

RESEARCH ARTICLE



Women's Role in Sustaining Patriarchy: Evidence from the Sukuma Tribe

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Abstract

This study examines the entrenched patriarchal system in Shinyanga District, Tanzania, and its profound effects on women's lives. The research was conducted within a qualitative approach based on an interpretive paradigm. The data collected during 18 focus group discussions with 180 women, carefully selected from 18 different administrative divisions of the district, served as the empirical basis for this study. The participants included women from various social backgrounds: young and older mothers, single and married women, and traditional midwives. Findings highlight the dominant role of fathers in families, the internalization of women's subordination, and the reinforcement of gender inequalities through cultural traditions, family teachings, and early marriages. Moreover, women's restricted autonomy, fear of abuse, and religious interpretations further entrench patriarchal norms. The study underscores the far-reaching consequences of patriarchy on women's independence, bodily integrity, and marital choices. To address these challenges, it advocates for community-driven interventions that engage diverse stakeholders, foster safe spaces for women, and involve men and boys in promoting gender equality. These insights contribute to a deeper understanding of the intersection between patriarchy, cultural practices, and gender inequality, informing tailored strategies to empower women in Shinyanga District.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Gender Norms, Gender Inequality, Sukuma tribe, Women, Feminist Theory

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1. INTRODUCTION

The world is dominated by a patriarchal system where women's subordination and exploitation are evident. Patriarchy is an entrenched belief system that places men in superior positions within social hierarchies, relegating women to a second-class status. The term "patriarchy" originates from an ancient Greek phrase meaning "the rule of the father". According to Hossen (2020), patriarchy is a system that dominates and subordinates women while granting men control over power and resources. In this system, the father's authority over family members is absolute (Obaidullah, 2020), with women's domestic roles considered unpaid labor and their work controlled by men. Sultana (2012) argues that patriarchy affects women both privately and publicly. Patriarchal values, such as dominance, oppression, and exploitation, are institutionalized from family units to complex institutions, shaping traditional culture and taboos. These values are ingrained in families, social relationships, laws, religion, schools, textbooks, media, and workplaces and perpetuated through socialisation. According to the results of a study by Perales and Bouma (2019) conducted in Australia, there is a strong link between a high level of religiosity and support for patriarchal beliefs.

Patriarchal ideology has a profound impact on the formation of social structures in which men maintain a privileged position and women a subordinate one. Such structures manifest themselves in the distribution of power and resources and the institutions of family and marriage. In particular, Anees et al. (2021) emphasized that patriarchal attitudes are a systemic source of gender discrimination, especially in the context of marital relations. Europe is generally regarded as having the highest level of gender egalitarianism and the highest rates of women's employment globally (Guveli & Spierings, 2021). However, inequality levels vary among countries, with Scandinavian nations being relatively more equal than other European countries (Gornick et al., 1997). This variation in inequality is

observed between different countries. Despite this, family patterns have shifted since post-industrialization, with more women entering the labor market and gaining greater economic independence through their earnings (Rubery & Fagan, 1999). Additionally, family dynamics such as delays and declines in marriage, increased cohabitation, higher divorce rates, a rise in partnering, and a significant increase in births outside of marriage became prominent across Europe by the mid-twentieth century (Goldscheider et al., 2015). Allanana's (2013) findings focus on economic dependency as the primary driver of women's subordination, and this study reveals that deep-seated cultural norms and socialization processes also significantly reinforce these gendered expectations. These changes are referred to as the second demographic transition.

While many African leaders appear to deny women's subordination and exploitation, the situation in Nigeria in 2016 highlighted these issues starkly. President Mohamed Buhari made a sexist remark about his wife, stating, "I do not know which party my wife belongs to, but she belongs to my kitchen, and my living room and the other room" (Osezua & Agholor, 2019). This comment underscores Nigeria's patriarchal system, where women are regarded as second-class citizens. Nigerian women face significant challenges in participating equally in social, political, and economic activities as men (Ejike & Obinna, 2019). Men's superiority and women's inferiority are reinforced by cultural norms, abusive traditional practices, and patriarchal values that confine women to domestic roles. Gender inequality in Nigeria is pervasive, manifesting in families, organizations, government agencies, and parastatals. This patriarchal system has entrenched systemic gender inequality, restricting women to low-paying jobs and keeping them under glass ceilings, contributing significantly to women's poverty, poor health, and various forms of abuse (Adisa et al., 2021).

