

## Effect of Gender Equity in Poverty Alleviation

Fodeba Daboh

International Peace and Conflict Resolution, Arcadia University, Glenside PA, USA.

[fdaboh@arcadia.edu](mailto:fdaboh@arcadia.edu)

**Abstract:** Poverty has been and continues to be the world's most challenging pandemic of our time. Disparity at every level by and large hasn't been a thing of the past. This paper is an attempt to underscore the shortcomings of women in general in eradicating poverty to that of their male counterpart. [Report and Opinion. 2010;2(3):61-66]. (ISSN: 1553-9873).

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### Introduction /Executive Summary.

Historically, it is a fact that women have not been seen as equal partners in growth and developments. Many international development experts hardly ever address issues relating to gender inequity and its corresponding implications on poverty in the world. Consequently, the development policy geared towards development has in most cases neglected women as determining factor to overall development approach. This situation has degenerated to a point that women are not given space to demonstrate their democratic God given rights. They are for the most part under-represented in decision making in every sector of society. Very few women make up activists groups, a significantly low number are engaged in professional career or are, elected or served as appointed officials in government positions. Even in societies such as Africa where communalism is the norm, women rarely held political powers or achieve executive position.

Furthermore, even in develop nation such as the United States or Europe, women have to fight hard on a daily basis to participate in domestic policies geared towards gender equity. Their male counterpart has succeeded in eliminating completely the role of women's participation in political and economic development and also confined them in a second role position. However, it has been proven that women like men can fully participate and succeed in any developmental project ever undertaking by them. The Rapti Women empowerment project in Nepal is a perfect illustration to this detail.

The Rapti Women Empowerment Project in Nepal has succeeded in proven a point related to poverty alleviation through Gender focus. This Heifer sponsored project in Nepal supported 109 families with live stocks such as goats and breeding bucks. The project precisely focus to serve the impoverish society through Passing on the Gifts of livestock and training skills which is provided by Heifer International. The overall Project's aspired tirelessly towards gender justice; self help group management for its members,

reproductive health and HIV/AIDS awareness. The project groups women and their male counterparts participating in receiving trainings on Heifer International cornerstones. Community health workers are also trained by Heifer to make available veterinary services for the livestocks. Project enabled members to send their children to school and catered for small loans facilities through savings clubs.

### **Analysis of Case Study**

Heifer International, a non-profit organization with headquarters in Little Rock, Arkansas is committed to ending hunger and poverty and caring for the earth. Based on that conviction, they have supported a group of women in Nepal and elsewhere around the world making them self-reliance. From Heifer International's standpoint on poverty alleviation, it is with a profound belief that gender equity is being seen as a social justice and human rights issue that directly leads to ending world's poverty. As mentioned, I will be considerably using the work of Heifer in Nepal as a case study for the purpose of this paper. In a culture such as Nepal engulfed with a way of life full of intimidation by gender inequity, variations and inequalities at every level, this has always been the day in day out norms. History has manifested that gender inequity is not just critical to women alone, but it is also aiding a system of injustice that has proven unfavorable to the development of the society as a whole. For the past decades, Nepal is among one of the very many countries of the world that Heifer International has effectively worked tirelessly to end poverty. Bordered with China and India, Nepal has the world's 115<sup>th</sup> largest economy making it evident that poverty remains a huge challenge in the nation. With a population of approximately 28 million, agriculture provide work for up to 76% of Nepalese nationals in the country.

It is against this backdrop that full participation of beneficiaries irrespective of their gender should be encouraged to participate in their individual

communities to accomplish sustainable development. As one of the twelve cornerstones of Heifer International's fundamental core values, Gender & Family Focus encourages both women and men to share resources and also in decision making as well as in the benefits of animal rearing and training to attain a common and sustainable livelihood. For far too long, women are not seen as equal partners in development. Such barriers regrettably continue to exist even in the most developed nations around the world. The unequal distribution of the world's resources in my view should not have a place in this enlightened world of ours.

This Heifer sponsored project in Nepal and elsewhere has made profound arguments that confirm the eradication of poverty within a society through women's empowerment.

