
THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN GENDER EQUALITY, WOMEN EMPOWERMENT AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

This Paper has two aims: (i) to establish the relationship between gender equality, women empowerment and development and (ii) to reveal the gender disparity women struggle with regards to poverty, health, education, economic activity, labor participation as well as political involvement. The theoretical rational rests on the assumption that gender equality and women empowerment are integral to sustainable development as stipulated by the United Nations Millennium Goals and acknowledged by the international community. Attaining development however, entails breaking the poverty cycle that most developing countries are trapped in. It's important to note here however, that although poverty is a common apprehension in developing countries, women make up for the vast majority of those living in extreme poverty signifying palpable hindrance to achieving development. The paper analyzes the apparent gender disparity pertaining to fundamental human rights denied to women, the matter that further intensify the challenges facing them. The findings of this paper reveal evident inequalities in what is accessible to women in terms of health, education, labor opportunities and political participation. The paper concludes that all the preceding diminishes women empowerment prospects which in turn decelerates development and diminishes any exertions wielded by countries to achieve this goal. These conclusions may aid decision-makers in employing sound public policies that endorse gender equality and henceforth accelerate development.

Keywords

Gender Equality, Women Empowerment, Sustainable Development, Extreme Poverty, Human Development, Gender Disparity

JEL Classification

J16, J18, O10, I32, O15, J16

Introduction

Development is a term that has been demarcated in literature by a variety of definitions. While many researchers tend to recognize development from a purely economic prospective, this

paper however views development from a human, social as well as an economic one. The UNDP -in 1995- has introduced the notion of 'human development' indicating that despite full recognition to the significance and necessity of the economic factor in securing decent standard of living to societies and supporting the reduction and -ultimately- the eradication of poverty, the concept of development still needs to exceed the materialistic perspective (Dorlet, 2005).

Women empowerment and endorsing gender equality have been recognized as one of the eight essential Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Furthermore, towards the end of the twentieth century all notions pertaining to development where women are involved have been merged into what is now known as gender and development (GAD) approach (Dorlet, 2005), thus giving full recognition to the role of women in achieving development.

This paper aims to portray the inevitable relationship between gender equality, women empowerment and development. The paper also aims to shed light on the evident disparity women suffer from in accessing basic human and civil needs and the impact of this deprivation on the achievement of the desired developmental goals. To attain the stated objectives the paper commences with a review of the literature illustrating the intertwined relationship between improving gender equality, endorsing women empowerment and accelerating development. In this respect academic literature done by prominent researchers in the field as well as reports released by international organizations have been investigated to depict the undisputable fact that development hinges on the capacity to endorse gender equality and women empowerment.

The paper, thereafter, proceeds to show how the unmistakable gender disparity poses apparent detriment to women, the matter that diminish not only their chances in escaping the poverty cycle but extends the same privation to their children as well. This is displayed through presenting the inequality and injustice women suffer with respect to poverty, health, education, labor participation and political involvement.

The paper concludes that macro-economic policies, especially in developing countries, are still male biased and that policy makers in these countries need to adopt gender sensitive strategies in order to empower women to bring them up to their potential productivity, and therefore, instate sustainable development.

The Relationship between Gender Equality, Women Empowerment and Development: An Overview

Gender equality – which is the state of equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities extended to both men and women - is a matter of utmost importance, especially because of how it intertwines with attaining Sustainable Development Goals. It is essential to realize that by continuing to undermine women and denying them essential tools for increasing their productivity we are forgoing potential workforce that can add to human capital, therefore, diminishing economic growth and hence development. Empowering women and incorporating them as vital members and partakers in all realms is not a luxury anymore but rather a necessity. Regrettably, gender inequality remains to be a fundamental barrier hindering the accomplishment of this goal.

