

Review Report

Egalitarianism to gender inequality: Cross-cultural exploration of gender relations, in economic systems

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Abstract - Gender inequality has generated a lot of debates among scholars across disciplines. Much of these studies have not explored a robust scholarship on the historical development of gender inequality by comparing different human societies and their subsistence strategies. This review study is designed to fill this gap, thereby contributing to corpus of literature on gender inequality in economic relations. As a historical research, the study uses secondary materials. These materials are mainly ethnographies of the societies under comparison. The study compares the roles of each of the gender categories in subsistence activities, in economic systems, to trace the sources of gender inequality in economic relations. Data available suggest egalitarian gender and economic relations. However, as societies evolved, there became a gradual decline in egalitarianism, leading to marked inequality. The inequality is relative to the complexity of social structure peculiar to the societies under review.

Keywords: egalitarianism, cross-cultural, gender inequality, gender and economic relations, ethnographies

Introduction

Gender inequality has generated enormous conversations in the academic arena. Scholars have beamed their search lights to account for this inequality. Much of these conversations are multidisciplinary in nature. For instance, some have argued that liberalism is seen as the ideological engine driving gender equality but indirectly creating peripheral inequality (Hickel 2014). Others have contended that social structure should be examined if one were to understand gender inequality (Ji *et al.* 2017; Van der Lippe *et al.* 2011). Some scholars have looked at patriarchal politico-social dimension. They note that gender relation is structured around superordinate and subordinate dichotomy, seeing the female gender at the receiving end (Makama 2013). Others have looked at welfare policies as the source of the inequality (Mandel 2012), and work-family policies (Mandel 2011). Other studies like (Hickel 2014) has looked at external institutions of development as indirectly expanding gender inequality. Yet, the debate is far from being over.

None of these studies explored the historical development of gender inequality by comparing gendered roles in different economic systems. This review study is designed to fill this gap, thereby contributing to corpus of literature on gender inequality in economic relations. As a historical research, the study uses secondary materials. These materials are mainly ethnographies of the societies under comparison. The objectives of this study are to compare the subsistence roles of each of the gender categories, in economic systems, and examine how gendered subsistence activities, in different economic systems lead to gender inequality in economic relations.

The study begins with review of literature; situated within the context of economic anthropology, followed by the conceptualization of gender and economic relations. Then, a theoretical framework to give an insight on the unequal gender relations is followed by methodology. Finally, the study compares ethnographies on gender and economic relations from simple to complex societies as identified by anthropology.

Review of Literature

Anthropology of economic relations

Economic anthropology studies how human societies provide the material goods and services that make life possible. In the course of material provisioning and during the realization of final consumption, people relate to each other in ways that convey power and meaning (Park 2000; Kottak 2008; Hann & Hart 2011; McGee & Warms 2013).

According to Haviland *et al.* (2008), the degree to which something is necessary for life has long been debated and differences between one society and another have environmental, historical, and cultural reasons; but some wants must be inescapably satisfied, otherwise death ensues. Therefore, there is a physical limit to relativism regarding material means of livelihood. On the other hand, nonmaterial goods such as the goodwill of deceased ancestors might be conceived as essential for the reproduction of a society. Most nonmaterial needs, however, have some material expression, such as food sacrifices during ancestor worship or wealth exchange during mortuary ceremonies. The domain of economic anthropology covers the recurring interaction of individuals, within and between social groups and with the wider environment, to providing material goods and services necessary for social reproduction.

Conventionally, economic processes are divided into production, distribution and circulation, and consumption. These logical categories respond to observable social interaction in all societies, although the categories themselves are a product of scholarly Western tradition. People, however, engage in social relations that can be described as economic and which can be analysed as participating simultaneously in the production, distribution, and consumption categories (Park 2000; Kottak 2008).

Economic anthropology initially concentrated on the economic life of primitive peoples (Herskovits 1965) where many of the elements present in the Western economy were absent. Direct observation of non-capitalist societies through ethnographic fieldwork produced remarkable and contextually rich information on economic activities worldwide. The way in which anthropologists reacted to the confrontation of this diversity, and how they coped with it in theoretical terms, generated most debates within economic anthropology.