My overall argument is to draw attention to all the fact that women's empowerments contribute to the health and productivity of the entire families and communities and can also improve developments prospects for an overall sustainable livelihood. As the saying goes "practice makes perfect", it has always been and still true today for Heifer that development at human, community and national level cannot effectively take place without efficient learning, training and practices of the people. The distribution of livestock and trainings to beneficiaries has allowed Heifer to transform the lives of many impoverished communities most of whom are women.

Also, in order to make certain that the voices of deprived women are heard, Heifer International has made the full participation of everyone in decision-making a priority irrespective of gender. Heifer International strongly believes that recognizing the harmful effects of global and national policies on the poor in general and poor women in particular is crucial to ending poverty and hunger. How can this be done always remain a puzzle in people's mind. For Heifer International in retrospect, the way to get this done is by empowering women and sensitizing the men. Heifer also realizes and absolutely acknowledges the fact that the persistent inequality cannot be eliminated in a short period time but rather overtime. Hard work and a pragmatic strategy are needed for both to meet at the empowering and sensitization level on the scale. Development efforts will not be successful as long as the scale is not balance. This is also true from the perspective of many development oriented Non-Governmental organizations. Most have been failing to achieve their desired objectives in ending world's poverty because of being in constant denial of this reality.

As an organization that believes in people's ability to change their own lives and to create a better future, Heifer promotes and supports "sharing and caring" among people, which is fundamental to equity,

or fairness. Heifer also sees itself as a launch pad in this all-significant process, and not as a contributor of answers or as a problem solver at all cost. Heifer has succeeded in alleviating poverty, hunger and social injustice through helping communities taking the driver seat in development (source –www.heifer.org). Gender inequity is a social injustice issue for the most part as the 1948 United Nations declaration on human rights states "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights". Women's empowerments, coupled with full participation are human right's issue and for that reason's deserves to be given much more attention.

The disturbing number of women suffering from poverty and how they can be lifted from it still remains to be a mystery. It is a fact that 70 percent of the world's poor are female and for that reason social women network and activist groups are relentlessly calling and craving for a concerted effort and a caring strategy to put an end to this injustice and to have equal share in economic and social development issues. Empowering poor illiterate women by giving them not only the capital resources but training in the Asian nation of Nepal has helped to bridge this gender inequity gap between women and men. Giving them just the animal without the proper and high-quality training hasn't been sustainable. It is as a result of the above the Rapti women empowerment project in Nepal makes certain that the development goal is attain by providing project's members/beneficiaries the necessary training skills. Many Nepalese women as a result of Heifer's partnership in sustainable development have been able to create group savings funds through their monthly contributions and other savings clubs approach. Each member will contribute a specific amount as agreed by the terms and agreements of the project. These funds has enhanced them the means of making loans to each other and to be able to purchase additional livestock. To a larger extent, and as a result of this rapid growth and developments paradigm, most families, due to women's full participation have been able to send their children to school and have become self-reliance. Below is a testimony by Heifer International on one local community beneficiary to demonstrate this; "Before Heifer, Sharada was a single mother struggling to care for her two young children. And even though Sharada worked hard every day, she still could not earn enough to pay for her own home or her children's education. But then Sharada joined a local Heifer women's group and her circumstances began to turn around immediately. With the gift of a pair of goats and training in their care, along with **training in values based literacy, gardening, and gender equity**, Sharada was able to increase her family's income. Sharada is now

a successful farmer and earns enough income to send her children to school. She has even bought her very own home. And thanks to Heifer's cornerstone of Passing on the Gift, Sharada has already **shared her success with another member of the community group** with the gift of offspring from her goats" (source, [www.heifer.org](http://www.heifer.org)). This among many is the testimony given by women whom have been empowered by one of Heifer's core value of gender focus.

