

# **Transitions of Family System and Externalization of Women' Roles in Sub-Sahara Africa: A Case study of Rwanda**

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Adaptation of modern-western values and systems for the development has led socio-demographic, economic, and legal transitions in sub-Sahara Africa. These transitions have been affecting the family system, transforming and diversifying the patterns and the functions of the family (Goody, 1989; Therborn, 2006). Family as a central system and a unit for production, consumption, reproduction, and accumulation (Bigombe & Khadiagala, 1991) defines the roles and responsibilities of the members to maintain and sustain the functions. Women's roles have become more complex and dynamic in today's sub-Sahara Africa due to the changes in the family system. This study, therefore, examines how the women's roles in sustaining the family have been redefined over time in sub-Sahara Africa taking a case study of Rwanda.

Rwanda is a country with one of the highest population density and population growth rate in sub-Sahara Africa. The country experienced continuous political and socio-economic unrests after independence in 1962. Disruptions increased both domestic and international migration, especially before and after the genocide in 1994. The death toll during the genocide is estimated to have been 8,00,000 to 1,000,000. The family formations in Rwanda have been affected by social disruptions and mass mobilization as well as the legal reforms. The traditional family system in Rwanda, which had long been based on patrilineal lineage was transformed into the nuclear family after *The Rwandan Family Code* in 1988. The fertility rate that has decreased from 8.6 in 1978 4.0 in 2014/15 also indicates the decrease in family size in Rwanda. Its successful economic and social development has boosted access to family planning services in recent years. Also, women's social progress has been remarkable, and Rwanda is well recognized by one of the highest proportions of the seats held by women in the national parliament in the world. Rwandan women remain to be the primary provider of agriculture labour together with men and are also responsible for housework and childcare (Reietveld, 2017). Maintaining good relationships with the family members such as in-laws and community is critical to be a good wife (Reietveld, 2017). This study aims to understand how the time allocation among these roles has been changing in the transformation of the family systems in Rwanda.

## **2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Family in sub-Saharan Africa often refers to the extended family including uncle, aunts, and grandparents under the patrilineal or matrilineal system. The westernization and modernization diversified the family patterns in African societies (Goody, 1989; Therborn, 2006). The existing literature has documented that the transition from the traditional extended family system to the nuclear family have affected women's reproductive intentions and behaviours, such as marriage and fertility control (Caldwell, 1982). Women's roles are determined by the family patterns and their functions in society to a great extent (Boulding, 1978; Nurudeen, 2016). Women's work, which is critical in maintaining and sustaining the family, is generally categorized into three: productive, reproductive, and community work, which is often referred to as the triple burden of work (Nurudeen, 2016). Productive work involves economic activities for income generation. Reproductive work concerns childcare and housework. Community work requires engagement with relatives and community members to maintain a social relationship (Boulding, 1978). The boundaries between productive, reproductive, and community work are often blurred and interdependent in most developing countries, including sub-Saharan Africa. Existing studies show that while the women's commitments to productive work have been increasing, and women's work burden has been intensified in sub-Saharan Africa (Nurudeen, 2016).

## **3. METHOD AND DATA**

The findings and discussions draw on qualitative data collected through the interviews with farming households conducted in Kayonza District in Eastern Province from September 2015 to November 2018. Also, we conducted interviews with a female gynaecologist who has been engaging in women's reproductive matters in Rwanda and a traditional female healer who has been engaging in reproductive health-related issues in Kayonza District.

## **4. FINDINGS**

Rwandan women have been responsible for educating their adolescent nieces about reproductive and sexual behaviours. The girls stay in the paternal aunt's house for six months to two years when they turn to 16 years old and learn about housework such as cooking and cleaning (Interviews in September 2015 and November 2018). Also, women teach their nieces about sexual and reproductive practices before the marriage, which serves as sex education (Interviews in September 2015 and November 2018). There is premarital abstinence in Rwanda, and the education from paternal aunts has been of critical importance for young girls to be exposed and learn about sexual norms, including sexuality and sexual relationships in Rwandan society.

The interviews revealed that the traditional women's roles in educating adolescent nieces have been dissolving as the transition from extended family to nuclear family has weakened the

women's commitment as a relative/kin. During and after the genocide occurred in 1994, many families and relatives fell apart, which made them difficult to maintain the practice (Interview in November 2018). Also, women's engagement in economic activities has been increasing in Rwanda. Especially, those who are in productive age with full-time job find it difficult to accommodate and educate their nieces. As a result, this role has been outsourced to a female gynaecologist (Interview in November 2018). The female gynaecologist who takes care of this matter accommodates the adolescent girls who need to learn about reproductive and sexual behaviours in Kigali Capital (Interview in November 2018).

## **5. DISCUSSION**

The findings suggest that women's time allocation among productive, reproductive, and community work has been changing over time in response to the socio-demographic, economic, and legal transitions. Providing adolescent girls with training on reproductive work and sex education has been essential roles of the family to foster the next generations in Rwanda. Simultaneously, it has been crucial for maintaining their family relationship/kinship. However, the disruptive social events affected the population movement in Rwanda and impacted the formation of the family and family relationships along with the transition from the extended family system to the nuclear family. While women's role as the maintainer of the family remains to be of critical importance, the time allocation among triple roles has been changing as the level of women's responsibility of each work has been redefined.

The findings also revealed that the women's traditional roles in the family had been gradually outsourced to non-blood related or non-family member. The reproductive and sexual education for girls has been provided only by paternal aunts, which takes place only within the domestic sphere. However, as women's commitment to productive work increases, their engagement in reproductive and community work has been decreased, which created a demand for the third person outside the family to replace their roles. In other words, women's roles have been externalized to mitigate their burden and balance the allocation of time among triple roles.

The findings further imply that the demand for reproductive and sexual education for young girls would increase in rural areas as well as cities since women find it challenging to allocate time for accommodating and educating their nieces. Creating opportunities for adolescents/youth to receive reproductive and sex education outside of the family, such as school education would be required in the future. Externalization of sexual education would diversify the reproductive and sexual practices of future generations, and this could affect the future fertility and demographic change. The impact on reproductive and sexual practices of adolescents/youth need to be further investigated, and this remains as future studies.

## 6. Summary

This study examined the dynamics of women's roles and responsibilities following the transformation of the family system in Rwanda. The findings confirmed that socio-demographic, economic, and legal transitions have been affecting family patterns and functions. Consequently, women's roles and time allocation among productive, reproductive, and community work in the family have changed. In the case of Rwanda, providing training on housework and sexual education with adolescent girls was one of the traditional women's roles as a paternal aunt. However, the role has been gradually externalized due to the increasing engagement in productive work and the decreasing commitment to community work. This study adds an understanding of the complexity of women's roles in maintaining and sustaining the family. Also, we provide insights into the future reproductive and sexual practices in accordance with the changes of family system in sub-Saharan Africa.

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