

Closing the Gap : Combating Africa's Inequalities

SHARON SONGAMLA

Ph.D. Student

University of Delhi, Delhi (India)

ABSTRACT

In examining the pattern of Africa's economic scenarios, one saw unequal distribution in terms of accessing resources and ownership of assets, land in particular. Unequal distribution of certain resources is one of the most important forms of economic inequality between men and women and huge consequences for women as a social and political actor. Gender disparities is considered one of the causal factor that contributes to food insecurity in the continent. Women are culturally perceived as having lesser value in terms of productivity and efficiency and rarely given much recognition in spite of their substantial labour contribution in agriculture and other sectors. Bridging the inequality gap is widely recognized around the world as a prerequisite in improving women's political standing as well as ensuring food security. Education is a prerequisite for the simple reason to improve gender balance and income and to acquire much needed human resources. Continent is strive to ensure food security which is the key to fast-track towards attaining self-sufficient economy.

Key Words : Inequality, Gender balance, Wealth, Poverty, Income, Livelihood, Education

INTRODUCTION

After decades of political unrest and military confrontation associated with economic decline and social instability, the continent is now experiencing a great deal of political space and stability with new visions and possibilities. One saw a shift towards greater political liberalization, beginning from 1990s initially with the independence of Namibia and later on the end of South Africa's apartheid regime in 1994. The changes that took place especially in the post 1990s gave way to emergence of a number of developmental mechanisms which allows the continent to exposed to change and to adapt to changing opportunities. Consequently, some of the countries experienced transitional process primarily in regard to gender norms on the basis of quotas, gender equality, violence against women, property ownerships and land rights, girls education and other such related provisions.

With many years of intense advocacy on women's rights, eventually, the continent had led the way to the

trend that specified for gender equality. The UN World Conference on women held in Beijing in 1995, on empowerment and advancement of women, fosters on gender mainstream in all policies and programs. This immensely enhances women's status in women's political standing in the society and this types of changes brings greater possible spectrum in many other spheres. As a result, women were exposed to change and come forward to exercise powers, and formed support systems to strengthen themselves to become a prominent actors and leaders. These sought to broaden their interests in national and international point of view and gave way to bring them into the mainstream in regional and international agenda. As such, the number of women in parliament has doubled globally in addition to that, the continent also able to produce women's top performers. "Africa become one of the highest representation of women in parliaments in the world" (Tripps, 2015).

In Africa, it is evident that gender norms were mediated by regional bodies such as African Union (AU) and more importantly organizations such as SADC and

other economic community. The SADC's protocol which was adopted by Heads of state at the 2008 summit, set 28 targets for achieving gender equality 2015. However, despite such dramatic efforts, in present trends it appears that gender mainstreaming is still not a reality in such dynamic countries.

Similarly, recent studies on gender equality shows that half of the population in sub-Saharan Africa is living in extreme poverty on less than 1 US dollar per day and inequalities are higher than in other developing countries. Despite the progress made by the increasing number of African countries towards stability and reforms since early 1990s, the continent's overall growth performance remains inadequate. Poverty in developing countries are mainly caused by low income, low assets, lack of opportunities (absence of information and knowledge) and social exclusion. Increasing gender gap give rise to greater poverty especially among women in developing world. The incidence of poverty, and its depth and magnitude is particularly more pronounced in SSA countries with significant rural-urban gender differences. After the intense advocacy for women's rights in addition to being the 20 year milestone after the Beijing conference, there is still palpable feeling of slow pace of progress in the context of gender equality.

Studies shows that quality education is key to social mobility and can thus help reduce poverty in developing world. It has been widely argued that most African's education and training programs suffers from low quality and learning systems as well as inequalities at all levels despite provisions being made in primary school enrollments. Consequently, only a few countries with better facilities especially in the metropolitan cities has developed while, leaving behind the ever increasing large section of poor in rural areas.