### Review of the Literature

Women by and large were not seen as equal partners in any accomplishment that is development oriented. This circumstance has made women the most vulnerable inhabitants in any community they happen to find themselves. It is an established reality that more than 70 percent of the world's poor are women (Schuftan 2003). In most societies around the world, women are still not considered as equal partners to growth and economic development but mere homemakers. Gloomily to this gender inequity issue, is the so-called development agencies around the globe that have turned a blind eye for far too long in addressing this crucial issue. As it is evident by some scholars, this paper will argue that the way forward in addressing this issue is by empowering the women. Women's empowerments contribute to the well-being of human developments and yield dividend for the entire family and community at large. This in turn can improve the overall sustainable livelihood of a nation.

At several related approaches on the broader gender issues, this paper will also highlights how many scholars and thinkers has contributed in speaking for the millions of voiceless women about the need to eradicate poverty through gender fairness. More importantly, the approach is also geared towards ongoing struggle in understanding poverty related issues through gender perspectives.

From Schools, religious sitting room, government buildings to name but few, the need for this human right issue has been made a topic of discussion in very many ways. In portraying a parallel between equality for all regardless of race, ethnicity, income, and religious belief has come to justify this matter as a human right issue. If poverty is about deprivation of basic necessity to human life such as, not being able to send your child to school, lack of shelter, being hungry, then it is the most horrible way of human life. This has made a profound case that poverty alleviation will not be a subject of the past without women's full engagement and contribution in growth and developments.

The literature review will argue that poverty cannot be fully addressed without a precise gender focus. Very many scholars and thinkers whom are authority on this subject had written extensively about

this intuitive topic. I shall scrutinize their respective literatures by pulling off what are their individual position regarding Gender equity as it range from growth, economic development, education, health etc. It is exciting to note that these scholars for the most part seem to be on the same page when the question tends to be about need for gender equity. On the contrary, it is also worth mentioning that they seem to differ on the way this should be addressed to achieve it overall objective. This difference in my view does not come as a surprise since scholars disagree to agree on issues after all. Conceptualizing the argument made by scholars and development agencies will evidently show that gender inequality has been and will always be a human right issue that needs to be advanced. According to Baruah (2009) "Despite such developments and an expanding body of literature on women in poverty as well as the discourses on gender and development that have moved from welfare, anti-poverty and efficiency to approaches that emphasizes empowerment, human rights and human capabilities, there is still concern that the inter-linkages between gender and poverty have not undergone comprehensive and rigorous study and analysis" (P.172). Referencing the gender development index (GDI) and gender empowerment measure (GEM) of the 1995 UNDP source, Baruah goes on to explain "the Human Development Report has also succeeded in capturing not just some of the links between gender and poverty but also in highlighting significantly increasing female disadvantage of the developing world, most notably South Asia, North Africa and Sub Sahara Africa" (P172). Women are always at the bottom and never treated by men as equal in most community.

Masika etal (1997) in their literature commented on the reflective attention that has been given to this human right issue. Masika et. Al. writes "in recent years there have been initiatives to reduce discrimination and ensure a greater voice and influence for women's needs and priorities in housing, and more generally human settlements"(P.12). Masika etal (1997) also furthered their remark by highlighting the shift on women's focus from housing need to that of income generation. It makes a whole lot of sense to generated income that can ultimately resolve the need for housing which is another basic need in my view. Though some theories are given credit for the advancement that has taken place in the health sector as a way of alleviating poverty and inequality, Masika etal (1997) are very much skeptical of the overall growth pattern in this module. Masika and others points out that growth in the health sector have not address the health needs and rights of women which is making the process of getting public health care more challenging to millions of poor womenities around the world.

From a pessimistic standpoint, Schuftan (2003) held globalization responsible for the uneven

distribution of resources in the global world. In his literature argues "globalization limits the ability of union workers to bargain, as well as making it more difficult for government to implement equitable policies. Governments that need to adopt pro-poor strategies are simply not able to do so". Building on this significant claim Schuftan goes on to stay that "as a result, the number of hungry people around the world keeps rising every year and poverty is becoming increasingly feminized (70% of all the poor are women). The advent of global technology like for instance the Internet has succeeded in making the world borderless. For example, a businessman can seat behind his computer in the United States and facilities his business in China within minutes. With all this spectacular transformation, it hasn't benefited women like their male counterpart.

