

## 1 Introduction

In this article I explore some of the relationships between poverty and reproduction in Africa. Much thinking about these issues has been based on a particular understanding of fertility – one which relates poverty to high fertility via a shortage of labour power and insecurity. However, some recent work looks at reproduction in sub-Saharan Africa in a rather different way. I briefly outline that work, and then try to draw out the implications for an understanding of poverty, gender and reproduction. Important questions include: are the reproductive histories of poor women different from those of non-poor women? What about poor men? How do changing gender relations affect reproduction? How does reproductive history affect economic and social status?

## 2 Poverty and Fertility: The Conventional View

A widespread view about reproduction and poverty is rooted in the idea that children are a resource in African contexts, in terms of their labour in agricultural and domestic settings. This basic idea, widely known under Caldwell's 'wealth flow' terminology (Caldwell 1982), has been developed in a number of directions. Following the critique that gender relations were ignored by Caldwell (e.g. Vock 1988), a more feminist version of this argument has been made. The labour of children is particularly needed by women, who face the most labour intensive tasks in agriculture and domestic work. In addition, the approach has been extended to the idea that children are valuable to the poor, and especially poor women, as old age security under conditions of pervasive insecurity. Although this idea was developed originally in Bangladesh (Cain 1981, 1983), it is often applied to African contexts.

Ingrid Palmer (1991: 4) gives a good example of a statement of this approach. With increasing poverty:

Old sources of insecurity are aggravated; any hope of providing for old age with economic resources recedes further. As family resources become scarcer, discrimination against girls in nutrition, education and health expenditure increases. More limited productive assets for women means greater labour exploitation to

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maintain living standards. With diminishing chances of surplus economic accumulation and less ability to plan for a better future, women may retreat into their traditional role of motherhood for securing labour assistance and old age support.

This analysis has now been applied to a number of areas where poverty, gender and fertility interact, such as the environment (Dankelman and Davison 1988; Dasgupta 1992) and structural adjustment (Grown 1994). For example, Grown argues that one effect of greater poverty brought about by adjustment policies may be a delayed decline of fertility. Others see environmental degradation leading to a greater demand for domestic labour (mainly via fuel wood and water collection) and hence higher fertility (or at least a stalling of fertility decline)

The policy recommendations which come out of this sort of analysis have tended to focus on factors such as female education, which are argued to have a 'synergistic' impact on fertility and productivity (see Jackson 1992, 1993 and Green 1994 for a thorough-going critique). At the same time, there is clearly a concern about being able to distinguish between high fertility having an economic, anti-poverty rationale, and 'excessive' fertility which compounds poverty and environmental damage. The tensions within this approach are not really resolved.

This view gives an explicitly economic rationale for high fertility in Africa, and originally Caldwell's concern was to emphasise the rationality of high fertility in the face of early approaches which saw it as the irrational result of outdated 'traditions'. It constructs the main route to family formation, and thence to labour supply and insurance substitutes, as via biological reproduction, paying much less attention to the social formation of the household labour force, and to the relationships between men and women within which biological reproduction is located. The conventional approach thus takes a rather fixed view of the relationship between biological reproduction and social relationships.

Some recent research on reproduction (mostly in West Africa) has looked more closely at the specific social contexts of reproduction. In particular, this work points to two ways in which the link between

poverty and fertility is less fixed than appears in the conventional approach. The first is to do with relationships between parents and children, and the second is to do with relationships between women and men as parents, or potential parents.

### **3 Alternative Approaches to Understanding Reproduction**

#### **3.1 Building households**

Building up a family, and hence a labour force and sources of security in old age, in a sense relies ultimately on births. However, the process is not direct, unmediated or unproblematic. A long standing theme in the social anthropology of Africa is that relationships – for example, of kin or ethnicity – can be constructed or managed. Recent work in the anthropology of fertility and household relationships in West Africa have built on this theme.

One direct way in which the household labour profile can be managed in a much shorter term way than through births, is marriage. For men in many African settings, expanding the productive group through marrying more than one wife is a classic route to a large farming household, and thence to prosperity (for Mali see Toulmin 1992; for Ghana see Whitehead 1996; for coastal Tanzania see Lockwood, forthcoming). There are also other ways of simply changing household numbers – for example through divorce, or through fostering older children – which, although particularly important in West Africa, is found quite commonly elsewhere as well (Page 1989).