The effects of climate change in Africa has been constricting productivity in agriculture sector that are critical for economic growth. The continent is familiar with the incidence of civil war, such situations renders agriculture unproductive by scaring away investments possibilities that would otherwise help boost economic development and generates employment opportunities.

Gaining economic power is seen as a major driver for women to exert control on their daily lives outside their homes and communities. Women have been manage to obtain minimum gains from political and economic climate and this gains has been crucial for advancing their status quo. The same is true in terms of initiatives

such as in corporate world, many African women claim to be equal opportunity employers and demand to implement empowerment strategy to allow people to recognize their contribution. Recent study indicates that women serving on company boards sharpen the continent's competitive edge and make inclusive growth a reality. African women are leading a way forward to promote more representation in political arena.

Bridging Gender Gap: A Milestone for African Women:

The economic trends in sub-Saharan Africa remains far behind to those of developed countries. Indeed, the period beginning from eighties through nineties the pattern of economic development was one of sluggish progress. The period was considered as a loss decade for the continent probably due to varying factors attributes to poor economic performance, the devastating effects of HIV/AIDS and the pervasive impact of armed conflicts in the region. The world Bank estimates that "civil war in African country lowers its GDP per capita by 2.2 percentage points annually" (World Bank, 2000).

Situations of conflicts and war within and between the states often amounts to destruction of social and cultural institutions. SADC (Southern African Development Cooperation) a regional body, has promulgated a protocol on Gender and Development for the promotion of women's access to and control over productive resources. In addition to that, most of the African countries had adopted some form of affirmative action program to increase women's access to political positions and other platforms to influence local and national bodies. Similarly "women in Development and Gender and Development have also been set up to mainstream gender into development policy at the sectorial level" (Mbilinyi, 2002). Such programs needs to be emphasized and designed to benefit women in particular and the extent of such policies needs to be implement quickly to tract progress in order to achieve targeted goals.

Exclusion of certain social groups of people are considered to be the factor that attributes to gender inequality in the region. Cultural attitude of the rural people, has further aggravated women's vulnerability and insecurity not only within the household but also outside of her homes, in their work place, and in other community. Not surprisingly, one saw prevalence of certain practices and traditions deeply rooted in a form of restrictions which

sometimes becomes an issue of exercising certain freedoms and capability particularly to women.

It may be stated that, past efforts on gender regimes have led to the creation of the so-called marginalization and vulnerability towards women due to its minimal representation in traditional authorities. For example, Doss has argued that gender analysis and agricultural development assistance that target only women heads of households, often overlook the vast majority of women who reside in male-headed households. In some countries, despite women being the majority of producers in subsistence agriculture, government institutions and resources targeted the elite farmers were of little benefit to women. It is also seen in some countries despite legislations and tenure policies for the subsistence farmers, women were often placed in disadvantaged position. Most of the time they were generally excluded from agricultural cooperatives as a membership. It is also found that women's needs and responsibilities were not given adequate attention in development strategies and programs.

The 2014 Millennium Development Goals by United Nations reported that on the path towards achieving the MDGs, some 33 million children in sub-Saharan Africa were out of school. There is no doubt that the concerted global efforts to universal education has narrowed down gender gap to some extent. However, in Africa one can still see the debilitating situation of education system caused by extreme poverty and prevalence of certain cultural traditions rooted in the minds of the people which is the main obstacles hindering girls education in the continent. In rural areas, the households driven by lack of resources had to send their boys to school while girls are confined at home to do household chores with the notion that doing such activities are sufficient for girls. "Women are more vulnerable to chronic poverty because of gender inequalities in the distribution of income, access to productive inputs such as credit, command over property or control over earned income as well as gender biases in labor markets" (UNDP, 2001).

Hence, the adoption of national women's agenda becomes critically important step in exercising women's needs and potentials. As UNECA, clearly pointed out that "the solution to overcome poverty, hunger and chronic food shortage in Africa should be focussed on economic empowerment of women, especially on the rural women" (UNECA, 1996).

