



Kardan Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities (KJSSH)

ISSN: 2616-8707 (Print and Online), Journal homepage: kjssh.kardan.edu.af

Women's Economic Empowerment: From Deprivation to Sustenance

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To cite this article: Shah, P.S. "Women's Economic Empowerment: From Deprivation to Sustenance, *Kardan Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, (2022), 5 (1), 1-14. DOI: 10.31841/KJSSH.2022.48

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.31841/KJSSH.2022.48>



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Published online: 25 June 2022.



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Kardan Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities

5 (1) 1–14

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Kardan Publications

Kabul, Afghanistan

DOI: 10.31841/KJSSH.2022.48

<https://kardan.edu.af/Research/CurrentIssue.aspx?i=KJSSH>

Received: 02 Feb 22

Revised: 26 May 22

Accepted: 20 June 22

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Abstract

Traditional roles for women have always defined them as housewives. However, this role is changing in many societies, and societies have accepted the change and are treating both genders equally. This is based on Agenda 2030, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and the World Congress on Women. The focus of this paper is on women's economic empowerment using a case study analysis and how women's living standards have been uplifted. The paper uses the principle of "leave no one behind" and the theory of feminism in poverty to explain the case studies. These case studies have been analyzed through desktop review. The findings indicate that if women were educated, then they would be financially secure and relieved from poverty. Gender inequality would then be reduced, and women would be economically empowered. Communities and individuals need to move out of their cultural cocoons and accept the reality that women need to be respected and economically empowered in society for their wellbeing. For this to happen, education for girls and women is a must, as are equal pay, promotions, and advocacy and policies on equality for women.

Keywords: Culture; Economic; Education; Empowerment; Women.

Introduction

The paper discusses women's economic empowerment by reflecting on the history of gender inequality and the progress achieved in curbing such inequality through feminist movements inspired globally. Women's voices have been strongly felt after the 4th World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995. In this paper, the author tries to explain why women were left behind in early civilization and how things have changed over time for the betterment of women. This is based on Agenda 2030, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the principle of leaving no one behind and the theory of feminism on poverty by Oakley.¹ The paper highlights how women are rising in the sector of economic empowerment and how they can be motivated on an equal basis for both genders so that there is no discrimination. The paper has been fully developed to depict the real situation on the ground and how things will change for the betterment of women as society advances.

History has favored men. Due to male dominance, the tendency to lean toward patriarchy has prevented women from achieving their full ability and potential in accessing education and finance. Society has always looked upon men as heads of families, resulting in unequal access to ownership and control of natural resources.² On the other hand, the patriarchal system has resulted in giving women the role of

¹ Oakley, A. *The sociology of housework* Policy Press, University of Bristol, (2019).

² ECLAC, UN. "Implications of Gender Roles in Natural Resource Governance in Latin America and the Caribbean." (2021).

housewives and child bearers.^{3, 4} Gender inequality, therefore, is rooted in patriarchy and continues to thrive.⁵ However, by the end of the 19th century, there were feminist movements to challenge gender inequality. The assumption that men are more intelligent than women has been challenged⁶ through movements advocating for the rights of women through religion, culture, and social and political hierarchies.

In line with these inequalities, a lot has been done to bridge the gap between men and women. The last 25 years are the record historical years for women's and girls' rights in terms of their wellbeing. The 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing advocated for the rights and well-being of women and girls through the Beijing Platform for Action. Since this conference, there have been special sessions held every five years to review the actions and initiatives of the 1995 Beijing Conference. In the year 2000, the 'Women 2000: Gender Equality, Development and Peace for the Twenty-First Century' took place at the 23rd Special Session of the Commission on the Status of Women to promote the advancement of women and gender equality through education and the provision of better nutrition, healthcare, and education for both women and their children. It also called for a fight against poverty and women's trafficking. Poverty was to be reduced by closing the gender gap in primary and secondary education by 2005 and providing free, compulsory, and universal primary education for both girls and boys by 2015. This was then followed by the 49th Session of the Commission on the Status of Women in 2010. In this session, it was emphasized that there should be full implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action to achieve the Millennium Development Goals. Then, in 2015, came the 20-year review of the Beijing Platform for Action at the Commission's 54th Session. At this point, the member states adopted a declaration that supported the progress made towards gender equality and committed to the faster embracement of the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. In 2020, at the 59th Session, the 25-year review and appraisal indicated the opportunities for gender inclusiveness, empowerment, and equality. All of this has led to the engagement of men and boys towards combating gender equality. Both genders have been made to realise the value of each other, their relationships, their role in society and, most importantly, the power hierarchy that shapes the relations between men and women. The Beijing Platform for Action has helped individuals understand the need for equal opportunities to shape their lives and lead society towards equality.⁷

In many parts of the world, gender inequality has resulted in women being unable to access finance. This is because of a lack of education, and in turn, this has resulted in a lack of employment opportunities, contributing to poverty and economic inequality. To elevate women from poverty, Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 1 to "End poverty in all its forms everywhere", SDG 5 to "Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls", and SDG 10 to "Reduce inequality within and among countries" must be met.⁸ This has been supplemented further by the adaptation of Agenda 2030 at the UN General Assembly in September 2015 by all governments and is aimed at improving lives. Agenda 2030 is based on the principle of "leave no one behind" – women, minorities, disabled people, youth, and minority and indigenous communities.

