

# Poverty, Gender and the African Culture and the Challenges of Globalization

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## Abstract

The African continent is commonly grouped under the main classification, third world or developing nations. It is popularly claimed that this consists basically of most nations that are grappling with the challenge of poverty and gender inequality. The paper addresses the issue of poverty and gender in African culture. It therefore, seeks to rekindle awareness with regards to this phenomenon around Africa with the aim of ameliorating the challenge. The consequence would be right growth in social, economic, political and other areas of life. For any marked growth to take place in Africa there is the need for a paradigm shift with regards to poverty and gender, the paper contends. The paper employed both sociological and historical methods of investigation. It is recommended that African nations should embrace an aggressive advocacy in respect of gender equality in various social, economic and cultural aspects. This can be achieved through equal opportunities to all, without gender discrimination. In addition, the challenge of poverty should be addressed with aggression and passionately too. There is the need to reawaken the right consciousness in the entire African continent with regards to these issues so as to be relevant in the committee of nations.

**Key Words:** Poverty, African culture, Gender, Globalization,

## 1.0 Introduction

It is commonly believed that the African continent is encompassed by myriad of challenges. This ranges from poverty to insecurity and others. Apart from this, the issue of gender discrimination and grave inequality has taken the front burner in most discourse in Africa. The effect of such debate, however, has not yielded the right dividends. This is basically due to the low level of awareness the issue has generated among most people in Africa. To say the least, the issue which ought to be regarded as quite pertinent by all stake holders, is rather treated with levity. The overall attempt in this paper is to summon all towards appreciating the challenge posed by the aforementioned variables. The clarion call in this instance is to create a fresh and an enduring awareness in Africa with regards to the negative consequences of poverty and gender inequality.

The paper would consider the following aspects in an attempt to addressing the issue at stake. This includes: the challenge of poverty in Africa, Gender and poverty in Africa, Poverty, Gender and African culture, Poverty, gender and its implications for globalization. The paper would also address the need for a paradigm shift with regards to the African view concerning the issues at stake. An attempt would be made consequently to advance some recommendations that would serve as modest panaceas in ameliorating the negative effects of poverty and gender challenge in Africa. This would definitely position the African continent among the developed economies of the world, thus achieving an enviable global recognition and the attendant dividends of globalization.

## 1.2 The Challenge of Poverty in Africa

One of the greatest challenges of the third world, to which Africa belongs, is poverty. It is argued that the Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia consist of the largest population of the most critically poor people in the world (Chronic Poverty Research Centre-CPRC, 2002). This position is further corroborated by the United Nations Development Project (UNDP) report on Sub-Saharan Africa. She argued that in Africa, between 1987

and 1998, which is a space of about ten years, the total number of poor people increased from about 217 million to 291 million. This population represented 42% of the total population of Sub-Saharan Africa (UNDP, 2004). This may be why Kolawole and Torimiro (2006) concluded that poverty in the entire African continent and Nigeria in particular, knows no bound and it is palpable in virtually every segment of the society.

The major consequence of the poverty scenario painted earlier on is that most countries in Sub-Saharan Africa may not be able to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDG). These goals were set out by world leaders in the year 2000. They include the following among others: reducing the number of the poor and hungry by half, increasing the access to education and health, reducing child mortality by the year 2015 (The Guardian, July 26, 2002). It is openly acknowledged that most countries in Africa are lagging behind with respect to achieving these goals. It should be noted that even if the goals are fully met by 2015, there will still be about 900 million poor people in Sub-Saharan Africa and Asia (CPRC, 2002). This is due to the fact that the people in these regions cannot meet their basic needs, thus making poverty intractable.

What really is poverty? It is relevant to clarify this concept in order to have a clear comprehension of the word. The World Bank examined two clear dimensions of poverty. First, what the term relative poverty means. According to the World Bank, relative poverty means people who have less money than those living around them. On the other hand, absolute poverty is defined in relationship to people whose income is less than 75pence-1.50 pounce per day. This means 1.25 dollars or 75 pence per day. It further argued that for the absolutely poor, the income for a whole week is less than what someone in U. K on the legal minimum wage (5.93 pounds) earns in one hour. Therefore, poverty encompasses lack of money and basic resources. It is obviously a state of scarcity and lack (Omomia, 2011).