It is noticed from other studies that some countries

in southern Africa such as, Morocco, Zimbabwe and Namibia, women's cooperatives have set up representation in their rural communities which becomes increasingly important in addressing their needs. "Women's representation is highest in Namibia, in the Ministry of Lands, Resettlement and Rehabilitation and in the Ministry of Regional and local Government and Housing, with 22 per cent and 25 per cent women decision-makers respectively" (United Nations, FAO, 1995). Other studies shows that, in countries like Zimbabwe, women participated less than ten per cent in districts councils. Most women in SSA make a constant trade-off in allocating labor time in productive resources with their domestic roles. Lesser degree of women's representation in traditional bodies and local power and provincial are due to those major factors hindering them.

One can pointed out that, increased female participation has a major impact on policies in regard to women's issues and concerns. Undoubtedly, the trends in female participation in agriculture would reflect the educational status of rural women. As it is seen that, those women farmers having education skills are first in adopting new inputs for their farming activities such as —seeds, fertilizers and modern equipments. Women involvement in agriculture is on the increasing rate, and so, proper financial support, accessing modern inputs and more available of farm land is necessary through appropriate regulations.

A study on agricultural productivity in Kenya, find that, "women's empowerment leads to increased maize productivity with the greatest gains derived from increases in women's participation in decision-making on agricultural production" (Diirro *et al.*, 2019). The findings further offer some encouragement with respect to the effectiveness of policies and strategic interventions aimed at stimulating increased agricultural productivity through women's empowerment.

Subsistence farmers inhabited in a villages with varying degree of community and social groups may help women to develop stronger social networks, which might in turn realize their potential to be more decisive in group associations— business associations, small credit groups, civil societies, and marketing groups etc. At the same time improve in human capital would meant women's higher bargaining capacity within the community. Their is a considerable potential for increasing the role and participation of women in agricultural research and extension service. "Women work as unpaid family

laborers, self-employed producers, farm and non-farm employees, entrepreneurs, traders and providers of services, and technology researchers and developers” (Hill, 2011).

Besides, gender equality in terms of education appears to be still far from being achieved in the continent. Study shows that drop out rates are high and the percentage of girls in secondary education remains low in comparison to boys although the rate differs between different countries. Policy makers have argued that the chances of teenage girls drop out of school and fails to complete full high quality education continues at high rate mainly due to socio-cultural factors such as lack of support from parents, cost of education, not valuing girls education but encourage early marriage and other factors like early pregnancies, rape at the hands of male counterparts and long distances from home. Recent UNESCO report on gender and development pointed out that lack of education diminishes women’s ability to take the opportunities to develop long term personal initiatives.

While, conflicts in countries like Mozambique, Sierra Leone, Burundi, Rwanda for example, have impacted education systems and causes detrimental to the people. It is revealed that schools and institutions have been either destroyed or closed down during civil unrest and war and conflict. Such jeopardized educational systems experienced in this typical countries could be another reason why school leavers, or graduates abandoned schools and preferred to stay in the towns/cities. “This handicap also reduces the scope for their involvement in decision making within the family, community and nation” (UNESCO, 2017).

Many African leaders are keenly aware of the imbalances and the cost of improving educational outcomes to the community. Experts have claimed that their is an education crisis virtually everywhere in the continent. Consequently, it appears that the educational opportunities in Africa are neither equitably distributed among different regions in the society and some sections of the populations are not evenly utilized. Studies shows that even if, sub-Saharan Africa’s enrollment ratio in primary and secondary schools may be improved but gender imbalances are still high.

Recent available data shows that, female and male managed plots experienced significant improvements in productivity when women were more empowered. This proves that, to enhance agriculture development strategy requires integrating women’s empowerment into existing

programs mainly focussing on equitable accumulation of resources and participating in community programs and services. Women lack access to capital and resources, and so, their decisions about their growing crops are limited.