Gender Relations: A Broader View

Cook (2007) notes that gender relations refer to complex, culturally and historically specific social systems that organize and regulate interactions between women and men, as well as their relative social value. Gender relations simultaneously encompass ideas, practices, representations, and identities that pertain to gender. For example, dominant ideas about gender throughout much of the world value those things associated with men and masculinity (features and behaviour appropriate to, male sex (Scott & Marshall 2005) rather than with women and femininity (distinctive ways of acting and feeling on the part women (Scott & Marshall 2005), which produces gender hierarchies, a ranking of men's and women's social worth. She notes that feminist research shows that these gendered ideas, practices, and identities are not determined biologically as a direct result of anatomical characteristics such as hormones, chromosomes, and sex organs. Rather, masculinity and femininity, the central components of gender relations, are social constructions, products of every social interaction that are linked in complex ways to the material reality of gendered bodies. Because gender is often misunderstood as being the study of women and femininity only, strictly, gender relations focus on the relationships between masculinity, the valuation of women and men and their relative access to, and control of resources.

As a social system, gender relations are a central organizing principle of society that govern, in part, processes of production, and reproduction, consumption, and the distribution of resources (Cook 2007). Gender relations, do not operate in isolation but are influenced and shaped by other systems that organize social interactions, between groups of people, including the economy. Feminists examine the ways in which gender is created in the society by studying how gender relations structure key social institutions (divisions of labour, health, education, family, work, and the media). Consequently, there is the need to keep in mind that gender is a feature of all social institutions and of society more generally, as much as it is a feature of an individual's identity, embodiment, and daily behaviour.

Michelle Rosaldo (as cited in Lamphere 2007) states that although there is a great deal of cross-cultural variability in men and women's roles there is a pervasive, universal asymmetry between the sexes. She notes that the striking and surprising thing is the fact that male, as opposed to female roles are always recognized as predominantly

important, and cultural systems give authority and value to the roles and activities of men. What needs to say here, however, is her generalization. Although she might mean well for her empathy on her fellow women, her generalization is only a conjecture. She might have selected the societies she wished to compare while leaving the rest. The meanings these societies she selected attach to these gender roles need a careful and exhaustive investigation to unravel the emic connotation of such divisions.

Michelle Rosaldo (as cited in [Lamphere 2007](#)) emphasizes that not only were there differential evaluations of women activities, but everywhere men have some authority over women. That they have culturally legitimated right to women subordination and compliance.

Rosaldo's generalization may fail to test generated by ethnographic evidence. This is so because there may be a society where the value of men is reduced to mere agents of impregnation. On the other hand, the case of absolute matriarchy may be found elsewhere. Even in some patriarchal societies, men are object of ridicule ([Green 1964](#)).

[Kottak \(2008\)](#) sees this sexual dimorphism as having affects on the way men and women act and are treated in different societies. He notes that anthropologists have discovered both similarities and differences in the roles of men and women in different cultures.

[Ezeh \(2015\)](#) notes that gender relation is not the same in every society. He cites much ethnography to show that the Igbo of Nigeria had a well-structured egalitarian gender relation before European contact. What preoccupies women in western societies has long been achieved among this group. However, [Ezeh \(2015\)](#) concedes that the current state of agitation of patriarchal domination is an offshoot of western contact and colonization.

After examining numerous ethnographies on Africa and indeed, rest of the world, [Amadiume \(1997\)](#) reports that in Igbo, the status for the role of head of family is genderless. This means that man or woman can be *di*, husband, or *dibuno*, family head. There is consequently the practice of woman-to-woman marriage, which is not only an Igbo practice but widespread in varying African societies.

[Amadiume \(1997:29\)](#) asks:

What then is the history of marriage in Africa? We do not know, for the European assumption has been that men have always controlled the movement of women. The facts associated with a matriarchal paradigm would suggest something totally different. However, euro centrism has not permitted any thinking, or research along these lines.

The implication of the foregoing is that, gender is designed by human groups in specific situations. Gender philosophies and gender role practices are moulded within societies. Societies expect women and men to behave and act in dissimilar ways. This way, gendered role relations are spatial practices, which vary across different geographical rules. These differences in gendered role relations rest on existing collections of social relations. This also depends on previous reorganization of institutions, economic activities, and policies in the society in question (Ugwu 2021).