#### **3.2 Making and breaking relationships**

However, underlying such demographic changes is the construction of social relationships themselves. This includes relationships between adults and children, which in the conventional literature on high fertility are taken for granted. As Caroline Bledsoe points out in a recent examination of the issues:

Although adults hope to draw support from children, actually deriving the benefits to which they believe they are entitled, whether from their own children or others, is highly problematic. Instead of viewing children as reliable

sources of future support, parents and guardians alike view children as **potential** sources of support. They treat the original fertility event as the beginning of a long, continuously negotiated relationship ... a process that may conflict with other people's efforts to make claims on the child or with the child's own desires to forge a more independent life or create links with other people. (Bledsoe 1995: 224)

This view sees relationships are much more malleable and less fixed, either in who they are between, or in the nature of the relationship. For example, adults in certain African societies can pursue claims of closeness on children (see also Renne 1993a). One of the primary ways of doing this is through fostering, as mentioned above. As Caldwell and Caldwell (1987: 419) point out, this has enormous implications for conventional economic decision-making models:

[Fosterage] so weakens the link between biological parentage and the number of children being raised that much of the discussion in economic demography about fertility decision-making and its concern with the value and cost of children is rendered meaningless.

A different aspect of this is that, in various ways, children sometimes fail to play the roles assigned to them in conventional thinking about poverty and high fertility, and perhaps hoped for by their parents. Relationships between children and parents sometimes break down. In the house where I lived in Rufiji District in coastal Tanzania during 1985 and 1986, the relationship between the head of the household and his teenage son was marked by constant tension and conflict. The man wanted his son there, to help with farming tasks and various other duties. He also wanted the boy there as a symbol of his family, since his wife had left him and gone to live in Zanzibar. At the same time, he wanted to have complete control over the activities of his son. Periodically, the conflict would become open, and the boy went off to a nearby village to live with other kin. He spent less time living with his father than being away, in the year that I spent there.

People in Rufiji observed widely that whether children would help you once they grew up depended

in part upon their nature. They also pointed to the *akili* of a child, roughly translated as 'skill' or 'intelligence'. This observation has wide relevance for the logic of fertility in Africa. In one case from Matsai, in Northern Nigeria, I interviewed a farmer who was struggling, and failing, to hold onto a small amount of land, in spite of having two adult sons. This dilemma appeared to arise partly from the fact that, for different reasons, each of his sons failed to deliver enough support to him to avoid the sale of land. On the one hand, the son who lived with him was particularly lacking in skills and farming or trading abilities. Although aged 40 and married, he was still being supported by his father, who took responsibility for providing him with grain. On the other hand, the second son left the area some 15 years previously, and does not send any support.

Equally, amongst the widows I interviewed in Hausaland there were substantial differences in the degree to which they relied on their sons for assistance. Some were able to enjoy a quite comfortable old age, with sons working on fields which they had inherited from their husbands. Others received little help, still spent long hours collecting firewood to sell, and relied as much on other kin, such as a brother. This is particularly striking because the extreme nature of gender relations in Hausaland, with seclusion for married women and a very restricted set of economic opportunities, means that one would expect widows to be particularly dependent on sons. In some ways, the situation is quite similar to that in Bangladesh, where Mead Cain conducted his original work. However, in other Asian contexts, it is clear that widows do not automatically expect their sons to play the role of support (see Vlassof 1990).

These examples show that loyalty and skill cannot be taken for granted, and that people do distinguish between children on this basis. Children however, are not passive in this process, and also strategize about who they may be better living with

The examples also show that in addition to selective economic and social investment in children and adults, people may also marginalise others:

How does marginalisation occur? When faced with mounting demands, adults may begin to de-emphasise their ties to individuals with little

promise, or to ignore the rights associated with a kinship position. Thus whereas a bright student who wins a college scholarship finds himself with a flood of offers from adults, related and unrelated, suddenly eager to help him with expenses, a primary school drop-out finds it difficult to enforce even the most minimal lineage rights.