Despite the tremendous expansion that followed after independence in Africa, weak education system has always been a causal problem for the continent. Education unquestionably plays a paramount role in economic development which contributes to human welfare and thereby enhancing individual livelihood prospects. Efforts on early educating girls had multiple benefits, possessing greater advantage to play diversified roles. For instance, in South Africa one saw the trends where women already had enjoyed higher levels of education had played historically leadership roles. Education serves as a force for socialization, training for human capital including literacy, numeracy, life skills causing to be more efficient thereby enhances productivity and improved income and thus, contributing overall economic growth. The failure to adopt education system in Africa during colonial and post colonial times causes imbalances which brought a serious consequences in its economic developmental prospects.

Many poor farmers in southern Africa, lacks education and monitoring and extensions programs and training especially women. With their several household responsibilities, has locked them from achieving their desired goals. Wakhungu argues that “when emerging economies take a hard hit in times of economic downturn, the answer for the rural poor is to remove girls from school so they can assist in household chores, farming, raising the children, or to marry them early to decrease the burden of providing for large families” (Wakhungu, 2010).

Therefore, investment in education and human development are key to success. Understandably, improving human development comes by way of schooling. When people are educated they become more aware of the opportunities that exists outside their immediate environment and helps improve productivity by learning new skills and perfecting old ones thus makes better choices to led a quality life. Completing education helps to lay the foundation for building a skilled and better educated workforce. It has been widely argued that greater equality between women and men contributes to reduction in poverty, generates more income and overall economic development. Yet, one saw pervasive

inequalities exists between women and men in the continent. In Africa women constitute a majority of the poor in the region as a result of their limited access to and control over productive resources such as land, livestock, access to credit and modern technology. In addition, women have limited access to adequate health facilities, and employment and are over represented in the informal sector where returns are extremely low and unreliable. It also evident that there are strong and mutually reinforcing links between expanding women's capabilities and enhancing food security in the continent.

Closing the gender divide could boost agricultural output in developing countries and reduce the number of under nourished people not just in Africa but also to the rest of the developing world. Society as a whole, through broad-based national coalitions has a role in prioritizing the empowerment of women by increasing human capital, efficiencies and productivity to strengthens their bargaining power. It may be state that, empowering women enhances their status including greater control over resources—land, livestock, labour, education, financial, health care, skill development, information on markets, all these variables in turn positively impact level of production. Many international development programs, perceived women's empowerment as a key factor in closing this gender gaps. With the launched of United Nations MDGs, many African nations took an important step in the right direction and committed to work towards the development goals of achieving universal primary education. Recent studies also shows that many countries in the region including, Cote d'Ivoire, Mauritius and Rwanda have registered remarkable economic performance over the past decades, and has lifted millions out of extreme poverty and making schooling and health care available to larger shares of their populations. According to the report on African State of Education “the African region has experienced an impressive increase in the number of students enrolled in primary schools. Between 1990 to 2012 the number of children enrolled in primary schools are more than doubled” (The Africa-America Institute, 2015)

Africa Grabbles with Wealth Disparity:

Economies of African countries are at different stages of development. Differing significantly in terms of their relative sizes, ranging from countries such as Malawi, which figures among the poorest states to countries like South Africa and Mauritius, a stable and

prospering middle income country. These differences attributes to a number of factors— diverse factor endowments, different geographical land sizes, and routes to international trade as some are land locked. Consequently, output appears to be extremely uneven, reflecting mainly differences in resource endowment and geographical sizes of different regions. The economic performance as a whole is found to be extremely fragile and vulnerable to climate change and adverse external disasters. In addition to having a small manufacturing sector, African economies lacks the ability to produce a diversified range of manufactured products.