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts socialist feminism as the theoretical framework. Hartmann (1979) is prominent among the socialist feminists. Socialist feminists claim, with Marxists, that for a better understanding of women's oppression, one needs to appraise class as well as capital relations. Nevertheless, they differed from Marxists in claiming that the oppressive relations between the gender categories are not simply derivative of class. They contended that the interconnections between sex oppression and class exploitation had to be addressed. For socialist feminists, it was no longer sufficient to discourse only about the women question and they did not undertake that the basis for women's oppression would fade spontaneously with the overthrow of capitalism.

These feminists concentrated on how the domestic labour done by women helps to sustain the capitalist system. On both a daily and generational level, women add to the reproduction of labour power by having and rearing children and by looking after husbands between their working days in mines and factories. Consequently, both capitalist and individual men profit from the free and personal services of women in the home (Hartmann 1979; Hamilton 2007). After feminists' analysis of the interconnections between the public sphere of capitalist and state relation and private sphere of the family, they challenge the issue of family-wage (Hamilton 2007). They see this as a thoughtful scheming to push them away from the industries.

Methodology

This study adopts historical cross-cultural research method. This is an attempt to generate interpretations on the basis of worldwide comparisons by looking for differences between those societies having and those lacking a particular characteristic.

The basis for the comparison is ethnographies drawn across societies and economic systems compared. The economic systems as identified by anthropologist include food collectors, horticulturalists, pastoralists, intensive agriculturalists and industrialists. Each economic system was examined to understand the sources of gendered inequalities in economic relations.

Egalitarianism to Marked Inequality: Cross-cultural comparison of Economic Systems

Feminist anthropologists have argued forcefully that the sexual division of labour is not about the technical division of who does what; rather, it is about how such divisions develop and change, and about the power to control the products of labour. Particular concerns have centred on the question of the links between the sexual division of labour and gender inequalities (Harris 1984). Does a sexual division of labour in itself imply social inequality, or can there be a division of labour that is organised along gender lines but involves relationships of complementarities rather than inequality? The consensus seems to be that a complementary division of labour might have been theoretically possible in gathering and hunting societies where they existed, although few such societies are extant today and few anthropologists have made such claims about equality for specific societies. Beyond small, and dwindling, numbers of gatherers and hunters, however, a sexual division of labour can be understood to be mostly embedded in other dimensions of social inequality.

Foraging Societies

The !Kung, a san-speaking people of Botswana and Namibia, provide an example of a foraging band society, where equality between women and men is manifested in many cultural practices and beliefs. Disparities between women and men in time allotted to foods collecting are equalized by differences in other kinds of labour, as women are more often engaged in food preparation and other household duties. Although men expended more time and energy in subsistence work than women did, (Lee 2003; 2013), their contribution to total caloric intake is less. Women's greater productivity despite less time-expended results from the fact that men's success rate in hunting is appreciably lower than women's success rate in food collecting.

Lee (2003; 2013) reports that both men and women of !Kung have equal rights. This equality manifests on sexual behaviour before, during, and outside marriage. Lee notes that another lack of evidence of male dominance is that physical violence against women in the form of wife beating and rape is rare. The latter in fact is often reported to be entirely absent. The former, though it occurs occasionally, is socially condemned.

The !Kung culture of equality is supported by subsistence activities of women and men, both of whom make vital contributions to their households. Although their economic roles are normatively different, there is actual flexibility in an individual's behaviour. The constellation of behaviours and attitudes that !Kung culture prefer, supports equality and autonomy for its members, regardless of gender or of any other principle of social categorization (Lee 2003; 2013).

It is the report of (d'Anglure 1984) that male dominance among Arctic peoples is tempered by several practices. First, though residence pattern tends to favour patrilineal bonds, couples typically begin married life residing with the wife's kin. They may remain there until several children are born and the marriage is assumed stable. Second, attitudes toward premarital sexual activities are equally permissive concerning girls and boys. Although there is some pressure for an unwed to marry her child's father, it is not intense. Third, flexibility in subsistence activities also lessens tendencies for male dominance because it publicly recognizes the fact that tasks can be performed equally well by either women or men. Women's participation in hunting and fishing demonstrates their productive contributions to their households. Fourth, decision making tends to involve people who are directly concerned in the focal activity. Men make decisions regarding their tasks and women do likewise. Although, men's opinion carries more weight, in decisions involving movement or settlements. Final factor is that absence of warfare in Arctic communities may mitigate male dominance. In sum, Arctic cultures manifest tendencies toward male dominance, but they also contain support for egalitarian gender relations (d'Anglure 1984).

