
The Feminization of Poverty in Africa: Roots and Branches

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Mohandas Gandhi said that the greatest atrocity is poverty. Unlike massacres in Bosnia or Rwanda, the corroding effects of long-term poverty seldom if ever make headlines. Nor do the causes of poverty in Africa form a popular subject for the U.S. news, whose images of Africa concentrate mainly on the "tribal" and the "primitive." Indeed, the assignment of responsibility for Africa's problems exclusively to Africans is a popular byproduct of such views. A series of recent *Time* magazine articles on President Clinton's trip to Africa represents a failed effort to overcome this tendency. They were based on the month-long travels of two correspondents in Africa. They began promisingly with the statement that "this story is not about the Africa you think you know," and talked about small successes. However, Johanna McGeary and Marguerite Michaels went on to say that

By any Western standard, Mozambique, Eritrea, Mali and Ghana are countries in awful straits. Their statistics still show an abysmal record of poverty, illiteracy, early mortality. While all four have achieved a dose of national economic success, with higher growth rates, lower inflation and more stable currencies that flow from obedience to stringent International Monetary Fund reform programs, they have yet to see their growing wealth trickle down very far. For ordinary citizens, daily hardships are intense: few jobs, few schools, few hospitals, poor diets, rising prices, no money...[T]he majorities of these populations...are ill fed, ill clothed, illiterate and just plain ill....¹

This initial article represented an improvement in the predominant views of Africa in that it tried to get away from presenting Africans always as victims and instead stressed grassroots African-initiated development efforts in the four countries it discussed. It noted both the problems and strengths associated with the prizing of the interests of the community over those of the individual (corruption which places relatives of high officials in important positions and promotes powerful families). However, McGeary and Michaels forecast some of the problems common to stereotypical views of Africa by saying that “Africa needs to make for itself...lives and systems that mesh modernization with an African way of doing things. That’s what works.”² In this view, modern is by definition not African but opposed to it. By this rubric, Africa’s problems are attributable to old things African, and progress is represented by how fast Africa can Westernize/modernize. The damaging effects of colonialism and its rapacious capitalist goals are ignored. McGeary and Michaels also chose to problematize neither the IMF policies described in the paragraph cited above, nor the U.S. African Growth and Opportunity Act, which makes aid contingent upon “free market” economies that privilege the interests of monopoly capitalism in the form of large multinational corporations. Scholars who have researched the impact of IMF-mandated structural adjustment programs have pointed out that impoverishment of much of the population, especially women, has been one consequence.

The next article, authored by McGeary alone, chose to adopt the same sniggering tone about Clinton’s March African trip that predominated elsewhere in the press; there was no serious reporting. Rather, Clinton’s effort to prevent the trampling to death of several women in Accra, Ghana, was interpreted as fright (at least not the temper tantrum reported by the *New York Times*). It noted the stereotypical images “seized on by the press” of people dancing and African dictators, but went on to focus exclusively on how important Africa is since Clinton chose to spend twelve days there, thus reconfirming the usual myopic U.S. focus. The author implicitly criticized Clinton’s apologetic tone in discussing slavery, U.S. promotion of terrible dictators for the sake of Cold War politics, and the ignoring of Rwanda’s genocide by the international community. McGeary spoke of “tribal music” (non-Africans have popular music or folksongs, nations or peoples and ethnicity, but Africans have “tribes”). In pointing out what she considered to be the humor of associating rural Africans with technology, she made an unfortunate reference to “The Gods Must Be Crazy,” an apartheid-era South African movie that bore much responsibility for reinforcing common U.S. racist stereotypes which hold that Africans are only good when primitive, and corrupt when not. The article was even entitled “Into Africa,” a play on the title of yet another film that dominates Americans’ images of Africa, “Out of Africa,” in which all important characters are white and Africans only servants or labor without personalities, ambitions, or character. The contents of the article therefore did much

to insure that its subtitle, "Will Clinton's trip change the way Americans view Africa, and rewrite the terms of U.S. policy?" would be answered "no."³

I could go on detailing the predominance of negative stereotypes of Africa in the U.S. media, but I wish to return to the subject of poverty in relation to the first paragraph here. Africa is the poorest continent; no one argues about those figures. There is, however, an argument to be made about the causes of that poverty and how African women are implicated in the process of the feminization of poverty, two subjects not treated by either *Time* article but critical to understanding what is now happening in much of Africa. Here I will summarize, based on almost thirty years of experience and research concerning Africa, the relationship of the situation of many African women to poverty in Africa.