Apparently, many of them are producing agricultural-based commodities with similar range of products in large-scale and unable to produce differentiated products. Tangible and salient factors such as marked deterioration in living conditions, especially during a period of high expectations are more likely to produce discontent to the continent which overtime turned out into political violence. Such situations of violence are fairly regular and remains pervasive in the continent. In addition, stagnation and decline in incomes magnify the rate of relative deprivation. Similarly, social disruption and political instability further undermines economic activity and spreading hunger and fueling refuge flows.

There is also evidence of political tensions that surfaced in southern Africa during nineties accompanied by a conflict, together with the continuing civil war which brings significant implications to southern African states. While political instability exists in parts of the region, causing continuing risk and political divisions which undermines and makes fragile in growth process. It has also been argued that colonial legacy have been cited among the conditions not favoring African economic growth but entrenched inequalities, segregation, colonialism and apartheid. Unquestionably, the exploitative nature of the European colonizers embedded in African sub-continent led to marginalization and brought about negative implications which creates hostility in the growth process.

It has been widely argued that colonial discrimination, associated with poor governmental policies attributes to inequality in the continent and thereby contributes to increasing regional conflict. Affluent classes and particular communities are more advantageous in accessing to infrastructure, and entrepreneurial portfolios. They possess superior education and training and better employment prospects while, disproportionate number of

social groups have lesser share in these mechanisms which causes huge differences in the distribution of assets and opportunities to the people which overtime resulted to inequalities. The failure of African countries to strive sustained economic growth hinges to poor credibility of governance and institutions with macroeconomic instability. Meanwhile, it has also been argued that ethnic divisions also acts as deterrent to growth in the region. Furthermore, “elite instability which reflects poor governance, has exacted a toll on African development, either by depressing growth or by reducing the rate at which growth is transformed” (Fosu, 2003).

Growing inequality and failure to rectify the initial inequalities associated with weak government policy could further magnify the levels of ethnic and regional conflicts and may fuel social discontentment. Unequal distribution of wealth is a source of conflict in this slow growing countries. Once the population is dissatisfied with income discrepancies as in Africa, the expectations of reducing poverty and inequality may actually deterred and rather spur to revolt to political violence. South Africa, the continent’s most developed economy is also the world’s most unequal. Disappointingly, countries with abundant natural resources like Botswana, Namibia and Zambia were also in the lists of most unequal. The recent UNDP report stated that of the 19 most unequal countries in the world, 10 are in Africa.

In South Africa, the political exclusion of blacks in the apartheid regime accounts a great deal of general dissatisfaction. The accumulation of wealth in varying degrees for non-whites population during the apartheid era was insufficient considering the substantial discrepancies in favor of the white population. “The inequality and the emergency resulted from the actions of the regime from a conscious policy of discrimination against the black majority of the population” (Nafziger, 2003). A recent study from World Bank reported that “a little over 10 per cent of the working population is white but white South Africans make nearly three times the average wage for black Africans, which constitute nearly three quarters of entire labor force” (World Bank, 2017). This gender disparities, affects the ability to find a jobs especially for women, with the notion that they earn less than men in terms of wage labor. Extremely high and rising unemployment rate in the continent are also as a result of lack of skilled labour. Recent UNDP on income inequality reported that “the loss of human potential due to inequality is higher in sub-Saharan Africa than in all

other regions” (UNDP, 2017).

“Inequality can also results from regressive taxes (where tax rate decreases when taxable income increases) unresponsive wage structures and inadequate investment in education, health and social protection for vulnerable and marginalized groups” (Africa Renewal, 2017-2018). According to UNDP, “promoting progressive taxation, addressing unequal access to land and enhancing the efficiency of social protection and distributional effectiveness of fiscal policies are vital to address income disparities in Africa” (UNDP, 2017).

The high levels of poverty is largely reflected in low levels of income and high rate of human deprivation. One can say here that the greatest deprivation in the continent is mainly in the area of low access to safe drinking water, lack of health care facilities, and lack of availability of public services. It also is acute in some particular region among various vulnerable groups such as households headed by old age people and child headed households. Poverty-stricken regions relates to unequal distribution of land or pressure on the land caused by growth of population or marriage systems that lead to settlements in the areas that are already overpopulated. According to UNDP “rural inequality depends on differences in access to land irrigation, farm size and share of land under extensive cultivation” (UNDP, 2017).