Subsequent to its importance, an immense body of literature is devoted to topics pertaining to gender equality, particularly in developing countries. The Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women in 1979 stipulated that, “the full and complete development of a country, the welfare of the world and the cause of peace require the maximum participation of women on equal terms with men in all fields.” However, the importance of gender equality in attaining women empowerment -and hence development- can only be explained in a socio-cultural as well as political and economic context. Gender injustice practiced in a given society becomes the status quo or 'natural' as Kabeer label it. Kabeer in 2001 expands on this point – previously stated by Bourdieu in 1977 as the theory of 'doxa',

claiming that traditions, norms, and culture are often taken for granted to the extent of becoming ‘naturalized’. Consequently, women tend to adopt and cope with their inferior status and start perceiving themselves as subordinate individuals of lesser worth. Subsequently, they lose sight of their human as well as civil rights leading them to making ‘choices’ that further assert their subsidiary standing in the society (Malhotra and Schuler, 2005).

The ‘feminist empowerment’ model places extensive importance on gender equality and considers gender subservience to be an intricate, multifaceted, deeply rooted problem that adversely impacts all aspects of a woman’s existence. The model is, therefore, founded on the premise of equity, equality and empowerment (Dorlet, 2005). Following the same perspective, Mayoux -in 2002- accentuates the importance of identifying empowerment in relation to a ‘gender and development’ approach (Dorlet, 2005). As such gender equality is deemed essential for attaining women empowerment which is acknowledged as a fundamental prerequisite in the development process.

It is, therefore, essential for women to be regarded and addressed as equal citizens with all consequent rights and responsibilities. Meaning that, both men and women should enjoy equal rights with regards to health, education, nutrition, access to economic resources, political participation, and safety from all forms of violence and oppression. Attaining of gender equality entails improvements in all these aspects, ending all types of discrimination against women and securing their access to all the mentioned essential human and civil rights (Action Aid UK and Christian Aid, 2015).

Gender disparity is the predisposition where the sex of a person postulates different rights and opportunities in life for women as opposed to men. The connection between gender disparity and development can be described using different levels of associations of gender disparity in poverty, in health, in education, in economic activity and labor participation, and in political participation. The following section of the paper addresses the degree of inequality pertaining to the mentioned associations.

The structure of the paper should be clear, and well organized. Titles and subtitles should be placed in logical sequence. Please make use of accepted terminology in your field, provide a detailed description of methodology, clearly state your results and discuss the implications of your findings.

Gender Disparity and Poverty

The World Bank defines “extreme poverty” quantitatively as living on less than \$1.90 per person per day (2016). This is while the USAID defines extreme poverty as “the inability to meet basic consumption needs on a sustainable basis. People who live in extreme poverty lack both income and assets and typically suffer from interrelated chronic deprivations, including hunger and malnutrition, poor health, limited education, and marginalization or exclusion” (2015).

Poverty reduction entails the exertions of those involved to evade the poverty cycle, the matter that dictates developing their skills in order to increase their productivity and involvement in their societies, hence uplifting their potential in having a better life (Dorlet, 2005).

Social discrimination against women as well as unequal access to economic resources puts women in distress, that’s to say while both men and women suffer from the adversities of poverty evidence shows that women tend to be increasingly jeopardized by it. Consequently, it is alleged that women presently make up for two thirds of the 1.4 billion people living in extreme poverty and accounting for 60% of the 572 million poor workers in the world (Action Aid UK and Christian Aid, 2015). This is as their socio-economic vulnerability makes them more apt to be victims of economic hardships of inflation, unemployment and unequal income distribution. Not to mention that they are the ones who struggle the most in conflict zones and humanitarian crises.