(Bledsoe 1995: 226)

Again, shedding or distancing can be achieved through fostering a child out. But even when they are kept in the house, people may marginalise children born of a previous relationship, or of a low-status partner.

Bledsoe argues that 'for a woman, the degree of paternal interest in the child she has borne is a focal point of interest'. Where a woman senses the father of a child is losing interest, she may adopt a strategy of sending the child to relatives, and even seek to forge a new relationship. For formally or informally polygynous men, Bledsoe argues that there is a tendency to rank wives, and therefore children by wives' status. Children of high-status wives, and especially educated wives, may receive special attention, while those of uneducated, low status wives, may be marginalised.

This points to the possibility of the retrospective rewriting of family histories, for current purposes. For example, the paternity of a child can be re-assigned after the event, according to strategies which the mother is seeking. Andrea Cornwall gives an example from southwestern Nigeria where a man refused to accept the attribution to him of responsibility for a woman's pregnancy, despite considerable pressure by both his and her kin (Cornwall 1996). His refusal was to do with denying a link to the woman, and a responsibility for the child. For the woman concerned, her priority was public recognition of paternity, and having failed to 'pin' the paternity on this man, she tried to pursue another. Eventually, the family of the first man accepted the paternity, taking on responsibility for the child, and effectively making the man redundant.

In part, this story reflects a long-observed approach to paternity in African societies in which it is social, not biological paternity which is important. But

beyond this, it is a reminder of the ways in which people may choose courses of actions to emphasise or de-emphasise particular relationships at particular times. As Cornwall puts it:

Refusing to acknowledge paternity is a well-used tactic to avert having to cater for a child, or maintain any kind of link with its mother ... Becoming a father is an expected part of men's life courses, yet despite being 'owners' of children, fathers can devolve responsibility over their children onto other women, either their mothers or their kin; sometimes to the extent whereby they become practically irrelevant in the day-to-day process of bringing up the child.

Having children may be less to do with the relationship between parents and child, than relationships between the parents themselves, or between them and other adults. This is especially important for women. Rather than seeing having children as achieving certain goals or functions for a mother, through her future relationship with those children, it may be more realistic to see individual women seeking to realise complex goals, which may involve several elements, in which births can potentially be a problem, an opportunity or a tactic (Cornwall 1996; Renne 1993b). Cornwall in particular argues that it is impossible to consider people's reproductive choices as strategic responses to changing conditions:

... people who become parents are often placed in situations where they need to improvise solutions to the kinds of complex tangles they may be presented with at any particular time. To read back from the ways in which problems are solved or addressed to impute an overall strategic framework or plan, pursued by individuals for themselves, becomes highly problematic ... Living with uncertainty requires creative adaptation, making do along the way with contingencies that cannot be planned for.

She rejects the metaphor of 'strategy' in relation to reproduction, in favour of more defensive and reactive practices, invoking De Certeau's notion of 'tactics' and Paul Richard's metaphor of 'performance' as 'a sequential adjustment to unpredictable conditions'. For example, a woman might seek to have a child with a man even though she is not married to him, partly because she may thereby be better able to

make certain claims on him which enable her in turn to realise another end, such as setting up her own business. Children need not be the end in themselves, and the relationship a parent has **with** a child may be no more important than the relationship the parent has **through** the child to other kin (Guyer 1994).

### 3.3 Bringing in the body

Bledsoe's most recent work in the Gambia shows in particular how women seek to manage their bodily reproductive capacity over their lifetime to achieve a 'success', which is about the relationships they achieve not only with their children, once grown-up, but also with their husband, husband's kin, and co-wives (Bledsoe *et al.* forthcoming). Indeed Bledsoe argues that for the Gambia at least, a woman can demonstrate that she has 'struggled' on behalf of her husband and his kin, through conceptions and pregnancies, as much as by live births. The reward, in the post-reproductive phase of her life, is grateful support from all within the compound, with younger co-wives brought in to take away the burden of heavy work. Certainly, distinctly different patterns of work activities and receiving money, clothes and food from compound members and kin, amongst junior versus senior (or 'retired') women are corroborated by research elsewhere (e.g. Warner *et al.* 1997).