The United Nations, in examining poverty in Africa described it as the lack of basic human needs. It supports its position by declaring that "African nations fall toward the bottom of any list measuring small size economic activity, such as income per capita or GDP per capita.... In 2009, 22 out of the 24 nations identified as having Low Human Development on the United Nation, Human Development Index were in Sub-Saharan Africa (UNDP, 2014). It further argued that the average European earns twenty times what the average African earns.

The Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) added an all-inclusive dimension to the consideration of poverty. It opined that poverty goes beyond the lack of income and productive resources to guaranty sustainable livelihood. She viewed poverty from the social perspective. This meant that the manifestations of poverty should be examined. According to her, they include: hunger and malnutrition, limited access to education and other basic services, social discrimination and exclusion as well as the lack of participation in decision making (DESA, 2014).

One of the basic manifestations of poverty as indicated above is hunger and malnutrition. Its effect is well captured by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). She submitted that "nearly 870 million people of the 7.1 billion people in the world, or one in eight were suffering from chronic undernourishment in 2010-2012. Almost all the hungry people, 852 million, live in developing countries, representing 15 percent of the population of developing countries" (FAO, 2012). It further argued that there are only 16 million undernourished people in developed countries. The challenge so far identified indicates that the Sub Saharan Africa has not witnessed obvious reduction in the population of poor people. For example, China has experienced dramatic reduction on the poverty rate in the last decade, whereas that of Sub Saharan African has continued to grow (Human Rights Facts, 2014).

The menace of poverty, no doubt has placed Africa at the lowest ebb of economic, social, political and technological development. This has further affected her role in global discourse and contribution. On the strength of this, the author would examine some common causes of poverty in Africa, with the view of advancing some modest ways of addressing the challenge.

### **1.2.1 Some common Causes of Poverty in Africa**

It is pertinent to address some common causes of poverty in Africa if the desire to ameliorate the challenge would be a reality. This is quite relevant as we consider the position of the World Bank. She argued that for over the last thirty years there has been a sharp drop in worldwide absolute poverty from 40% to fewer than 20%. However it is disheartening to note that in most African countries the percentage of absolute poverty has not fallen. This means that over 40% of the people in Sub-Saharan Africa live in absolute poverty (World Bank, 2014). Although it is not the intention of the writer to list the causes of poverty in any deliberate chronological order, suffice it to say that corruption stands out clearly as one of the major causes, among others.

- a) **Corruption:** It must be noted that corruption is not limited to Africa. However, it is highly implicated as one of the major causes of poverty in Africa. It is common knowledge that most people in leadership position in Africa encourage bribery and corruption. In most cases this is to benefit themselves and members of their extended families at the expense of the generality of the people. Corruption is commonly claimed to be prevalent both amongst the high and low in Africa, where most people tend to

see it as a way of life without recourse to the attendant consequences. This has continued to encourage poverty as those whose relatives and family members are not in position of authority where they can gain access to the wealth of the nation are left out of the “corruption game.” This, no doubt will continue to encourage corruption. In most cases, those in leadership positions in most African nations prefer to better the lot of their family members at the expense of their nations. This will definitely continue to encourage poverty among the general population.