The Gender Development Index (GDI) is the index showing the ratio of female to male HDI (Human Development Index) and it categorizes countries into five groups based on the degree of absolute divergence from gender equality in HDI. Group 1 encompasses countries with the highest gender equality in HDI accomplishments while Group 5 comprises countries with the lowest gender equality with regards to HDI achievements. Statistics prove that the more the deviation from gender equality the highest the manifestation of poverty -as measured by the national per capita income- in general and among women in particular. A report by the UNDP shows that countries in Group 5 exhibit evidently lower per capita income (measured in 2011 PPP \$) than those in Group 1 or 2. To exemplify, Afghanistan in Group 5 with a GDI of 0.723 has registered per capita income of 1,102 for women in 2018. This is while El Salvador in Group 2 with a GDI of 0.969 has registered 5,234 per capita income for women during the same year (2019). Also, worthy of noting is the noticeable variance between women per capita and that of men in countries with low GDI. In Namibia – Group 1 with GDI value 1.009- shows a per capita income of 8,917 for women and 10,497 for men, displaying a reasonable variance between both. This is while during the same year, in Yemen - Group 5 with GDI value 0.458 – women have registered 168 per capita income in 2018 compared to men who have registered 2,679 for the same year (UNDP, 2019). This proves that although poverty is a common struggle in developing countries, women bear the biggest burden of it. The fact that women are more subject to extreme poverty is explained by the hardship acquired from unpaid and low paid work, the fewer assets and resources they possess the gender-based violence they are subject to and the high possibility of being coerced in early marriage without reaching a proper education level. All the previous aspects deter women from being able to reach their full productive potential and adequately participating in their countries' economy, the matter that keeps them trapped in a cycle of extreme poverty. It is worth noting here that although gender disparity is evident in almost every part of the world it is definitely more acute in developing countries, evidence shows that more developed societies struggle less with gender inequalities. The criteria used for reaching this conclusion include reproductive health, educational level, economic wellbeing and political participation, (USAID, 2015).

Data from different countries proof that women make better decisions -when managing the little income under their control- in attending to matters pertaining to childcare, enhancing family nutrition, provision of healthcare as well as spending on education. In Kenya, a study in 2014 study has established absence of a woman in the household caused financial instability in the family, loss of crops and agricultural productivity (USAID, 2015). Research also indicates that increasing women participation in the labor force leads to rapid economic growth and therefore granting countries a better opportunity in escaping the poverty cycle (USAID 2015). It is –therefore- unrealistic to eradicate extreme poverty –one of the main goals of development- without addressing gender equality.

Gender Disparity in Health

Health is a key factor in women wellbeing in specific and in achieving development goals in general, yet health policies rarely take in consideration gender issues. Particularly in developing countries women have diminished to no control over their healthcare provision. This is as they are usually unable to travel alone to access remote health services, not to mention their lack of possession of needed financial resources to pay for the healthcare they need. The situation is further intensified when girls or young women are denied healthcare by public health facilities without parental or spousal approval, which makes private health providers their only resort resulting –therefore- in extra costs that are usually not afforded by many. Cost –however- is not the only matter impacting women health, detrimental norms and traditions in many cultures - such as female genital mutilation and coerced early marriage- also have dire consequences on women's health in developing countries.

Additionally, women suffering extreme poverty usually have limited control over their reproductive health, which is a by-product of lack of proper education again resulting from poverty. Early childbearing, lesser intervals between child births and unplanned pregnancies adversely affect women health and lessen their chances in finishing their education or having a paid job. As such the extreme poverty cycle becomes exceedingly difficult to break since higher fertility means less spending on health and education per child. Higher fertility –on a national level- has also been related to less investment by governments on infrastructure and public services (USAID, 2015), which by all means hinders economic growth and development.

In 2010 a research in Bangladesh illustrated that an infant with a deceased mother has an eight-time higher risk of dying in his first year compared to an infant with a living healthy mother. Also, another research in Kenya –in 2014- found that children with deceased mothers are more likely to drop out of schools as well as suffer from financial volatility (USAID, 2015). Therefore, although preserving the life of a mother is enough of a goal in itself, it's also crucial to consider the shattering impact it has on the well-being of her children, the economic security of her family and the general prosperity of her community. Healthier women are naturally more productive as they are able to seek formal employment and hence add to the wealth of their families and the society in general. This is as well as being more equipped to take care of the health of their families and the education of their kids, therefore more apt to assume their role in supporting the economic growth and development of their societies.

