

Exploring the nexus between economic crisis and family instability among female teachers in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

The study explores family instability as a social problem affecting female teachers due to the economic crisis prevailing in Zimbabwe. The research was designed and conducted within the qualitative paradigm. The methodology involved informal conversational interviews and focus group discussions. The study was conducted with a group of thirty female teachers who were pursuing their master of education studies. The study established that female block release students experience social problems such as family instability as a result of the economic hardships that they find themselves in.

Introduction and Background

The economic meltdown in Zimbabwe started in the early 2000s. This has raised levels of poverty for both women and men. However, according to Haralambos and Holborn (2000) the chances of being in poverty are not equally distributed. Some groups are much more prone to ending up in poverty than others, while the chances relating to particular groups change over time. As such, women who are left with fewer resources with which to manage the home and provide for the family are likely to feel the impact of poverty. In the case of Zimbabwe, poverty has been exacerbated by current economic trends, which have trapped many people especially professionals in a vicious cycle of low income. The middle class, in which teachers belonged to was eroded. Master of Education students, the bulk of whom are teachers are among those people caught up in vicious cycles of poverty. Due to their low incomes, the female students are increasingly depending on self-employment in the informal sector to augment their meager salaries. It should be noted though that male students may have similar problems but the researchers' interest was on female students.

Poverty is likely to cause family instability among families of master of education students who have to cope with the heavy demands of university education, work as teachers and participate in the informal sector. The block release mode of entry is characterized by a packed school holiday program where students attend lectures at the university. It is also characterized by an open learning system where students do their assignments and prepare for semester examinations while at work. Thus, in an environment characterized by economic meltdown and poverty, the female student's study time is taken up by activities aimed at

fighting poverty in the family. It was against this background that this study sought to explore poverty as a socio-economic factor that causes family instability among families of master of education female students. The plight of teachers is brought to the limelight by Raymond Majongwe (People Magazine October, 31, 2008) when he says:

“in the 1980s a teacher could buy a house, in the 1990s a teacher could buy a car, but as things stand today, a teacher is so impoverished he cannot afford to buy even a pair of shoes.”

The above statement serves to show how teachers have become relatively poor. As a result, female students are likely to experience social problems since they have to come to terms with their poverty and at the same time carry out their studies.

Theoretical framework: Conflict Perspective

According to Haralambos and Holborn (2000), from a conflict perspective it is the failure of society to allocate resources and provide opportunities fairly that explains the problems of poverty. Poverty is not held to be the responsibility of those who suffer from it. Instead, such people are seen as victims. According to some conflict theorists, recent studies of poverty have found that those who rely upon state benefits for their income are among the largest groups of the poor (ibid). They further assert that if poverty is defined in relative terms, and the definition that is advanced means that benefit levels do not raise the recipient above the poverty line, then a great deal of poverty can simply be attributed to inadequate benefits. Mingione (1996), a conflict theorist argues that increases in poverty are linked to changes in the world economic system. Byrne (1999) agrees with Mingione that changes in the world economic systems have led to an increase in poverty. Haralambos and Holborn (2013), state that most conflict theorists move beyond explaining why particular individuals and groups are poor in an attempt to relate poverty to the organization of society as a whole. They claim that poverty is rooted in the very structure of society.

From the above discussion, it is clear that master of education female students, who are teachers who rely on state benefits, are among the poor especially at a time when Zimbabwe is experiencing economic hardships. These students, because of poverty, may not be in the right frame of mind to pursue education and are therefore likely to face social problems such as family instability. As a socio-economic factor, how then does poverty cause family instability among these students?

Poverty can be a social malady that may cause family instability. According to Adams (2001), a family is a group of two people or more related by birth, marriage or adoption, who reside together in the same household. The nuclear family, that is, a family made up of husband, wife and children is a universal human social grouping. (Murdock, 1949). Either as the sole prevailing form of the family or as the basic unit from which more complex forms are compounded it exists as a distinct and strongly functional group in every known society (ibid). Haralambos and Holborn (2013) also add that the family has always been regarded as the cornerstone of society. In pre-modern and modern societies alike, it has been seen as the most basic unit of social organization and one, which carries out vital tasks such as socializing children.

Furthermore, according to Adams (2001) Parsons talks of functions of the family namely socialization and stabilization of adult personalities. Under stabilization of adult personalities, the emphasis is on the marriage relationship and the emotional security the couple provides for each other, (Giddens, 1993).

However, recent studies have shown that socio-economic changes seem to be undermining traditional families (ibid). rising divorce rates, cohabitation before marriage, increasing numbers of single parent families and single person households and other trends have all suggested that individuals may be basing their lives less and less around conventional families. Schaefer (2004) agrees with the above assertion when he writes that there is evidence of a decline of the nuclear family due to poverty and such a decline could cause family instability master of education students are likely to be equally affected just as other members of society. For instance, female-headed families also known as matrifocal families have resulted due to poverty. (ibid). Matrifocal families could be seen as a result of nuclear families breaking down rather than being an alternative family form which is valued. Again, master of education female students, who also belong to families, need to be investigated to find out if they are also experiencing the problem of matrifocal families.