- b) **Mismanagement of Financial Resources:** This can be examined from the perspective of how grants and borrowed money have been managed by most nations in Africa. Wangwe (2014) posited that due to large debts by African nations little is being spent on social services like education, pension and medical care. The total debts currently owed are far in excess of 321 billion U.S dollars, he averred. In support of this position, Aid to Africa at Risk and Africa’s reforms efforts (2014), submitted that well over 500 billion U.S dollars have been sent to African nations in the form of direct aid. Unfortunately, they argued that the money has not had commensurate long term effect on the generality of the people, thus perpetuating poverty in the region.
- c) **Unstable Governments:** The army has often cashed on this lacuna to ascend to power through military coup. It is clear that due to the lack of strong and stable democratic structures and traditions, the army has often easily taken over the government in most African nations. The military leaders definitely do not have the need for re-election; hence they make themselves rich at the expense of the generality of the populace. It is the position of the writer that stable government and democracy, will, to a reasonable extent, assist in reducing poverty.
- d) **The Rule of Law and Poverty:** There appears to be a positive correlation between the right rule of law and poverty reduction. The large scale corruption prevalent in most African nations could be due to lack of mature legal system. This is premised on the fact that most African nations do not have mature and less partisan legal system that will readily bring perpetrators of corruption to book, their status in the society notwithstanding. In most developed countries, human right laws are brought to bear on any one who runs afoul of the interest of the generality of the people. The same cannot be said of most African nations, where justice is perceived to be abused and compromised, and sometimes gravely perverted.
- e) **Land Use and Ownership:** The mainstay of most African nations is agriculture, and one of the major inputs for agriculture is land. Unfortunately, most African nations do not have the right land registration system. This has adversely affected access to agricultural loan which would have definitely boosted the agricultural potentials of most African nations. According to Southern Africa Overview (2003), this land ownership challenge makes it difficult for those seeking loans to establish legal ownership to the satisfaction of prospective financiers. There are common occurrences in most African nations where developments have been stalled due to family or clan claim to ownership of such lands. Although in Nigeria, the Land Use decree vests land on the government, the implementation of this to its full purpose has not been quite encouraging. Individuals often frustrate such efforts towards some level of social liberalization of land ownership. This definitely will affect the use of land. Consequently, those who depend on agriculture for sustenance would continue to remain at subsistence level and not able to make genuine economic progress. This will definitely impinge on their level of poverty.
- f) **Diseases and Poverty:**  
The correlation between disease and poverty stems from the fact that anyone who is not in good health cannot function optimally, hence unable to overcome poverty. Most of the water- borne diseases in Africa is as a result of consistent water crisis and lack of portable water. On the other hand, diseases such as malaria, tuberculosis, dysentery, tapeworm, polio and others are still highly prevalent in Africa. The prevalence of AIDS in Africa is said to be quite worrisome. It is argued that about 3,000 Africans die on a daily basis of AIDS. A total of 11,000 are infected, with less than one percent of this number actually treated (Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopaedia, 2014).
- g) **Marked Conflicts and Poverty:** It is no gainsaying the fact that conflicts lead to total shut down of most economic activities of the affected nations. Africa is said to be topmost among regions with ranging conflicts. For example nations like Somalia have been going through long standing civil war. Another example is countries like Ethiopia and Eritrea which had conflicts between them. Others like Sierra Leone, Liberia and others have had their fair share of conflicts as they are still struggling to

recover from the devastating repercussions of the war. The present religious insurgency in Nigeria, perpetrated by the *Boko Haram*, notably in the Northern section of the country, has had great economic, political, religious and social effect on the entire nation. It has become difficult to encourage investors to come into the country. They are not confident with respect to their safety, security and economic prosperity should they come to Nigeria. This is quite worrisome as the economic dividends from their presence in the nation have been tactfully jeopardized. Thus the level of poverty continues to soar.

- h) **Inadequate Infrastructures:** There is a dearth of infrastructures in Sub Saharan Africa. The presence of several rivers and fresh water lakes has not in any way led to the presence of portable water in Africa. The roads are in bad shape and this has grossly affected economic life of most nations in Sub Saharan Africa. Alternative means of transport is also ill developed in most African nations. The rail system, sea transport and others have not been fully explored. Where these are prevalent, they are actually inadequate and not fully developed. The lack of these infrastructures have entrenched absolute poverty in Africa. These facilities when well developed would assist trade and overall economic life of African nations.
- i) **Inadequate Power Supply and Poverty:** The important role of power in the development of any nation cannot be over emphasized. It is also common knowledge that most nations in Sub Saharan Africa are still struggling with adequate power supply. This has affected the growth of industries that would have absorbed a sizeable number of the labour force. Adequate power is not available for even cottage industries and other small scale businesses, which would have reduced the level of unemployment, thus reducing poverty in Africa.

The reasons for poverty in Africa are definitely in-exhaustive; the few that have been considered are among others that should be surmounted if any meaningful progress is to be made with regards to eradicating poverty in the African continent. The strength of any strategy for the eradication of poverty in Africa must be built on formidable national policy subscribed to by all as stake holders. There is the need for the right and passionate advocacy by the different nations in Africa which must encompass the citizens. They should be seen as the ultimate recipients of the dividends of such achievements. This will definitely change the consciousness initially held by such African nations, as they now desire to be counted among the committee of nations, and make global impact.