African women perform approximately 80 percent of the routine farm labor on the continent, with high variations from place to place. That proportion rose historically due to European colonialism, which removed many men from rural areas and paid the men relatively little for their work in mines or on plantations, not enough to support a family. Thus, women were left with a higher workload intended to supplement their husbands' earnings elsewhere with food, as well as to feed themselves and their children at home. This tendency did not improve with independence, since the first priority, and the best received wisdom in development circles in the 1960s, whether capitalist or communist, was to industrialize. This policy was an attempt to promote diversity in Africa's economies and overcome Africa's role in the world economy as a supplier of raw materials to the rest of the world. The focus on urban development was also popular with government elites, who worked in towns and wished to have the usual amenities associated with urban life: good schools, sewers, government-subsidized housing, good roads, cars, etc. Many had been educated abroad to expect a standard of living approximating a European or American one and had as an example before them a European colonial elite with a vastly inflated standard of living compared to the rest of the population.

Then there was the European tradition of male privilege that was carried to the colonies and imposed on vastly differing African situations. When eventually after World War II Europeans decided that in order to justify their proclaimed "civilizing" mission in Africa they had to do something about providing public education and more employment of educated Africans (though not in South Africa, which embarked on the de-education of the African population with Bantu Education policies) in the colonial administrations, only men were considered. Women's education was a side issue regarded as important only for the future housewives of a projected African bourgeoisie, which would collaborate to keep colonial rule in Africa. Thus, that education was scarce and manifestly unequal, training African women for Western-type subordination.

European men, in fact, had great difficulty, and little interest in, appreci-

ating the real qualities and unique contributions of African women. In much of sub-Saharan Africa women were expected to be self-supporting and to bear primary responsibility for feeding the children. Moreover, if women were not farming, as in some West African coastal towns, they were expected to trade to feed themselves and their children. These expectations have continued, and even been expanded upon, to the present. In the many crises that have beset many parts of Africa the women have simply kept on working, knowing that without that work their families would starve. Moreover, historically in many African societies, women had far more diverse roles than predominated for European women after the eighteenth century (and most colonial officials were middle-to upper-middle-class and imbued with the housewife image). African women were priestesses, miners, queens with real power, big businesswomen and traders, farmers, and potters, and filled many other economically valuable roles that, even when available to women in Europe, were equally ignored.

After independence in the early 1960s, most countries made attempts to provide universal primary and middle school education, and many governments spent up to a fourth of their budgets on providing education. In many places, equal numbers of girls and boys began primary school, but there were factors that diminished the possibilities for girls, in particular, to continue their education and therefore by secondary school the numbers of girls were down. Only 15 to 30 percent of the students now in most African universities are female. Why? Women still bear much of the responsibility for feeding the family and they usually cannot afford to hire labor to help them. They often rely on their daughters. The two chief factors causing a higher dropout rate for girls than for boys in primary and middle schools are first, the reliance on girls' labor and second, pregnancies resulting in expulsion (male teachers or students equally responsible for the pregnancy are usually not sanctioned). Thus, in the increasingly exclusionary struggle for scarce school places at the upper levels and for jobs requiring education, women are often at a disadvantage.

Then there is the problem of population growth, which even in African countries where the growth rate is now declining is still high by world standards. Why? The best explanations lie with the need for child labor and social security in old age in the absence of government pensions for most of the population, so that poverty perpetuates high fertility, combined with the high valuation of perpetuation of lineages. For instance, Kenya used to have the highest population growth rate in the world, with women bearing eight children on average. But that began declining some ten years ago and now women bear "only" six (or five in urban areas) children on average. Much of Kenya's land is arid and will not bear a large population, while the fertile areas already have a very high population density that constantly forces many off the land, especially women and their children, who have lesser land rights by inheritance and fewer resources to purchase land.

Therefore, urbanization is proceeding apace in most countries, with projections that by 2000, now upon us, 25 to 40 percent of the population will be urban. Some women emigrate to towns even when not landless to escape a crushing rural work burden.

Another important root of the feminization of poverty world-wide is male dominance, which is an underlying assumption manifested in the material disabilities of women. It is difficult to base democracy on a dictatorial family structure, a lesson that John Stuart Mill taught us in the nineteenth century and that Americans and Africans all need remember. Male privilege is embedded in our family and governance systems and enshrined in a gender division of labor that assigns much of the dirty work, largely unpaid or underpaid, to women.