³ Klasen, S. The impact of gender inequality on economic performance in developing countries. *Annual Review of Resource Economics* 10: 279–298.

⁴ Klasen, S. (2019). Klasen, Stephan. "What explains uneven female labor force participation levels and trends in developing countries?." *The World Bank Research Observer* 34, no. 2 (2019): 161-197.

⁵ Gomez, Sergio, and Fernando Soto Baquero. *Reflections on the concentration and foreignization of the land in latin america and the caribbean*. FAO, 2013.

⁶ Furnham, Adrian. "Sex differences in self-estimated intelligence, competitiveness and risk-taking." *Mankind Quarterly* 58, no. 1 (2017): 109-111.

⁷ Munoz Boudet, Ana Maria, Paola Buitrago, Benedicte Leroy De La Briere, David Locke Newhouse, Eliana Carolina Rubiano Matulevich, Kinnon Scott, and Pablo Suarez-Becerra. "Gender differences in poverty and household composition through the life-cycle: A global perspective." *World Bank Policy Research Working Paper* 8360 (2018).

⁸ Assembly, G. (2013). Human rights council twenty-third session agenda item 3 promotion and protection of all human rights, civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, including the right to development Report of the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, Magdalena Sepúlveda Carmona.

The focus of Agenda 2030 is to change the hierarchy of the pyramid where over one billion people are living in extreme poverty, and these are mainly women and children. The new pyramid based on the concept of "leave no one behind" should have women and children at the top of the global community's agenda.⁹ This is further supported by the Post-2015 Development Agenda, which indicates that gender equality is not to transfer opportunities from men to women but to realize everyone's rights so their full human potential is valued.¹⁰ At the same time, many women have been underpaid especially in informal jobs and have no protection from their employers. In 2011, the adoption of the International Labour Organization's (ILO) Domestic Workers Convention¹¹ and Domestic Workers Recommendation¹² by governments into their national policies and legal frameworks brought in hope for domestic workers, especially women¹³.

This paper relies on a qualitative analysis of scholarly material on gender equality sourced online. It takes a discursive approach, and its arguments are based on a case study analysis of women's economic success in multinational companies (MNCs) in the agricultural sectors in the developing countries like Senegal, Ecuador, Mexico, and Columbia; the textile industry in Bangladesh; and the Telco industry in parts of Africa. Women's success stories are also captured through in-migration and mobility, self-employment, women's initiative projects, gender groups, policies and advocacy, and the gig economy.

Against this background, the paper is structured into 5 sections. Section 2 explains the theory of feminism in poverty. Section 3 discusses the realities of women's world. Section 4 considers women's economic empowerment successes, and Section 5 concludes the paper.

Theory of Feminism of Poverty

Social sciences have often associated work with "paid" employment and have neglected the work done by women in the informal sector, which is usually unpaid. This includes childcare and household chores.¹⁴ The theory of feminism and poverty explains four stages. The first wave of feminism was when women were discriminated against from working outside their homes, thus increasing poverty. The second wave related to the class and race of women, where only women in a specific class or race were allowed to work and upgrade their status quo, thus increasing the rich-poor gap among women. In terms of the third wave, it was a vast diversity of women's lives, experiences, and education that allowed them to embrace employment and sustain their households and reduce poverty, while the fourth wave has taken a new stride into embracing technology where there are no limits to embracing women's empowerment and removing them from the trap of poverty. This paper focuses on the third and fourth waves of feminism in poverty aimed at eradicating poverty.¹⁵ The third wave has played a big role in the lives of women as their homes were never viewed as workplaces but rather as women's places of 'biological' duties.¹⁶ It was during the industrial revolution that it became an eye-opener that women worked in two shifts – paid work in the public sector and at home in the private sector with no pay. With time, men began to realise that life was becoming more difficult with them being the only breadwinners, and when their female companions started going to work, the trap of poverty was reduced.

⁹ Secretary-General, U. N. "leave no one behind a call to action for gender equality and women's economic empowerment." *Women's Economic Empowerment* 16, no. 1 (2016): 1-14.

¹⁰ Secretary-General, UN "A life of dignity for all: accelerating progress towards the Millennium Development Goals and advancing the United Nations development agenda beyond 2015: report of the Secretary-General." (2013).