Horticultural Societies

Witherspoon (1975), reports that the underlying egalitarian nature of Navajo society remained strong despite the economic and political changes of the nineteenth century. Gender roles were differentiated in some endeavours, but overlap was also characteristic of actual behaviour. Balance between women and men were enacted on a daily basis in

the work people performed and in the quality of their social interactions. Although egalitarian gender relations among the Navajo have continued to persist, recent economic transformations have altered productive roles and contributions of women and men to their households. Household composition itself has changed in many areas of the Navajo nation (Witherspoon 1975).

Evans-Pritchard (1951) explains that male dominance among the Nuer is demonstrated in attitudes and behaviours that give greater social value to men than to women. Men and women's relationship to cattle is a significant reflection of ideological value accorded to the gender categories. In the context of Nuer subsistence, women's work with the cattle is directly productive because they are responsible for milking the cows. Nevertheless, it is men who are symbolically linked to cattle and who perform the socially prestigious work associated with their care and survival. In addition, men are the owners of cattle; they make decisions concerning their use and distribution; they employ cattle in exchanges for marriage, payment of debts, and on ceremonial occasions.

Okeyo (1980) records that land for farming and grazing, was held by kinship groups organized into patrilineages. Lineages allocated land for use to men within the group. Besides, the basic economic unit of husband and wife was essentially cooperative. Despite male control over kinship relations, preferences for patrilocal residence, and inheritance of land use rights through men, Luo women had some degree of independence and autonomy due to their substantial contribution to household subsistence and their control over distribution of crops. Their rights to land and the social recognition of their productive labour in supporting heirs to patrilineages gave women a more important social position than experienced by other pastoral peoples such as the Nuer (Okeyo 1980).

Among the Iroquois, Lafitau (1974) records that in general, traditional norms sanctioned equality and autonomy of women and men. All people had rights to make decisions concerning their activities. No individual had rights to impose his or her will on others. The division of labour among Iroquoians, therefore, separated tasks of men and women. Each contributed resources and goods through their labour. Men and women in a household performed complementary tasks: all necessary for the functioning and survival of the group. Contributions of both women and men were highly valued. Men and women work, were socially recognized and rewarded (Lafitau 1974; Abler 2004).

Among the Jivaro, [Meggers \(1971\)](#) recounts that, women contributed substantially to their households. They are responsible for planting, tending, and harvesting crops, notably manioc, sweet potatoes, and squash. These products supply most of the Jivaro's subsistence needs, although they are supplemented by fish and animal meat provided by men.

Jivaro women also control and perform garden rituals that must be enacted to ensure a good crop. Women are believed to have a special relationship with plants. Jivaro culture thus, endows women with a critical role linking subsistence to the supernatural realm. Women are significantly responsible not only for ensuring success in their own productive activities, but their ritual knowledge is also necessary for men's success in hunting ([Meggers 1971](#)).

Among the Igbo, an important feature of the economy is the reliance on market trades, conducted primarily by women. Women's control over local trade is a key to their ability to establish a high degree of independence and autonomy. Women sell farm produce and handicrafts in town and regional markets to others who buy goods for their own households or who buy for resale to local villagers. Some women are able to make sizeable profits in these exchanges. Through their control over market activities and the money they receive, trade women establish independence in their household. Data from Afikpo Igbo provides insights into relationships between trading activities and social status ([Ottenberg 1970](#)).

[Green \(1964\)](#) records that among the Umueke, Agbaja Igbo, women, wielded much power because of the role they play in the economic and family life. Among this group, women are the chief breadwinners. Although the men contribute, the women contribute the greater share of the normal family food, buying also other food items like salt with their money.