Gonzalez, cited by Schaefer (2004) points out that the development of female-headed households may cause family instability. She explains that poverty can contribute to the development of female-headed households and that the female-headed family represents a positive adaptation to the circumstances of poverty. In poverty-ravaged Zimbabwe, matrifocal families are likely to become common. The effects of being in such families, on women in education needed to be examined. The study therefore is focusing on female students because from observation, only small minorities of the lone parent households are headed by men.

Due to poverty husband and wife have to supplement their poor remunerations. This might be achieved through either playing a role in the informal sector or crossing to neighbouring countries to do menial jobs (SARDC, 2000). This may lead to the development of lone parent households. This study sought to examine whether there could be a link between poverty and family instability that pertains master of education female students as they try to supplement their remunerations.

The problem

Pursuing further studies, with a poor remuneration may promote social problems for master of education female students. The students need to raise fees and they are the ones who face shortages at home. While both women and men enjoy autonomy in spending some proportions of household incomes, they have distinctly different spending patterns (SARDC, 2000). Women tend to spend more on dependents, including members of the extended family and replacing food supplies when they run out, men tend to spend more on themselves (ibid).

Objectives of the study

Given the above background, the aim of the study was to examine family instability as a social problem that relates to master of education female students. In this regard the study sought to:

- Explore family instability as a social problem that relates to master of education female students.
- Establish how family instability constrains the education of females.

Methodology

The study adopted the case study research design, which falls under the qualitative paradigm. Yin (2011) defines a case study as an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly defined. The case study straddled exploratory, descriptive, and explanatory to richly describe, explain, assess and evaluate the nexus between economic crisis and family instability.

In-depth interviews and observation were the main research instrument. Informal conversational interviews and focus group interviews were also used to triangulate in-depth interviews. The study focused on all thirty master of education female block release students of the August 2006 intake at a State University in Zimbabwe. In this study, the sample comprised of the whole population which was thirty female students. The participants were selected using a combination of convenient and purposive sampling techniques.

Findings and discussion

To respond to the research objectives, the data was presented in text form supported by tables. This is because the concern was not to quantify or find the number of respondents facing a particular problem, but the real focus of the research was to unearth the link between economic crisis and family instability. This is consistent with the methods used to gather data, which are in-depth interviews and focus group interviews. A total of five focus group interviews were held. Each focus group had an average of six people. In addition informal conversational and observation were done throughout the entire research period.

Family instability

As highlighted by the objectives the study sought to explore family instability as a social problem that relates to master of education female students and establish how family instability constrains the education of females as teachers and as students. Table 1 below summarizes the information gathered using interviews while table 2 shows information obtained through observation.

Table 1 summary of responses related to family instability based on interviews

Response	N	%
The struggle to make ends meet affects both family and studies	18	60
Spouse migrated to neighbouring country	6	20
Lack emotional support	2	6.7
Overburdened by duties	3	10
Suspected double rootedness	1	3.3
Total	N = 30%	100%

Table 2 Summary of responses related to family instability based on observations

Indicators	N	%
Staying as lone parent	9	30
Quarreling with spouse	5	16.7
Tension in the home due to inadequate resources	12	40
Late submission of assignments due to squabbles	4	13.3
Total	N = 30%	100%

The study used the thematic concept of family instability to refer to families in which a husband whose wife is a teacher is forced to live separately because of the downward performance of the country's economy. The term was also used to refer to a family where a husband and wife (who is a teacher) are living together but are experiencing problems because of the poverty prevailing in the country.

The observation, normal conversational and the focus group interviews which comprised of thirty students revealed that master of education female students are experiencing family instability. On answering the question, "In Zimbabwe the poverty datum line is always dropping, does this trend affect your family in anyway?" eighteen of the thirty interview respondents, that is, (60%) confirmed that their families have become unstable. The study observed that in the sociology group alone four out of the six female students were staying as lone parents because their spouses were working outside the country. Together 30% are staying as lone parents. From the various speeches from the respondents, the following speech was quoted:

"My spouse has migrated to a neighboring country to seek better fortunes leaving me to be in charge of the children; I am now the head of the household."

From the statement, the study deduced that the current economic trend has created female-headed households or matrifocal families, 6.7% respondents who are in the same situation as the respondent who has been quoted confirmed this. Interviews further revealed that lone parents lack emotional support (6.7%) On further probing one respondent, admitted:

“The emotional support I get from my spouse when he is around is essential but it is necessary for him to become an economic refugee while I remain with the children because this struggle to cope with insufficient money often leads to arguments.”