This way of seeing reproduction is based on a local model of reproductive potential. Whether a woman fulfils this capacity, in this model, depends upon her deployment of 'muscle', 'strength' and 'blood'. Closely spaced pregnancies in which blood and strength have not been regained from the last reproductive event are seen as more dangerous. Here, the most important point is that strength can be used up in heavy agricultural and domestic work, while blood can be regained through eating nourishing foods. Clearly, poverty is related to both.

Bledsoe argues that particular problems arise for a woman where reproductive mishaps – stillbirths and miscarriages – cast doubt on the validity of her 'struggle', or where a husband is overloading her with work, or not helping her by allowing her to space pregnancies and build up her bodily

resources by eating well. Where cooperation breaks down completely, women will seek to start a new relationship. The later in their reproductive lives they do this, the more difficult it is, because they have fewer reproductive resources left with which to build up a new record of pregnancies.

In this approach, it is pregnancy, rather than fertility per se that is considered important. Conventional approaches tend to construct reproductive outcomes as determined by a choice made on economic grounds. Sometimes it seems assumed that these choices are made by women, at other times it seems assumed that, as is often expressed ideologically in Africa, it is the husband (or even the husband's kin) who make the reproductive choice. By contrast, this approach sees such outcomes as the result of subtle processes of negotiation, compromise, psychological manipulation and resistance, involving both the timing of sexual contact and the use of contraception (for some West African examples see Bledsoe and Hill 1994; Renne 1993b; Mott and Mott 1985).

Much of the research drawn on in this paper is from societies in the coastal areas of West Africa. There may be some real pitfalls in drawing general conclusions about reproduction and social relationships elsewhere. The comparative statistical research of Lesthaeghe and colleagues on reproduction in Africa suggests that there may be regional contrasts between coastal West Africa on the one hand, and Sahelian countries and East and Southern Africa on the other (Lesthaeghe 1989).

In addition, there is an important point about the 'structures' which kinship rules set up, and scope for particular kinds of action. For example, there may be far less room for mothers to manage and shape relationships with their children in places where there are kinship discourses which emphasise the rights of the father, with a strong idiom of descent through the father, by comparison with matrilineal societies, or those in which there are discourses of double descent or a de-emphasising of lineage (cognatic societies).<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> For the classic account of African kinship systems see Radcliffe-Brown and Forde, 1950. For a critique of

determinism in the analysis of kinship see Holy and Stuchlik, 1983.

## 4 Implications for Understanding Poverty

The implications of these alternative approaches to reproduction in Africa for poverty can be thought of in two main areas. One is the characteristics of poverty; the other is the gendered nature of poverty processes.

### 4.1 The characteristics of poverty

One clear implication of the research discussed above is that individual impoverishment or accumulation in Africa is a very long run, relational process. Poverty analyses often focus on income and assets in the short run, to the neglect of familial relationships. This clearly relates to the more recent literature linking poverty with social exclusion and social capital.

Impoverishment, on this view, can be conceptualised as a long-run spiral, which involves not only economic failure, but also social marginalisation. Bledsoe reminds us that social marginalisation must be understood within a context of scarcity of resources. It is an outcome of poverty, but also helps to reinforce poverty. For example, the poor may fail to hold onto their most successful children if they are courted by richer relatives elsewhere. Poor men may also be unable to hang onto their wives, who may seek a more rewarding relationship through which to convert reproductive capacity into social and economic rewards. Later in life, an estranged wife might deny a poor husband's claim to paternity of a child.

This leads on to a methodological point. Poverty measures are often based on single-round income or expenditure surveys taking the household as a unit. The analysis here has some implications which can be captured at this level. For example larger households are richer and vice versa: poorer households are smaller and vice versa. But this is within, not between, societies, because kinship and household formation rules differ so much across societies. But beyond the obvious and frequently made criticism that household level surveys largely miss intra-household inequalities, and often inter-household transfers, it is also true that they fail to capture the dynamics of household formation and fission. The point is that, for all the reasons outlined above, the marriages and the households of the poor will be more unstable than those of the rich. Thus a survey

at one particular date may be of little use in identifying the situation or characteristics of poor households at a later date. Such surveys might usefully be augmented with life history surveys of individual men and women which attempted to identify the trajectories of the poor and non-poor.

