.

Mozambique has a long political tradition for emphasising gender equality and women’s empowerment, dating back to the post-independence Frelimo era and extensive contacts with western donors. Since Independence in 1975 there has been an increase in women’s political representation and participation in decision-making processes – with women holding as many as 36 percent of the seats in Parliament – and the country is a signatory to all international gender-related agreements.

Despite advances in the policy-framework and female representation, however, structural constraints and a strong patriarchal culture continue to preserve the dominant position of men, and inhibit most women from gaining enhanced economic self-reliance and social independence. Mozambique remains the poorest and least developed country in the Southern African region both in human and gender development terms. Indicators on income, education and longevity are all exceptionally low, and the poverty headcount of 63 percent among female headed

households is considerably higher than that of male-headed households at 52 percent, with the discrepancy being on the rise.

In a series of three studies on gender policies and the feminisation of poverty in Mozambique that form the basis for this brief, significant differences in the position of women were found between the north and the south as well as between rural and urban areas. Such variations are essential to understand in order to design relevant policies and interventions for improving the conditions for women in the country.

Analytically the studies are based on the notion that history and contemporary political, economic and cultural structural forces have a powerful effect upon human action and the shape of events. At one level, then, gender relations are shaped and reproduced by external processes that are congruent with established patterns of power in society at large. At the same time, however, there is room for human agency in ordinary lives as people relate to structural constraints and opportunities the best they can from the economic and socio-cultural position they are in.

Social change occurs through ‘vital conjunctures’, or changes in the structural environment. There are two such ‘conjunctures’ that have been particularly important for gender relations in Mozambique: One is the strong exposure of the southern and central parts of the country to structural forces of ‘modernity’ and labour migration, and the concomitant continued influence of ‘tradition’ in the northern parts of the country that have been less susceptible to such forces. The other is the impact of

urbanisation, which seems to have opened up new spaces for men and women alike in a way that is in the process of making gender relations in cities and towns profoundly different than in rural areas.

In the northern part of Mozambique, men have historically dominated the traditional Macua, colonial Portuguese and Muslim social formations – although the matrilineal kinship structure of the Macua makes it easier for women to maintain links with their natal family and the sharia laws are ‘gender sensitive’ in that they underline the financial responsibilities men have towards women and children. Our data from Nampula show that women’s political representation, from the formal provincial to the informal local level, is low. Women hardly work outside subsistence agriculture and are practically absent from the informal economy. Additionally the levels of education and health conditions are poor – with the exception of the HIV/AIDS infection rate which is the lowest in the country. The proportion of female-headed households in the province is relatively low at 21 percent, as many as 30 percent of women are parts of polygamous households, and most women are formally married with very limited decision-making power in male-headed households. As many as 43 percent of girls in Nampula have sex before the age of 15 and early marriages are common in the region. 62 percent of women have an ‘accepting attitude’ towards domestic violence.

The key gender-denominator in the north is the very strong patriarchal culture which is firmly based on a combination of tradition and religion. Patriarchal structures are reinforced by continued male dominance in the formal and informal political spheres and manifested in various forms of gender-based violence and sexual abuse.

The southern part of the country has historically witnessed profound processes of socio-economic change, including an extensive male labour migration to South Africa, a ‘feminisation’ of agriculture due to male absenteeism and a strong influence of urban and ‘modern’ life from the adjacent capital city of Maputo. Our studies show that women in Gaza have found themselves with increasing socio-economic responsibilities, and are well represented in formal political offices. Women also show a high level of participation in small-scale agriculture and the informal economy, and girls enrol in education at the same level as boys. The proportion of female headed households is exceptionally high at 53 percent, polygamy



is rare and the majority of those living with men are not formally married but live in cohabitations. However, women also suffer from the highest HIV/AIDS rate in the country at 32 percent.

In the South gender disparities seem to be primarily class related, with poor women with no economic independence being susceptible to continued control under the patrilineal system and patriarchal ideology. The importance of bridewealth or lobolo and the extensive pattern of unprotected sexual relationships can be seen as ways to maintain control by men, who regard their status and position threatened by economically independent women and the increasing number of women who establish their own households.

Urbanisation in both the north and the south has changed the socio-cultural space for men and women alike. Social relations in dense and tense shanty-towns in urban Nampula and Gaza tend to be less susceptible to cultural control from tradition and religion; more diverse by including friends, neighbours,

Summary of the studies: Tvedten, Inge, M. Paulo and G. Montserrat (2008). *Gender Policies and Feminisation of Poverty in Mozambique*. CMI Report R: 2008:13.; Tvedten, Inge, M. Paulo and M. Tuominen (2009). *"If Men and Women were Equal, We Would All Simply be People". Gender and Poverty in Northern Mozambique*. CMI Report R: 2009:14; Tvedten, Inge, M. Paulo and M. Tuominen (2010). *'A Woman Should Not be the Boss When a Man is Present'. Gender and Poverty in Southern Mozambique*. CMI Report R: 2010:3. The reports are available at www.cmi.no. Technical editor: Inger A. Nygaard. Photos: Inge Tvedten. The research project is funded by NORAD.

association members and workmates partially at the expense of the – often absent – extended family; and have more room for human agency or for ‘bargaining with patriarchy’. In line with this, urban women in our studies generally have higher participation in the economy; higher involvement in education; and are more likely to head households than in rural areas. Urban women also have better access to information, resulting in better knowledge about how to avoid HIV/AIDS, the new Family Law, the new Law on Domestic Violence and other vital issues for women’s empowerment.

At the same time, however, the very poorest men and women in urban areas seem even more vulnerable than their rural counterparts. Employment and income is essential for food and basic social services; reciprocal relationships are largely based on exchange of money and material items; and the urban poor have more difficulties in maintaining essential rural relationships for agricultural production and extended family support. There are some indications that the poorest women relate to such situations better than the poorest men by establishing and maintaining women-focused networks, but still not to the extent that it resembles the ‘masculinisation’ of poverty seen in some other urban areas in Southern Africa.

Recommendations. The recommendations following from our series of studies are based on the premise that a stronger emphasis on gender equality and women’s empowerment is necessary, not only to fulfil

commitments made by the Mozambican government for gender equality per se but also to fulfil the goal of poverty reduction. They focus on the need for moving from general policies and regulations, to targeted interventions that take the variations in gender relations into consideration. These are accounted for in detail in the reports, and include:

1. Interventions in the North conveying the message of gender equality to key opinion-makers in traditional and religious institutions.
2. Interventions in the South focussing on the rights of single women and their children in relation to the Family Law and sexual protection.
3. Interventions in the rural North to support larger involvement of women in agricultural production and exchange.
4. Interventions in the rural South to support women’s rights to shares of migrants incomes and to land in a patrilineal context.
5. Interventions in the urban North to form associations making it easier for women to act independently from men.
6. Interventions in the urban South supporting women in making the step from small scale informal traders to larger entrepreneurship.
7. Direct cash transfers to the very poorest rural women (usually older widows and divorcees) and urban women (usually unemployed and socially isolated single mothers) in order to alleviate situations of desperate poverty and vulnerability.