### 1.3 Gender and Poverty in Africa

The consideration of gender and poverty in Africa is borne out of the fact that this variable has been well incriminated in the aspect of poverty in Africa. The attempt in this section would be to elucidate the fact that the female gender is more at risk of poverty in Africa. The ultimate aim would be to solicit a redress of the prevailing situation, thus giving everyone, whether male or female equal opportunity to actualize their God-given potentials and privileges without man-made barriers and inhibitions, which are often encapsulated in morbid discrimination.

The claim of gender inequality with respect to poverty in Africa is captured succinctly by Obiageli Ezekwesili, the World Bank Vice President for the Africa Region. At the conference, "Women and the Changing Global Outlook," held on the 8<sup>th</sup> of May, 2009, organized by the British Embassy in Washington and the National Geographic Society, she declared that in "Africa, poverty has a female face" (Ezekwesili, 2009). She further argued that the global economic crisis would definitely have a greater impact on women. Girls, more than boys will suffer tremendously in the areas of education and infant mortality. Similar position had earlier on been highlighted by Hunter-Gault (2006), who stated that the open secret about poverty in Africa is that it has a woman's face, and its newest companion is HIV/AIDS.

The above concerns are quite agitating with respect to the alarming rate of poverty in Africa and among the women, in particular. The Platform for Action adopted at the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in September 1995 gave credence to this claim. It stressed that, more than one billion people living in the world today, the great majority who are women, live under most unacceptable conditions of poverty, especially in the developing countries (United Nations, 1996). On their parts Buvic, Lycette and McGreevey (1997) argued that women now account for a growing percentage of the world's poor. The publication of the United Nation Development Programme (UNDP) stated that 70% of the world's poor are women (UNDP, 1997), of course most of whom are in Africa.

The gender and poverty distribution in the United States of America (U.S.A) appears to be a far contrast from that of most countries in Africa. According to Carmen, Proctor and Smith (2013), in 2012, the poverty rates by gender in U.S.A were 13.6% for males and 16.3% for females. Apart from this, the gender distribution of people in poverty was, 44% of people in poverty were males, males accounted for 49% of the total population. While 56% of people in poverty were females, females accounted for 51% of the total population. These

statistics are quite instructive for the African continent as she wishes to aggressively address the challenge of poverty in general and female gender poverty in particular.

#### **1.4 African Culture and Poverty**

It is pertinent to clarify the concept, culture, before qualifying it as African. The word culture connotes a general term that encompasses a people's total behaviour and attitude. Put simply, the British Anthropologist, Edward Tylor (Erinsho, 2008), was the first to define the term culture. According to Taylor, culture is the complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, custom and other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society. On his part, Erinsho (2008), defined culture as the way of life of a group of people. This embodies all aspects of life of the people, including their beliefs, style of life, dress, attitude and other unique attitude that are shared by members of the group.

This is also the position expressed by Muyole-Manenji (2010) who defined culture as the sum total of all things that pertain to religion, roots of people, symbols, language, songs, stories, celebration and all expressions of our way of life. It must be noted that Africa has a rich culture that sets her apart. African culture is therefore the totality of the way of life of the African, which reflects his total worldview in most cases. How then is the African culture incriminated in the aspect of poverty, especially poverty and gender in Africa? This is the main concern of this section.

According to Adeniran (2007), since the advent of colonialism in Africa, women have been exposed to all forms of discrimination simply due to their "femaleness." This is premised on the fact that most African nations do not have statutory laws and policies that would address the tide of gender disparity. The African continent is dotted with common practices that are grossly inimical to gender emancipation. For example, early marriages, forced marriages, wife inheritance, widowhood practices, to mention a few. These are common practices in the African culture that would continue to fuel the ember of gender poverty and discrimination. There is also the deliberate entrenchment of gender stereotyping (Haraway, 1991). Here, it is believed that the male child belongs to the man, while the female child belongs to the mother. This sets an initial psychological attitude of discrimination, translated into favouritism, where the male child is given access to education and other good things of life, while the female child becomes the "fetcher of water and firewood." This leaves the female child with no option than to accept what life has offered her. Consequently she may be forced into marriage. This entire process continues to perpetrate the negative spread of gender poverty and discrimination in Africa.