The broader structural system of inequality in Tanzania has created significant power imbalances between men and women, resulting

in women's subordination, exploitation, and high levels of partner violence (Vyas & Jansen, 2018). Tanzania's predominantly patriarchal society generally positions women at a lower social status, with men exerting control over them. Gender roles reinforce traditional masculine and feminine identities, influencing the division of labor and resources within households and shaping social status in the community (Dillip et al., 2018). As Idriss (2022) highlights, forced marriage is a form of patriarchal violence in which norms of male dominance undermine a woman's agency and autonomy in matters of marriage. The local cultural context in Tanzania delineates specific roles for men and women, with women responsible for all domestic chores, including cooking, fetching water, caring for patients, children, and the elderly, and serving men. Despite these challenges, women often play a role in sustaining the patriarchal system. This study examines how women contribute to the persistence of patriarchy in rural Tanzania.

The mechanisms of gender socialization play a key role in shaping unequal roles and hierarchical relationships between men and women. According to Debapriya and Rajni (2019), socialization processes result in the internalization of differences, with women being trained early to adopt subordinate behaviour and perform service roles. Similarly, Jahan (2022) points out that patriarchal narratives promote qualities such as modesty, patience, and submission for women and strength, determination, and authority for men. This cultural construction of masculinity and femininity perpetuates patriarchal patterns across generations.

Through the patriarchal system, men have dominated, oppressed, and exploited women, yet women themselves have often been key supporters of these systems. Both government and non-government actors have implemented various measures to promote gender equality in Tanzania. These measures include promoting sustainable development goals, especially goal number 5, establishing national policies like the plan of action to end violence against women and children (2016-2021/22),

allocating 10% of the council budget for women's loans, and creating the Ministry of Community Development, Gender, Women, and Special Groups. Despite these efforts, male dominance over women in both public and private spheres has persisted. This study explores the role of women in supporting the prevalence of patriarchal systems within the Sukuma tribe of Shinyanga District.

2. METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted in Shinyanga District, located in the northwestern part of Tanzania, where there is a high prevalence of Gender-Based Violence (GBV) due to the deeply rooted patriarchal system characteristic of the Sukuma ethnic community (Women Fund Tanzania, 2023). Patriarchal norms and values have consolidated the subordinate position of women for generations, contributing to the reproduction of systemic gender inequality in the social, economic and cultural spheres. The problem is particularly acute in the institutionalized practice of early marriage: according to UNFPA (2014), 59% of girls in the region marry before reaching adulthood, despite ongoing efforts by government agencies and non-governmental organizations to reduce this practice.

Methodologically, the research is based on the principles of qualitative analysis within the framework of an interpretive paradigm, allowing for a deep understanding of women's daily practices, attitudes, and life stories in patriarchal relationships. The choice of a qualitative approach is conditioned by the need to disclose internal, subjectively perceived aspects of gender discrimination that cannot be fully operationalized using quantitative methods.

The grounded theory proposed by Glazer and Strauss (1967) was used as the primary analytical tool, which made it possible to build categories of analysis and identify thematic clusters based on empirical data rather than on pre-formulated hypotheses. This approach was appropriate for capturing the complexity of gender norms and power structures within the

community. Additionally, the study is informed by feminist theory, which provides a critical lens for understanding patriarchal oppression and gender-based inequalities in Shinyanga.

In addition, the study is conceptually based on feminist theory, which provides critical tools for analyzing the structural nature of gender inequality and identifying ways patriarchy affects women's identity, behavior, and life choices. The combination of a grounded theory and a feminist paradigm has made it possible to capture the external manifestations of discrimination and the internal mechanisms of subjectivation through which women assimilate and reproduce dominant gender norms.