Gender Disparity in Education

In spite of the remarkable increase in the literacy rates through generations, statistics still show a gap between men and women literacy rates. The UNESCO Institute for statistics declared that out of the 750 million adults that are still illiterate two-thirds are women. Notwithstanding the improvement in gender inequality with regards to youth literacy rates, it still persists in one out of five countries – as illustrated by the atlas. Research done in 43 countries, mostly positioned Northern Africa and Western Asia, Southern Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, attests that young women between the age of 15 to 24 years still lag behind men –in the same category of age- with respect to fundamental reading and writing skills (UNESCO, 2018). Research - in 2011- has shown that amid 'low-income countries' only a humble 20% has attained gender equality in the primary stage of education, 10% in the lower secondary, and 8% in the upper secondary. The disparity also increases as the poverty increases; in some of these countries nine out of ten women have been found not have had the opportunity to finish their primary education (USAID, 2015). These concerning figures show how much work still needs to be done in order to fulfill the Sustainable Development Goals pertaining to the right of education to all.

That is to say, even though the enrollment ratios of girls in primary schools, it remains obvious that women still struggle with persistent encounters hindering them from attaining the proper education. Examples of these struggles are extreme poverty, discrimination, gender-based violence, forced early marriages and consequent early pregnancies (Action Aid UK and Christian Aid, 2015). However, worst of all is the perceived worthlessness associated with girls' education. The lack of foreseen future employment opportunities for women makes parents less willing to invest in their girls' education and more willing to divert this investment to their male siblings, especially in households suffering from extreme poverty.

There is a tendency to place women in 'gender stereotyped' learning and training opportunities (Kabeer, 2012). Needless to say, if women are to assume their role in the society in general and the economy in particular efforts need to go beyond primary or basic education. This is as secondary to high education as well as proper training positively correlates with access to job opportunities and participation in the formal labor market. In sub-Saharan Africa

- a region characterized by extreme poverty- men's income average twice as much as women's, yet education has been found to help bridge this gap. Globally, for every year of education women's paid labor remunerations increased by 11% for primary schooling, 9% for secondary schooling and 17% for high education. These figures show a substantial upsurge in developing countries, for example in women with high education earn 95% than women with modest education (USAID, 2015). The returns on women education exceed the simple financial figures, this is as the UNESCO –in its 2014 report on education- has claimed that children with mothers who have completed secondary education have twice as much probability to live past the age of five, thus cutting early childhood mortality by half (USAID, 2015), signifying another milestone along the road of achieving development.

Gender Disparity in Economic Activity and Labor Participation

Despite the extensive arguments advocating women as a vital labor resource in enhancing economic growth and development, women participation in economic activity is still subdued relative to men. Collier specifies four distinctive aspects -hinging on 'social conventions'- that restrain women from properly participating in economic activity. First is the existing discernment that extends beyond the household to the labor market and access to credit and funding. Second is the fact that 'role models' in economic and production activity tend to be highly 'gender-specific'. Meaning that boys tend to follow the example of men preceding them while girls feel inclined to follow in the footsteps of other women. Consequently, when a new economic opportunity emerges if it is assumed by a man it will automatically, thereafter, be readily available to men rather than women. Third is the distribution of responsibilities and compulsions within the household that falls primarily on the shoulders of women that make them reluctant to surge their burden by more labor outside their domicile. And lastly -and foremost demanding- is the duty of reproduction that is the entire responsibility of women with what it entails in terms of time, physical and mental health strain on them (Collier, 1989:8, cited in Miller and Rasavi, 1995).

Palmer builds on the verdicts of Collier and takes the notion of reproduction burden way further as he labels it a 'reproduction tax' on women labor that they have to submit prior to engaging in any other labor activity. In this sense the 'reproduction tax' levied on women not only limits the time at their disposal to participate in economic activity but also confines their choice solely to work opportunities suitable to their household obligations. Evidently, the economic consequent is misallocating a valuable resource exemplified in the forgone opportunity of women productivity, which is a distortion to the market forces leading to extensive economic inefficiency (Palmer, 1991:163 cited in Miller and Rasavi, 1995). Macro-economic policies -thereafter- have been criticized by many researchers for its male bias, Elson calls on policy makers to grant some attention to 'human development aggregates' instead of just "considering the monetary aggregates of productive economy and ignoring the human resource aggregates of the reproductive economy (Elson, 1993, cited in Miller and Rasavi, 1995, P.27).