In the African culture, women are often seen as suitable "housekeepers," which meant that they are seen as only capable of being home keepers and not for other career opportunities. This is supported by Mama (1997) who argued that colonization excluded most African women from the formal labour market. This could be said to have entrenched a social engineering and popularisation of the concept of "housewification." This has perpetually limited the woman in most African culture to a stagnant level where she may not or could not have the opportunity to aspire to greater heights.

On his part Omolewa (2002) opined that the colonial government alienated the women folk from easy access to education, primarily due to their manpower need. Could there be any justification by the successful African leaders not to have reversed this position? The answer to this question is seen in the position of Ojo (2002) who opined that female poverty is due to the non-challant emphasis placed on female education in Africa. This is supported by Mamdani (1996) who stated that poverty among the female gender in Africa is due to discrimination in educational opportunities. What is the effect of this scenario on globalization?

#### **1.5 Poverty, Gender, African Culture and Globalization**

It is wrong to subscribe to the view that a nation or continent exists on her own or typically for herself. The dictum, the "world is a global village" is quite instructive at this instance. Globalization can be described as the process of the intensification of economic, political, social and cultural relations across international boundaries (Akindele, 1990). Apart from this, Ohiorhenuan (1998:6) sees it as "principally aimed at the universal homogenization of ideas, culture, values and even lifestyles" as well as the "villagization of the world" (Ibrahim, 2013).

This definitely goes to authenticate the fact that what prevails in one part of the world could have some ripple effects on the other. This includes the devastating effect of poverty prevalent in the African continent. The present poverty situation prevalent in the African continent; definitely have several devastating effects on other parts of the world. If most continents in the world are regarded as sufficient in themselves, it becomes unnecessary to continue to send aids. Most African countries have benefited and are still benefiting from the developed countries with regards to material and capital support.

The aspect of globalization presupposes that most of the nations of the world would live in symbiotic relationship as they share in mutual fraternity. The bulk of responsibility and care should not rest perpetually on only one or few of the partners. But this is not the situation due to the level of poverty in the African continent. To say the least, some African nations live "parasitically" on other developed nations of the world. This trend must be reversed if Africa is to be reckoned with in the committee of nations. She can enhance this position by

embracing a radical paradigm shift. The African continent must overthrow poverty, especially female poverty. This must be addressed discretely and passionately. There is the need for a reversal in the present state of education, health, employment, some cultural positions held by African nations and others. The female gender constitutes a far higher population of the poor in Africa. An aggressive change in the socio-economic status of the female gender in Africa would guaranty this quest.

### 1.6 The Way Forward

It is not enough to continue to rehearse the glaring harm of poverty and gender discrimination in Africa without a deliberate attempt to ameliorating the phenomenon. No doubt poverty has multiple root causes and also manifests in different forms. This has not in any way made it “mystical” or insurmountable. The following outline would capture the essence of addressing gender poverty:

- a) Access to education irrespective of gender.
- b) Women empowerment in respect of skill acquisition and small scale enterprises.
- c) Abhorring early marriage, thus reducing young pregnancy which often puts the girl-child at risk of maternal death.
- d) Equal job opportunity for the female gender as the male counterpart.
- e) Avoiding gender violence, for example wife battering, rape, female circumcision, widowhood ill-treatment and others.
- f) Provision and access to good health. Working assiduously to address the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Africa. It is commonly opined that women are most vulnerable to this disease.
- g) Open access to capital for small scale enterprises for the female gender in particular.
- h) Identify and implement statutory policies that will give equal political opportunities to females.
- i) Legal access to property and family rights. There are some cultures in Africa where the females are not entitled to the property of the progenitor.
- j) Re-addressing some aspect of the African culture, especially those aspects that are inimical to progress for the female gender.

### 1.7 Conclusion

The African continent can successfully address the challenge of poverty if she is determined to overcome the present stereotype of gender discrimination. The consequence is that there would be an overthrow of the contemporary cultural position that had remained inimical to the female gender prosperity. The aspects of the African culture that stands as clog in the wheel of her progress should not be embraced. The continent should rise from her slumber and be determined to make global economic and socio-political contributions. Apart from this, the African continent should disentangle herself from the age-long dependency syndrome, as she addresses the problem of gender inequality.

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