Sampling and Data Collection

To ensure the representativeness of various female perspectives, targeted selective sampling was used, which made it possible to select study participants according to predefined criteria. The sample included young mothers, single mothers, traditional midwives, elderly mothers, and married women, which provided a variety of life experiences and social roles among the respondents. As part of the empirical phase, 18 focus group discussions (FGDs) were organized, one in each of the 18 administrative divisions (wards) of Shinyanga District. Each focus group included 10 participants, totalling 180 women. The discussions were based on semi-structured questions aimed at identifying women's experiences in the context of patriarchal norms, the level of autonomy in decision-making, and societal expectations.

In order to increase trust and ensure cultural sensitivity in the research process, female facilitators from the local community were involved. Their participation helped to establish trusting relationships between researchers and participants and created a more open dialogue. This helped to prevent possible data distortions and ensured the accuracy of the research.

3. RESULTS

The study revealed that patriarchal values in Shinyanga District shape women's perceptions of themselves, their roles within the family, and their interactions with men. Key themes that emerged include the father's central role in the family, inherited norms and values, early marriage, women's internalized beliefs about their status, fear of abuse, and religious justifications for gender hierarchies. These findings demonstrate how deeply embedded patriarchal norms limit women's autonomy and reinforce gender inequality in multiple spheres of life.

The analysis of the data collected through focus group discussions has allowed us to identify six main themes that reflect the mechanisms of internal justification and perpetuation of patriarchal norms. Each category was supported by the participants' empirical statements and interpreted from the standpoint of feminist theory and sociological analysis.

The summarized results are presented in Table 1.

According to the results, the first theme ("Father as the Foundation of the Family"), reveals the ingrained symbolism of male dominance, where the father is perceived as the central figure of the family structure. This attitude forms a stable hierarchical model in which women and children occupy subordinate positions, and the role of men is associated with authority and legitimate authority. In the second category ("Women's Perceptions of Themselves"), it is recorded that many participants are aware of the oppression of their position but perceive it as an inevitable part of women's destiny. This perception indicates a deep internalization of patriarchal norms and a reduced ability to reflect critically, which is characteristic of the so-called "adaptive subordination". The third theme ("Family Teachings to Women") demonstrates the role of family initiations and educational attitudes in the transmission of gender subordination. The women describe how girls have been taught silence, obedience, and the priority of

TABLE 1. Thematic categories, empirical statements of the participants and their interpretation in the context of patriarchal norms

No.	Category	Quote from the survey	Context	Interpretation
1	C1: Father as the Foundation of the Family	<i>"Father is the foundation of the family... we all agree because the system is built in our brains."</i>	Discussion of the roles of the father and power in the family.	An illustration of hegemonic masculinity and the normalization of male leadership as a natural order.
2	C2: Women's Perceptions of Themselves	<i>"You have to tolerate... tolerate now... even if things happen to you in your family, you have to tolerate like other women... because we, women, all the time, experience oppression".</i>	A statement about tolerance and the suppression of feelings.	Maintaining women's submissiveness through internalizing inequality
3	C3: Family Teachings to Women	<i>"And where you are coming from, they tell you to respect your husband and your in-laws. So when that girl arrives there, she must live that example... she thinks when she speaks up, she will be going against tradition".</i>	Discussion of traditional instructions for young wives.	Control over women's reproductive and emotional labor.
4	C4: Marriage at an Early Age	<i>"You find a girl who is 15 years old, and her husband is 28 or older... she will just be obedient."</i>	Cases of forced early marriages.	Restriction of access to education and economic independence.
5	C5: Women's Fear of Abuse	<i>"When the man comes, it's to be heavily beaten... therefore, you proceed to collapse because you fear that heavy beating as if you were a thief dog."</i>	Cases of domestic violence.	Deterrence and prevention of resistance attempts.
6	C6: Religious Justifications for Gender Roles	<i>"God created man first, and woman from his rib... we just come behind him as assistants."</i>	Religious argumentation of the hierarchy of the sexes.	Sacralization of the gender hierarchy and transmission through religion.