Women have many sources of income, which include selling kernels, trading on tobacco, and sometimes, sell of fowls. They also sell surplus farm produce to get money. Their role in the economy and household put them on advantage over men who admit normally that the women feed them. Based on this, women can deny men food to bring them to order when misbehaved. Most of the time, the caring of children is left for the men when women are out for market engagements. [Green \(1964\)](#) states, 'the fathers of the small children would often be found left in charge while the mother was at the market' (p.171).

Green (1964) records that even when the women kill the livestock of men found eating their crop, men would not take any court action because women will always win. The men believe that women own them and would always defend any killing. The only option is to take your killed livestock before the women eat it up. Green (1964) states that occasionally, men would use humour to complain of the women dominance. She says:

The men would tell the women that they took unfair advantage of them when a male child was born by holding it upside down so that its head touched the ground or by putting a foot on its face to show their dominance (p. 176).

Unlike Iroquoian culture, which thoroughly supports gender equality in ideological and material forms, Igbo culture conveys mixed messages. Male dominance is verbalized and enacted through contrasting demeanours of men and women, and through some restrictions on women's participation. However, individual women are able to assert their independence through their critical control over economic exchange.

Non-intensive Agricultural Societies

Non-intensive agricultural societies are characterized by systems of social stratification. Social relations among individuals and kinship groups are not founded on egalitarian principles but on hierarchical ranking of people. The degree of segmentation and strength of hierarchy vary cross-culturally (Ugwu 2020).

Blackman (1982) reports among the Haida and Tlingit, that both men and women benefited from potlatches in numerous ways. They receive gifts as guests and could function as hosts. Many types of potlatches were given by either gender category. In addition, gender equality in the potlatch system was demonstrated by the fact that sons and daughters were equally recognized through feasts given by their parents. A son or daughter's birth, naming, puberty, marriage, and other accomplishments were celebrated publicly.

Even though Tlingit and Haida cultural constructs validated the equality of women and men, women are socialized to be somewhat deferential toward their husband. Wives were expected to respect their husbands in daily activities. Women owned property and had recognized rights to dispose of it as they chose. A woman's

property remained her own after marriage and did not merge with that of her husband's. The principle of individual control of goods and houses worked against women, though, in the event of divorce or the death of husbands (Blackman 1982; Ember *et al.* 2007; Haviland *et al.* 2008; Schultz *et al.* 2009).

Pacific coast cultures conveyed complex messages about women's and men's status and authority. In some domains, separation of tasks and rights were clearly demarcated. Subsistence activities were allocated according to gender; rights to inheritance of property were differentiated so that women inherited goods from their mothers and men inherited property and titles from their mother's brothers (MBs). However, egalitarian valuation of women and men was a prevailing principle and led to the essential independence and autonomy of both (Blackman 1982). However, a turn to the Kpelle shows that gender constructs support the 'believe in the formal superiority of men over women' (Gibbs 1965, p. 230). Nevertheless, examination of the roles and rights of women and men reveals that women make significant recognized contributions to their families and have both economic and social independence despite the public control exercised by men.

Gibbs (1965) reports that a couple farms on land allotted to men as heads of households within patrilineages. Land controlled by patrilineages is awarded to men as the last link in a chain of hierarchical jurisdiction because all Kpelle land is said to be owned by paramount chiefs, each of whom controls his own territory. Although men are the holders of land-use rights, women have a great deal of control over the produce of the land. They make decisions about which crops to grow and in what amount. In addition, women determine the planting of other crops on acreage allotted to them by their husbands. 'They have complete control over the income from these individual posts' (p. 201).

In summary, variations in gender constructs are linked to participation in household economies and in community affairs. Among the Haida and Tlingit women had important decision-making rights in economic distribution within the households and in intergroup trade. They participated with men in planning and hosting family and ceremonial potlatches, which validated and increased the status of their kin groups. Women's equality and autonomy were therefore, manifested in critical spheres of social life. Among the Kpelle, ideological and religious precepts stress men's superiority, but women maintain some autonomy and rights to decision making because of their productive farming role and their control over other produce of their labour.