For instance, in Egypt, the IMF stipulates that if the female contribution in the labor force is elevated to the same level of the male participation rate in addition to granting them proper access to employment opportunities, this would result into an increase of up to 34% in the GDP of the country (USAID, 2017). Regrettably, however, women participation in economic activity in Egypt hovers around 23% -compared to 79.1% for men- which is almost half as much as the world's average for women participation in economic activity registering 53% (ILO, 2018).

Gender Disparity in Political Participation

Globally, women participation in political life – as measured by the percentage of women seats in parliaments- has registered a humble 21.9% in 2014 (Action Aid UK and Christian Aid, 2015). The figure indicates the lack of proper inclusion of women in formal as well as informal decision making at all levels, whether at the household, local community, or national government. Obstacles to women’s political participation are deep rooted in the culture of most countries. Even in cases where women are represented, the adverse stereotypes and negative sentiments relating to their leadership skills, deters their active involvement in decision making on an equal standing with their male peers.

Moreover, when the previous is coupled with violence against women the situation worsens, it is predicted that 35% of women will face some form of violence either domestically or otherwise, in their lifetime (Action Aid UK and Christian Aid, 2015). Violence – or even the fear of it- in itself is key hurdle in the way of women empowerment. This is as it averts women from attaining other basic human rights, including freedom of choice, education, involvement in social and economic life and ultimately participating in any form of decision making relating to their lives or to others. Political participation is the hope that women acquire a voice capable of influencing the legal framework and hence, addressing their problems. This is as it has been proven beyond doubt that women representation even at the level of local government can initiate different outcomes. For instance, in India data shows that the number of portable water projects were 62% higher in regions with ‘women-led’ councils compared to those led by men. Also, in Norway there has been a manifested positive correlation between the representation of women in community councils and the improvement of child-care coverage (UN Women, 2019).

Regrettably, a report by UN Women -in 2019- indicates that only 24.3% of parliamentarians world-wide are women as compared to 11.3% in 1995 signifying extremely slow progression. Data also reveals that as of June 2019 only 11 women are holding a Head of State position and only 12 are holding a Head of government position. This is while a more distressing statistics signifies the presence of 27 countries with less than 10% women representation, and 3 countries displaying no women representation at all. Moreover, only 20.7% -in January 2019- were found to be holding ministerial positions and were mostly confined to five portfolios, namely, Social Affairs; Family; Environment; Employment; and Trade. (UN Women, 2019).

Conclusions

Poverty reduction entails the exertions of those involved to evade the poverty cycle, the matter that dictates developing their skills in order to improve their chances, increase their productivity and involvement in their societies, hence uplifting their potential in having a better life (Dorlet, 2005). Securing equal rights to health, education and job opportunities is not only a just cause in itself but also an investment that promotes economic prosperity when the productive capacity of women is utilized up to its potential.

Statistics have proven -time after time- in renowned literature that increasing women participation in the labor force leads to rapid economic growth and therefore granting countries a better opportunity in escaping the poverty cycle. Healthier, better educated women are naturally more productive and more equipped to take care of the health of their families and the education of their kids. And that proper political participation is indispensable for women to acquire a voice capable of inducing the legal framework and hence, tackling their problems. Therefore, gender equality is an essential prerequisite for escaping the poverty cycle the matter that is at the core of achieving development in any society.

Despite all of the mentioned beforehand, macro-economic policies -as attested by numerous prominent researches- remain biased in a way that favors men at the detriment of women. The result of which is a continued lower female productivity -compared to their potential- and

hence diminished development achievements compared to the desired. To alter this situation, policy makers, have to adopt gender sensitive strategies that acknowledge the palpable connection between gender equality, women empowerment and sustainable development.

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