Note: compiled by authors

men's interests since childhood, reproducing the inequality structure from an intergenerational perspective.

Early marriages as a form of subordination (the fourth category) emphasize that girls often marry in adolescence, which leads to the loss of educational and economic opportunities. This confirms the concept of "structural violence," in which social norms limit individual opportunities, especially in vulnerable groups. The fifth category ("Women's Fear of Abuse") illustrates how

physical and psychological violence is used as a mechanism to maintain female subordination. The participants discuss the fear of beatings and punishments as a deterrent, limiting their behavior and freedom of action. Finally, the sixth category ("Religious Justifications for Gender Roles") demonstrates how religious interpretations serve as a tool for the sacralization of patriarchal structures. Male superiority is justified by divine design, which makes it indisputable in the eyes of women raised in this cultural tradition. Thus, the

identified topics allow us to assert that patriarchal norms are not only imposed from the outside but also reproduced by women through the processes of socialization, internalization and fear of social sanctions. These results confirm the need for culturally sensitive interventions aimed at transforming gender attitudes and empowering women at the local level.

4. DISCUSSION

As revealed in this study, patriarchy extends beyond the mere domination and exploitation of women by men; it encompasses a comprehensive societal framework that influences mental, social, spiritual, economic, and political aspects, shaping the behavior and expectations of both men and women in social contexts. These findings align with Douge-Prosper (2018), who highlights how patriarchy enables men to assert their will over women, leading to the internalization of male dominance as the norm in women's thinking and actions. The study further supports Allanana's (2013) assertion that women are relegated to a second-class status, with their primary roles confined to domestic spheres, particularly in caregiving and household labor. This mirrors the experiences of the women in this study, who expressed that their responsibilities were primarily centred around cooking and caring for their children and husbands. However, unlike

The findings of this study further emphasize that women have minimal control over their bodies, with men typically dictating decisions regarding sexual activity and reproduction, often disregarding women's health considerations. This observation corroborates the research of Anees et al. (2021), which identifies patriarchal ideology as a key driver of gender discrimination, particularly within the institution of marriage. Anees et al. (2021) argue that patriarchal norms strip women of autonomy, leaving them powerless in decision-making processes regarding their bodies, a theme echoed in this study. Moreover, these findings extend Princewill et al. (2019)

research, which discusses the role of bride price and the fear of abuse in limiting women's autonomy. While Princewill et al. (2019) focus primarily on economic and legal constraints, this study highlights that patriarchal control over women's bodies is also reinforced through cultural narratives that frame male authority as natural and divinely sanctioned.

The study also found that patriarchal societies constrain women's freedom to choose when and whom to marry, often leading to coerced marriages, particularly among younger women. These findings parallel those of Hossen (2020), whose study in Bangladesh illustrated how early and forced marriages result in relationships characterized by female submission and obedience rather than mutual respect and dialogue. Furthermore, Idriss (2022) identifies forced marriage as a form of patriarchal violence, reinforcing how patriarchal norms continue to shape women's agency and autonomy in marital relationships. Unlike previous studies that emphasize the legal aspects of forced marriage, this study highlights how cultural and familial teachings play an equally critical role in sustaining these practices.

A notable finding of this study is the strong correlation between religion and patriarchal gender attitudes among women. Participants viewed their subordinate status as divinely ordained, citing religious narratives that position men as natural leaders of the household. This aligns with Perales and Bouma's (2019) study in Australia, which demonstrated an association between high religiosity and adherence to patriarchal beliefs. However, while Perales and Bouma (2019) highlight variations in patriarchal attitudes among different religious groups, this study finds that religious teachings in Shinyanga overwhelmingly reinforce male dominance across different faiths, suggesting that patriarchal interpretations of religion may be more rigid in specific socio-cultural contexts.