Intensive Agricultural Societies

Turning to data concerning two highly stratified, complex agricultural states, India and China, ideological constructs supporting male dominance were intensified during historical periods of consolidation of state power. They remain very strong up to the modern era, and in fact, continue to varying degrees. Differences obtain among various groups, within these nations with respect to adherence to traditional gender constructs. Many differences are correlated with class, education, religious beliefs, and urban/rural dichotomies. Despite the unique circumstances of each society, traditional gender relations and attitudes toward women and men in India and China were quite similar.

[Narain \(1967\)](#) reports that male dominance and the resulting subordination of women have been accepted in India culture throughout its history spanning millennia. In the earliest documented historic era of India society, Vedic period, patriarchal constructs and practices were already instituted. Men dominated their households and communities and most women were excluded from arenas of productivity and value. However, women in Vedic society were not totally subordinated. Mothers had some authority in their families, and daughters were well treated by their parents. Although sons were preferred, girls were given the opportunity as boys for education and religious training. In fact, many chroniclers of India's Vedic history were women. In addition, some elite women were trained in military and administrative skills ([Narain 1967](#)).

Traditional Chinese culture, like that of India, was intensely patriarchal. Patriarchal gender relations and the ideological constructs supporting and justifying them were developed through several millennia of Chinese history ([Wolf 1974](#)). Wolf records that male dominance in China was manifested in numerous social, economic, political, and religious spheres. The social domain was organized through lineages and clans based on patrilineal descent.

[Diamond \(1975\)](#) reports that in the Chinese culture males were preferred. The economic division of labour contributed further justification for preference for sons. Indeed, the Chinese word for wife, *neiran*, literally means 'inside person' ([Croll 1982](#)).

In summary, in India and China, intense patriarchal systems restricted women's rights in their household and communities. This system also trivialized women's contribution, and denied women access to political participation. Religious and philosophical ideologies were responsible for this subordination of women in these societies.

Industrial Societies

Hartmann (1979) reports that despite women's participation in the labour force, they remained marginalized by intersecting links between gender segregation in employment and unequal remuneration for work performed by women and men. Segregation between the genders entailed the assignment of different types of work to men and women. Some occupations were considered appropriate for women and others for men. For example, men undertook industrial jobs requiring operations of large machinery, whereas women were employed in so-called "light industries," such as those producing soaps, hats, and cigars.

These distinctions of work and responsibilities between men and women were generally not necessitated by physical abilities. They were arbitrary, artificial reflections of gender stereotypes that insisted on differentiation. However, the process did not merely attribute distinctions between the genders; it assigned men more valued roles than women and rewarded both accordingly. Another feature of economic relations contributing to women's marginalization and secondary status was that they generally received lower wages than did men, even when both performed the same job. In summary, despite gains in employment, women face discrimination in the work place. The gender gap in pay continues, as does occupational segregation. Patriarchal attitudes can still be found in familial and public life.

Data from all the societies point to the egalitarian gender relations in societies other than chiefdoms, agricultural and industrial states. The data show that gender relations in the industrial societies were offshoot of gender relations in chiefdoms and agricultural states. Although there was female subordination in chiefdoms and agricultural states, females exercised some level of autonomy than seen in the industrial state.

Conclusion

This study explored the historical development of gender inequality by comparing gender roles in different economic systems. As a historical research, the study uses ethnographies of the societies under comparison. The study compared the subsistence roles of each of the gender categories, in economic systems, and examined how gendered subsistence activities, in different economic systems lead to gender inequality in economic relations.

We observed that, gender and economic relation followed egalitarian nature among the band. The values attached to subsistence activities are complementary and as such, contribution of each gender category is valued. Among the bands, we also observe that there is no marked differentiation and accumulation of wealth is by no means a necessary ideology. Every day, they forage for their needs.

Likewise, with sedentary subsistence strategy, social differentiation began and relative valuation of the major factor of production. With men in control of land, it is reasoned that women are subjugated. However, there is level of egalitarianism inwardly. This is so because; there is still valuation on the relative contribution of each gender category.

However, with stratification, as marked by chiefdom, and thereafter, industrialism, inequality began to set in, albeit, minimally. With accumulation and centralization of resources, we observe that polarity between the genders categories percolate. This study has succeeded in adding to literature on gender and economic relation, and economic anthropology. The study however, recommends a further comparison to accommodate recent ethnographies on these societies.

Conflicts of Interest: Author declares no conflict of interest

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