While, unequal economic power between the rich and the poor within their regions goes to the disadvantage towards poor who have little control over the determination of prices of their produce. The poor are limited by less economic opportunities with low domestic production to market their produce and lack of avenues for paid and job opportunities. In addition to that, climate change and depletion of forests and other natural resources caused by inappropriate agricultural practices, and urban development further magnify the levels of poverty in the continent. Low productivity experienced in Africa may also be the result of low or non adoption of technology due to high cost and restrictions and inability to make effective use of modern technology due to illiteracy.

Conclusion:

Reducing inequality and poverty is the overriding concern of Africa’s development policies and programs. The measure of success of developmental policies adopted by various stakeholders and the concern governments needs to foster more towards inclusiveness.

The focus should be on areas where there has been the least progress such as— agriculture, health sector and environment. UNDP in its recent report on income inequality in sub-Saharan Africa point out that “tackling the root causes of gender inequality is a way to improving the lives of both women and men” (UNDP, 2017). Many gender experts says that to achieve goals on women’s empowerment, there has to be effective implementation of policies that encourages empowerment and requiring changing of attitudes. “To address the country’s triple challenges of high poverty, high inequality and high unemployment government investment education, health services and social development as well as social assistance to vulnerable households and contributory social security, public transport, housing and local amenities has played a notable role in these efforts” (World Bank, 2007).

A number of reform measures aimed at promoting macroeconomic stability combined with improvement in distribution of social services should also be embarked. Governments channelling investments into sectors that creates viable job opportunities, and seek to enhance climate change resiliency by offsetting carbon emissions are encouraging. The problems of poverty is caused by lack of opportunities and choices on basic fundamental needs. The fact that poverty is quite multi dimensional and varies in different countries, the causes remains more or less the same. In country like Africa, factors like, low productivity, political instability, wars, natural and geographical factors, poor health facilities, poor governmental policies, and corruption appears to be the major factors.

The reality of gender and income inequality demands complex sectoral policies which revolves around increased investment in education, good governance to ensure fairer distribution of wealth. To make the policies works, the continent must start implementing various strategies that has catalytic roles. Many African leaders are keenly aware of the imbalances and cost of improving educational standards. Many experts claim that there is an education crisis virtually everywhere in the continent. Experts have been stating that better access to technology could be a game changer for development and closing income inequality gap in Africa. A skilled labour enables to produce more technologically sophisticated goods and make better choices in every works of life.

To get a better grasp of the challenges being faced by women, key areas must be pointed out to understand

what the critical issues are and shed some lights in basic trainings and innovations. And also examines their complex reality which needs to understand in order to arrive at viable solutions.

While eliminating all forms of gender -based discrimination in the continent requires long term commitments by introducing legal framework which could gradually reduce the levels of gender discrimination. Successful economies are characterized by good public decisions, competent civil services, effective financial supervision and prudent macro-economic management. One can see African countries lacking behind with these economic indicators. Economic performance on the whole has remained fragile and most SSA countries continues to exposed to natural disasters and adverse external shocks.

Governments in Africa should devote a large section of their resources to provide educational opportunities for all, especially women, and create better living conditions through providing jobs, reasonable salaries and wages and better housing. An educated and skilled population is attractive to many employers and investors. Strong education systems are key drivers of economic growth not just for Africa but to the rest of the world. Young Africans should be well equipped in basic knowledge and numeracy skills and possess potential to use digital technology to access and interpret information. Since, agro-food business represents enormous opportunity for youth employment as well as for rural development in developing countries. Young people especially women must be prepared for the jobs in today’s globalized economy to ensure a smooth transition in labor market.

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