Based on such sentiments the study can conclude that some master of education female students have nuclear families that have become unstable. This confirms Giddens’ (1993) statement that recent studies have shown that socio-economic change seemed to be undermining traditional families. Increasing numbers of single parent families and single person households and other trends suggest that individuals may be basing their lives less and less around conventional families, not out of choice but as a result of poverty.

The revealed that poverty has led to female students being overburdened (10%). To confirm this, a respondent had this to say:

“With my husband away, life is no longer the same, I am breastfeeding and in addition to my usual duties, I have to do the duties initially meant for my husband. Though this is difficult, it is better than starving.”

Such findings reveal that indeed there is a decline of the nuclear family mainly due to poverty and such a decline causes family instability. From the respondent’s revelation, the study arrived at the conclusion that while women try to play the roles of both mother and father, children are denied attention and they may grow up lacking the initial socialization that they are supposed to get from the family.

Observation also revealed that inadequate resources created tension in the home (40%) as indicated by the following response:

“Inadequate resources created tensions in my home. I need transport fares to come to Gweru and rent for accommodation during the course of my semester. This usually results in me leaving children under the care of a maid or relative with barely adequate resources.”

Such a response shows that being a lone parent is not easy, more so for block release students. They find it difficult to manage their families and organize family life because of inadequate resources.

From the interviews one respondent (3.3%) whose husband had migrated, cited the problem of lack of trust among couples. On further probing, the study extracted information to the effect that this respondent suspected that her husband fell trap to double rootedness, a situation where male migrants, establish in effect two functioning households. From her utterances, I was interested in the following:

“Let’s be serious ladies. My husband has been gone for two years and has not yet returned. Do you think he has been staying as a bachelor? Knowing him as I do, no I don’t think so. Remember, I used to cook and clean for him, so am I to believe that all of a sudden he has to do these things all by himself? No, I don’t think so.”

From such sentiments, I came to realize that some females whose husbands work outside the country for long periods lack peace of mind. They suspect that their husbands have extra marital affairs and as such, they not only worry about their problems as lone parents but also about their husbands’ existing or imagined double rootedness.

During the interview, 60% of the respondents revealed that the struggle to make ends meet does not only affect family life but it also affects their studies. The findings revealed that female students have to work inside and outside the home in order to contribute to the family's income. Such schedules do not leave them with adequate time for studies, or visiting the internet café. As a result, they fail to produce quality assignments. Thus, in an effort to fight poverty, females end up with too many responsibilities and too little time to access technology.

Observation further found that conflicts and arguments due to poverty (16.7%) constrain the education of female students. An environment characterized by conflict, fights and arguments is not conducive to learning. More observation revealed that some female students submit their assignments after the due date (13.3%) as a result of squabbles at home.

Discussions and interpretation

The study has shown the experiences that female students go through at home, at work and at college due to poverty. In times of poverty female students learn. Not because they are motivated but because once they are equipped with a higher degree they hope to escape from poverty.

Poverty threatens the stability of society by undermining the stability of the family. Parents are forced to be busy in income generating activities, thus leaving less time for socializing their children. Due to poverty, accessing education is difficult for women who come from families where there are conflicts. In order to attain education, such women have an extra push that keeps them going. They are great because they overcome great odds caused by poverty.

In times like these, when many people are affected by the downward economic performance of the country, many females in education have strength and determination that makes them remain in the educational race. As found in the study, poverty causes stress does not deter female students from pursuing their studies, even though stress is a health related problem that would require them to seek medical attention.

Within family set-ups, there are specific roles and expectations for respective family members. Families depend on their specific roles in making life comfortable presumably for every family member. Unfortunately, poverty is forcing most women to carry out their husbands' roles as well. The findings have shown that most women are living as lone parents. Thus, because of these roles, the barrier for females in higher education is so subtle that it is transparent, yet so strong that it prevents them from moving smoothly moving up in the educational ladder.

The findings imply that the teaching profession is currently characterized by frustrated and alienated workers who just hang on to their jobs hoping and waiting for salary reviews. As a result, the education of the pupils in schools is compromised because not only are female master of education students but also their counterparts are equally frustrated. Furthermore, the teaching profession has social expectations, regulations and principles that determine teacher conduct and ethical foundations crucial for its survival. Sadly though, the findings imply that poverty forces female teachers to disregard most ethical considerations and they become deviant. As a result, most female teachers automatically develop survival skills to avoid starvation as well as to acquire higher education.

On the whole, poverty devalues and debases the standard of quality of life among female professionals. The study has shown that graduate teachers would devalue themselves in neighboring countries and work as domestic workers. Thus, block release students have intrinsic motivation that is why they continue to learn. Each of these female students spurs herself on until the goal is reached.

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