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Male privilege is constantly shifting in form and being reinvented under new circumstances. In the U.S. there are sexual predators who molest women or purposefully seduce women in order to spread AIDS. In Africa there are men who, knowing they have AIDS, still insist on having unprotected sex with their wives or lovers. These are artifacts of male privilege and manifestations of the belief that women's bodies, even their lives, are male property to be disposed of at will by men. Women also bear many of the consequences of AIDS, even when they do not have it themselves, in terms of feeding and caring for the sick.

These are important roots of the feminization of poverty in Africa: lack of access by women to education, well-paid jobs, land, and capital; an unequal gender division of labor; and a pervasive male dominance that promotes all of the above, spread and reinforced by colonialism, international monopoly capitalism, and structural adjustment programs. But it is not appropriate to view African women as victims only. One of the most remarkable stories coming out of Africa is that of the extraordinary efforts by groups of women to improve not only their situation but also the country as a whole. Urban women have paid for schooling for their children and pooled their earnings to buy land, build houses for rental or childcare purposes, start businesses, and develop food supply systems for cities. Rural grassroots efforts have involved women who till fields in common; pool their earnings; build houses, clinics, schools, and latrines; and carry out reforestation, small industry, and soil conservation projects while increasingly looking to have political representation.

In one Kenyan village I visited recently, dam building was the current major project; the tools in use were short and long-handled hoes and sisal bags for hauling dirt. Promises of help with equipment from a non-governmental Euro-

pean-funded agency had not materialized. The vast majority of such efforts have been without outside assistance and, until relatively recently, largely ignored by many governments. Development agencies, whether non-governmental or governmental, have often unthinkingly imposed alien priorities and male-dominated organization when they have attempted something similar, rather than working with these women and letting them set the priorities. These efforts in my view represent Africa's best hope for remedying many of its problems, but women need more power and authority, as well as resources, to be able to carry them out more effectively, and men need to be cooperative equal partners in carrying them out. Men are only going to be equal partners if family structure is democratized, which it must be for economic development to be more successful.

To return to President Clinton's trip and the African Growth and Opportunity Act which it is promoting, it is worthwhile to note that Clinton did not apologize for the role of a peculiarly iniquitous international capitalism, led by the Europeans, in shaping African economies into entities intended to profit outsiders with exported profits (not only people). President Nelson Mandela of South Africa and Randall Robinson of Trans-Africa have a good point in opposing the act. Grassroots efforts are not forwarded by increasing the predominance and power of multinational corporations in Africa, some of which are promoting the act in order to exploit the last world area not fully industrialized in the interests of securing more cheap labor and resources.

If I understand it correctly, this act mandates structural adjustment, as World Bank/IMF policies have, which in turn insists that African governments disinvest in education, health care, and other social programs. In fact, not just preference in trade agreements, but also any African aid by the U.S. government will be predicated upon African governments' reducing expenditure on social programs. These decisions precisely increase the responsibilities and disabilities of women; they are, in fact, one of those "unfunded mandates" that governors in this country complain about states not being able to afford to carry out (usually progressive safety or nondiscrimination measures). In this case, African governments place the cost of social services primarily on women, who have few resources to meet them. Such policies undermine grassroots efforts in favor of promoting daunting "competition" by large companies. Even large locally owned industries cannot survive when up against companies whose resources exceed theirs by magnitudes.

So, this is not a new departure for Africa but a renewal of colonialism in which multinational corporations destroy local efforts and increase the feminization of poverty. We are looking at the spread of an enclave economy in which women, in particular, form the primary labor force (because they work for less) for factories which produce electronic and garment industry products. It is still not clear whether that sort of development will benefit most people, as the disin-

tegration of the “Asian miracle” and South Africa’s troubles have demonstrated. Mandela has been there and done that, hence his opposition. Thus, it was not a paradox that Republicans, who have resisted the reimagining of Africa, supported the trade liberalization bill since their credentials regarding furthering big business and male privilege at the expense of anything and everyone else cannot be doubted or impugned. But there are better ways to further that potential if we are willing to rethink our policies from the bottom up and truly work in partnership. This means supporting small efforts and working-class African women’s and men’s priorities, growing together in an egalitarian relationship beyond the roots to new branches. ●

Notes

1. *Time*, 30 March 1998: 35-46.
2. *Ibid.*
3. “Into Africa: Will Clinton’s Trip Change the Way Americans View Africa, and Rewrite the Terms of U.S. Policy?” *Time*, 6 April 1998: 49.
4. Some vociferously supported the stereotypical images presented in Reggie White’s speech to the Wisconsin legislature, which vigorously promoted and even sanctified the connection of white people with money and of black people with spiritual values.