From a different perspective, Zuga (2009) increasingly acknowledged the transformation in gender equity that has taken place over the years. According to Zuga (2009) "Women in non-traditional roles have been slowly creeping into our subconscious. We are also seeing more women in our communities working in professions that were dominated by men. Gender roles are being redefined and this modifies our ideas of women's work". Undoubtedly, such improvement shouldn't go unnoticed especially when most women have worked and continue to work so hard to bridge the gender inequality gap.

Gwatkin (2000) like Zuga (2009) did recognize the enhancement and diligent progress in gender equality that has taken place over the years. Unlike in the 80s and early 90s Gwatkin (2000) points out "As the third millennium begins, there is an incipient renewal of concern for poverty and equity in health. One sign is the emergence of over a dozen inter-country research projects on health, poverty and equity, supported by a wide range of donors and covering over a hundred countries". Reflecting on another indicator is the meaning and relevance that is now attached in improving the overall health and safety of the poor by the current World Bank's strategy. Gwatkin (2000) argues that despite the fact that much still needs to be done, yet it is evident that today's gender poverty gap is much better than it was in the past.

Making a case about inequality from health related standpoint, Smith (2001) also argued that some approaches or policies has not be effectively implemented due to the assertion that "women are not often decision makers on fertility issues, since unequal gender relations in the household enable men to control women's sexuality and fertility"(P.96). In developing and emerging societies, women for the most part cannot be part of a decision-making body for the simple fact that they are women. This among many is responsible for the poor and deplorable conditions women continue to face. Unless and until this inequality seized to be the

reality, poverty will continue to be the prevalent challenge of societies in our time. There are still much more imbalances in the distribution and access to private property between men and women which is even making women more dependence upon their male counterpart (Argawal 1997).

On the same premise (Argawal 1997) goes on to make a strong and persuasive argument to buttress her claim. She writes "Women are also Systematically disadvantaged in the labor market, with fewer employment opportunities, lesser occupational mobility, lower levels of training, and lower payments for the same or similar work, compared with men". This also highlights the fact that there is still much needed work to be done for a flourishing growth. Like men, women should be equally counted and recognize as partners in development. Unless and until this reality is noted, the road ahead will continue to be rigid.

As gender equity remains to be the foundation stone for growth and developments, the need for gender equality continue to be acknowledged by many scholarly literatures. (Molyneux 2002) states that "Development practice was henceforth to be more consultative, more sensitive to the needs of the poor, the environment, ethnic minorities, women, and others who have been at the sharp end of it"(P.172). Despite the fact that much has already been accomplished with respect to this area under discussion, yet it can't be better justified than the way this literature described women at the "sharp end of it". This helps to give a meaningful connotation as to how women issue still deserves a significant consideration. Conceivably, Karekezi etal (2002) pointed out the most obvious disproportion on the impact of poverty on men and women. According to him, gender-related issues specifically in Africa, impacts men and women very differently. Like other scholars aforementioned positions on this subject, women tend to suffer severe levels of deprivation than men at every level.

A case in point as illustrated by Karekezi etal was Zambia in Africa where 72% of household with female being the head as opposed to 61% of male head of household live in abject poverty (P.16). As the literature continue to disclose some terrifying evidence, Karekezi etal 2002 referenced the work of (Schirnding 2001) by stating "At the household level, women and children are adversely affected by particulate emissions from burning biofuels. A study undertaken in rural Kenya found women, who do most of the cooking, were exposed to twice as much particulate emission as their male counterparts, and were on average twice as likely to suffer from respiratory infections"(P.17). All of this unquestionably continues to make an apparent argument regarding women's on going challenge. It is against the above background that made me to argue that women's empowerment will not only development women's

capacity building, but can lift them out of poverty and enhancing them with sustainable livelihood.