A final point about the characteristics of impoverishment or accumulation implied by the analyses above is that, for women (and through women for men), part of the spiral is mediated by bodily resources. However, this is not in the sense that is usually understood in analyses of poverty which emphasise a direct link between income, nutrition and capacity for work or reproduction (e.g. Dasgupta 1993). Rather, it is mediated through women's own understanding of this link.

Thus, for example, women marginalised within their relationships with their husbands may enter into a reinforcing spiral of reproductive difficulty and marginalisation. Being denied nourishing food and relief from heavy work may lead women to space pregnancies much more widely. This in turn may marginalise a woman from her husband's kin and within her household, leading him to seek another wife, leading to even further marginalisation for the woman and her children. Equally, poor men who cannot give a wife nourishment and protection from heavy work after pregnancies, may also see her leaving him for a relationship which can offer her more.

Placing this in relation to Palmer's analysis quoted at the start of this paper, the retreat into the 'traditional role of motherhood' may not be so easy, socially or bodily, for the poorest women, paradoxically, as for richer women. There is little data on this issue. Fertility studies rarely consider women's economic situations in any depth, and in some ways, the best proxy we have is educational status. And within the context of rural African society, where very few women are educated above primary level, it is not at all clear that richer, primary educated women have lower fertility than poorer, uneducated women. In several African contexts uneducated women have lower fertility than primary educated women.

## 4.2 The gendered nature of poverty

In the process of managing social relationships, women in Africa are generally less well placed than men economically, because of the constraints on their actions and status in labour institutions, in land access, etc. They may often, however, be better placed emotionally, especially as mothers. To a degree, the relative freedom women have to construct different kinds of social relationships with their own and other's children depends on the kinship system. Matrilineal and cognatic systems are easier than patrilineal ones.

There are also important differences between African societies in the degrees of freedom women have to pursue alternative lateral strategies through having children. The women in the Sierra Leone societies described by Bledsoe, in the Yoruba societies described by Renne and Cornwall, women in Rufiji, and even in the Gambian societies described by Bledsoe and others, seem to have a great deal more room for manoeuvre than women in, say, Hausaland. This may mean that whereas in the former kind of societies women are marginalised and impoverished through divorce and abandonment by children, very poor women in Hausaland get marginalised **within** marriages and compounds.

Changing gender relations may have an analogous effect. That is, one of the ways in which sharpened gender inequality may be manifested is in a reduced ability for women, relative to men, to socially manage relationships with children, or to resist marginalisation by men, whether in conjugal or non-conjugal relationships.

What do these approaches have to say about sex bias? That is, what can we say about how boys, as opposed to girls, are likely to get taken up by parents or relatives, or whether girls are more likely to be marginalised than boys? Clearly, we know from the study of sex bias in Asia that the organisation of kinship and the economy is relevant to extreme sex bias. Between the various African systems of kinship, there are differences in the expression of closeness between mothers and sons in patrilineal systems, (e.g. Swazi society, Kuper 1950), and between mothers and daughters in matrilineal systems (e.g. Bemba society in Zambia, Richards 1950). But there is little, if any, evidence of sex bias

in Africa in terms of demographic outcomes or expenditure patterns. And according to Rose (1995), shifts in educational enrolment in Africa during economic decline in the 1980s appear to have affected boys worse than girls.

Gender clearly determines treatment in areas such as inheritance and marriage payments. But beyond these, if the analyses above say anything about the differential material treatment of children (beyond given inheritance rules), they point to the significance not of the sex of the child but rather to the nature and status of the relationship between the child's parents. In many ways, the manner in which a rich man treats his sons by different wives may differ more than the way he treats the sons and daughters of a given wife.

Finally, the above research suggests that simple arguments about the links between mass impoverishment (because of environmental degradation, or structural adjustment), and fertility are not useful. This is partly because, as argued above, the 'retreat into motherhood' is not a likely response to increased poverty for many women. Increased poverty makes it less possible, if anything, to have more children (or children more quickly).