Additionally, this study underscores how patriarchal systems perpetuate gender norms through socialization, where girls and women are taught to respect male authority within

families and communities. These findings align with Debapriya and Rajni (2019), who argue that gendered socialization processes lead men and women to internalize different roles, with women often positioning themselves in subordinate positions. While Jahan (2022) primarily discusses these dynamics in educational and media representations, this study demonstrates how these gendered expectations are deeply ingrained within family structures and daily social interactions.

Overall, the findings of this study contribute to the broader discourse on patriarchy by confirming, extending, and refining existing scholarship. While they corroborate prior research on the mechanisms of patriarchal control, they also highlight how patriarchal norms are sustained not only through economic and legal structures but also through deeply ingrained cultural and religious beliefs. Additionally, this study expands on previous research by providing a nuanced understanding of how patriarchal norms are reinforced at the micro-level through family teachings and everyday interactions. By situating these findings within a broader academic context, this study enhances the understanding of the persistent and multifaceted nature of patriarchy in shaping gender relations.

5. CONCLUSION

This study underscores the deep-rooted influence of patriarchal norms on women's lives in Shinyanga District, highlighting the persistent prevalence of early marriage and systemic gender inequalities despite ongoing interventions. The scientific significance of the work lies in rethinking the role of women not only as victims but also as unwitting agents of the stability of the patriarchal system. The literature review allowed us to summarize key theoretical approaches that reveal the institutional nature of patriarchy, including the influence of religion, socialization, gender attitudes and normative practices that consolidate male dominance. Important were the studies highlighting how the internal

mechanisms of internalization and gender socialization form a subordinate female identity.

The Sukuma patriarchal system reinforces male dominance, positioning men as the heads of families and women as subordinates, thereby restricting women's autonomy and decision-making power. These entrenched gender hierarchies shape women's identities and social roles, dictating their behavior in both private and public spaces. The findings emphasize the urgent need for targeted, culturally responsive interventions to challenge patriarchal values, combat gender-based violence, and promote gender equality in the district. Addressing these issues requires a holistic approach integrating legal, educational, economic, and community-driven strategies to create sustainable social change.

Potential areas for further research include an in-depth analysis of differences between generations of women in the perception of patriarchy, the study of resistance mechanisms and adaptation strategies in the female environment, as well as comparative studies in other ethnic and cultural contexts. Of particular interest is the study of the role of education, digital media and legal reforms in transforming gender attitudes in rural communities in Tanzania. Thus, the results obtained can become the basis for the development of socially oriented programs aimed at transforming patriarchal attitudes and empowering women through education, legal education and community involvement in rethinking traditional gender roles.

Recommendations

To effectively challenge patriarchal norms and promote gender equality in Shinyanga District, the following evidence-based and policy-aligned interventions are recommended:

(1) **Community-Led Social Norms Change:** Strengthening community-based approaches that engage families, teachers, local leaders, and religious figures in shifting cultural perceptions of gender roles. Programs

such as UNICEF's Social Norms Change Model can be adapted to encourage dialogue and foster positive behavioral transformation (Diop et al., 2022).

(2) Safe Spaces for Women and Girls: Establishing community centers or support groups where women can openly share experiences, access counseling, and receive legal assistance. Similar initiatives, such as the UN Women Safe Cities and Safe Public Spaces program, have successfully empowered women in gender-discriminatory environments (UN Women, 2017).

(3) Men and Boys as Gender Equality Advocates: Implementing school-based and community programs that educate men and boys on the negative effects of patriarchy. Adopting strategies from the MenEngage

Alliance could help foster equitable gender relations and prevent violence against women and girls (UNESCO, 2023).

(4) Economic Empowerment for Women: Expanding access to vocational training, financial literacy programs, and small business funding for women. Initiatives such as the Grameen Bank microfinance model can serve as a reference for empowering women economically, enabling them to challenge oppressive gender norms (Joshee, 2008).

By implementing these recommendations, policymakers, development practitioners, and community leaders can work collectively to dismantle patriarchal structures, promote gender equity, and ensure women's rights are upheld in Shinyanga District.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

Writing – original draft: Mathias Mkude.

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