Schech and Dev (2007) in line with other scholars on gender issues argued that even the so-called World Bank failed to pay much attention to gender equity. They referenced (Bergeron 2003) calling the blunder 'dismal'. Up and until recently under the leadership of James Wolfenson that the issue through NGOs and civil society groups were able to be given some favorable attention (P.16). All the literatures discussed so far have manifestly shown the need for a sustainable men and women partnership for development-oriented goal.

Another issue that is noteworthy is the sluggish gender achievement gap in the school educational system. Not until very recently the educational gap was very alarming. Much discourse has never taken place regarding this all sensitive and practical issue. According to Sadker, Sadkar and Steindam (1989): Only 1 author out of 183 discussed sex differential treatment in classroom interaction, in athletics or in the curriculum (P.44).

Furthermore, Cagatay (2001) on gender and poverty, argued that poverty in the household has been directly shifted to its individual members. By every indication, women tend to be more vulnerable to chronic poverty. This she stated is because of the inequalities that have always existed when it comes to income, access to credit facilities as well as in the labor market. (P.6). This also justified the ultimate explanation for women's empowerment as the way forward to bridge the inequality gap.

From religious perspective, Walker (1999) made a tough claim about the shortcoming of religion on women and their sexuality in general. With specificity to Christianity, Walter (1999) argues that women for the most part are deprived of their God-given rights in taking charge of their independence or autonomy. Walker (1999) referenced the work of (Gnanadason 1997) about the Archbishop of Sarajevo stating "that women who have been raped had a duty to bear the children thus conceived" (p.17). Religious leaders are always regarded as sacred people in most underdeveloped nations of the world. This state of mind is making it hard for people to defy their authority. It is more difficult for women due to certain cultural and religious convictions. Walker (1999) goes on to comment on the leadership and organizational structures in most churches. The fact that history has indicated to us that men has always been in charge and takes the leadership role in the running of churches, will always leave this role in the hands of men.

As a final point in this literature, Johnson (2005) wrapped it all by tapping on the centerpiece of the slow down on women's progress. He states "Consequently, it has been possible – even normal - to improve the condition of women without hurting the condition of men or challenging the position of men. However, resistance occurs when there is action to achieve greater equity in the position of women, because it is more likely to mean changes in the position of men. Arguably, this has been a central theme of the 'gender and development' agenda" (P.57). This decisive and on-going dialogue is true for the most part of the world including the United States.

### Conclusion

Unquestionably, the case study of this paper did make an explicit argument for a bottom up approach to development and poverty alleviation in particular. It is obvious to point out that the Heifer International concept of gender equity did address the aforementioned problem of poverty alleviation. It displayed a case to substantiate the argument that empowering women and sensitizing men will not only stimulate rapid economic growth and developments, but can also contribute to sustainable livelihood of the entire community. Both men and women can see themselves as partners with equal responsibilities towards not only their families but also the entire community. The way out to gender inequality is to make certain that women are empowered by presenting them with equal opportunities that will provide them equal access to employment, health care and housing. It is also crucial to put in place legal Policies that will protect women from unfair gender discrimination.

Overall, the paper has established the fact that gender imbalance has a direct impact on the quality of life of the human being in general. Women as a gender has carried most of the burden related to poverty.

All the aforementioned clearly give a picture to the way forward in eradicating poverty. It is an overall attempt geared towards the need to see women and men as equal partners to personal human development and not just as homemakers without any economic input to the well being of their family. In addition, as pointed out in my introduction, I will conclude by commenting that gender equity is in the process of being achieved at this point. Certainly, some amount of credit should be given to those development agencies and policy makers that have fought so hard to make the voiceless people be heard. Many poverty alleviation professionals have succeeded at least in moving this deep-rooted systemic discrimination against women from the ground floor and making it an issue that is worth debating.

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[www.heifer.org](http://www.heifer.org)

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Fodeba Daboh received his BA degree in Political Sc with a concentration in International relations, a second Major in African Studies and a Minor in History from the University of Pennsylvania. Fodeba is currently pursuing his Master of Arts degree in International Peace and Conflict Resolution from Arcadia University. His overall interest is Sustainable development, poverty and capacity building in Africa in particular.