The second reason is that, rather than triggering a demographic response, increased poverty is more likely to bring about change in the social management of demographic events, such as greater fission of households, and more marital mobility, including higher divorce rates.

Bledsoe relates this process to changing notions of what constitutes a family:

If we acknowledge the phenomenon of social marginalisation ... we see that a nuclear conjugal family and the patterns of investment within it may emerge as the outcome of a long-term *post hoc* process of establishing unions, bearing children, and periodically sloughing off ties to all but one core 'inside' set that may emerge much later in the formation of the family. Such patterns are likely to take on increasing importance as economic conditions worsen.

(Bledsoe 1995: 228)

### 4.3 Policy

In this paper, I have argued that new ways of looking at reproduction in Africa open up new perspectives on impoverishment (and accumulation) as gendered, often long-run processes which work through familial relationships. This is not to deny the significance of income in cash or kind, or assets. It is rather to point to the fact that, in Africa, opportunities to gain income, or the use of assets, work through familial relationships which are distinct from market relationships.

What does this say about policy to reduce or eradicate poverty? Individual relationships within families are a notoriously difficult area for policy intervention, especially for weak states (as most African states are).

Marginalisation is a mechanism for dealing with poverty: it is the particular social construction of familial relationships which can emerge in conditions of economic stress. The analysis above does not offer an explanation of generalised increases in poverty – these are likely to be macroeconomic or climatic in origin. Rather, it looks at the ways in which individuals may become destitute within unequal societies. The implied macro-policy approach is therefore to provide rapid, equitable (and gender-equitable) growth in the economy, which will mean that processes of marginalisation simply become less of an economic problem. Conversely, any policies which accentuate the readiness of people to marginalise others within or between families are potentially very damaging.

A central issue here is education, and rising costs of education. The plunge in state resources going into education in Africa in the 1980s and the subsequent privatisation of education costs has undoubtedly led to sharper marginalisation of some young people. The provision of universal primary education would not necessarily eradicate marginalisation of some young people, since the focus might then simply shift to secondary education. But the consequences of marginalisation would not then be so serious.

Beyond the macro-level, there is a question about what policy should be aiming to do: trying to prevent marginalisation and encourage solidarity (or shared impoverishment), or trying to protect the already marginalised. The former would be

probably much more difficult, and would require ideological change, as well as workable incentives to refrain from marginalising the weakest and least able. The latter becomes partly a problem of how to identify and reach the marginalised, since they are not co-terminous with particular, easily identified groups ('women', 'the elderly', 'children'). Instead, the analysis above would imply that more specific categories of people are vulnerable to marginalisation, such as older women with long intervals between the birth of children, or school drop-outs. Targeting resources – school fee waivers, or subsidised credit – at these sorts of people may succeed in substituting for resources withdrawn by kin. Beyond such specific targeted measures, there is a need for real investigation of the widespread assumption that 'the extended family' in Africa successfully plays an insurance role. If the role of the family is much less certain and benign than is commonly thought, then there is an urgent need to focus on alternative forms of security or insurance, including more effective institutions for saving.

There is also a gender policy issue – i.e. the unequal economic and ideological ability of men and women to manage relationships makes women potentially more vulnerable to marginalisation than men. In many ways this is simply another aspect or mechanism of women's greater impoverishment which is widely analysed. Probably the greatest input to policy which the analysis could make is to emphasise that existing anti-poverty programmes should not only be gender-aware, but also aware that gender-specific impoverishment in Africa will occur through social marginalisation. The same applies to the position of poor children generally.

A final point is that the synergistic policy formulation of the conventional view of reproduction and poverty – that female education is a powerful route to lower fertility and reduced poverty – is probably not so simple. Within the fertility regimes which still exist in much of Africa, primary education for women is associated with slightly higher fertility. In a sense, this represents the greater ability of more educated women to manage a more 'successful' reproductive life, and perhaps also that primary-educated women are not usually among the marginalised. Female education is, of course, a major policy end in itself; as such it should not be tied to a fertility-reduction end.

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