¹¹ International Labour Office. (2011). *Convention no. 189 and recommendation no. 201 concerning decent work for domestic workers*. ILO.

¹² ILO. R201 - Domestic workers recommendation (No. 201). (2011)

¹³ Assembly, G. (2013). *ibid*

¹⁴ Pollard. J. *Feminism and work*. Elsevier 21-28, (2020)

¹⁵ Oakley. A. (2019). *ibid*

¹⁶ Oakley. A. (2019). *ibid*

The governments also realized that women were the backbone of the country's finance sector. In 2000, the famous feminine theorist, Sassen, stated, "Households and whole communities are increasingly dependent on women for their survival." Governments too are dependent on their earnings as well as enterprises where profit-making exists at the margins of the 'licit' economy".¹⁷ Since the last decade, the gig economy has shown that women can work in the comfort of their geographical locations and deliver the work making them fully empowered and reducing their poverty.

Realities of Women's World

Women have been facing a myriad of difficulties. For example, women are restricted from working, and those who can work are confined to the informal sector. Women in the formal sector face sexual harassment at work, are underpaid and work long hours compared to their male counterparts, do not advance to senior positions, face discriminatory practices such as termination of employment, such as during the COVID-19-led restructuring, and may even lose their jobs if discovered to be pregnant. Climate change has also impeded women's economic improvement and development.

In countries where in-migration is high, companies and individuals prefer to employ the migrants as they accept low salaries, especially women. This is the case in South Africa, where they employ a cheap labor force, especially women from Lesotho and Mozambique. This is because poverty is very high amongst women-headed families in these countries, so the women are exploited when they migrate to South Africa. This also explains the second wave of feminism, leading to the increase in the poverty trap.¹⁸ Another example is from South Africa, where it is mainly black women who are employed as domestic workers as they work for low pay. The same applies to the afro-descendant women in Brazil and the indigenous communities who are employed as domestic workers or in the agricultural sector as they are cheaply available due to poverty.¹⁹ In many parts of the developing world, women are still over-exploited. For example, in Kenya, if a woman is lowly educated and is given a job, there is usually a transaction fee, which is in terms of "body capital," where a woman is supposed to offer sexual service.

In other parts of the world, policies and legal frameworks to protect women are either not there or are weak, as in the case of Afghanistan, where the Taliban demean women and they are excluded even from their basic rights like primary education. Lack of regulations results in novel imbalances in the relationship between workers and companies. There is a possibility that companies have a chance to escape from certain responsibilities touching on the rights of workers. Unsolved systemic challenges can also lead to strengthening the unequal position of men and women in their work. Due to toxic masculinity, women can only be seen as suitable for work in the domestic sphere. Clients might refuse to be served by female service providers because of sexism in society.

However, a lot is being done to uplift the lives of women globally, although injustice still remains. According to the 2018 World Bank report²⁰ which were derived from a study of 189 countries, 104 countries continued to have stringent laws which prevent women from working in certain types of professions. The same report also identifies 59 countries as not having laws on sexual harassment in the workplace, while in 18 countries, men had legal power to stop their wives from working.

¹⁷ Sassen, Saskia. "Women's burden: Counter-geographies of globalization and the feminization of survival." *Journal of international affairs* (2000): 503-524.

¹⁸ Cramer, Christopher, Carlos Oya, and John Sender. "Lifting the blinkers: a new view of power, diversity and poverty in Mozambican rural labour markets." *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 46, no. 3 (2008): 361-392.

¹⁹ Kabeer, Naila, and Ricardo Santos. "Intersecting inequalities and the sustainable development goals: insights from Brazil." (2017).

²⁰ *Women, Business and the Law 2018*. (2018). Washington, DC: World Bank.

Though the principle of "leave no one behind" is being implemented globally, inequality has been growing and affects 71 per cent of the world's population.²¹ While efforts have been made to empower women and provide them with jobs, 2020 has been amongst the worst years since reforms to women's empowerment. This is because of the COVID-19 pandemic, which saw drastic job losses. In most societies, it has been women who have been the hardest hit.²² From all job losses that occurred due to the pandemic, 5 per cent of women lost their jobs in comparison to men who were at 3.9 per cent globally²³. In terms of individual countries, in Peru, 57.9 per cent, Brazil 22.2 per cent, Italy 4.3 per cent and in the US 10 per cent of women lost their jobs²⁴.

However, besides COVID, statistics indicate that it is women who have always suffered from unemployment in comparison to men. For example, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) data for 2017 indicated that 6.2 per cent of women were unemployed in comparison to 5.5 percent of men.²⁵ Moreover, it is also women who have been subjected to unpaid domestic work²⁶. Research by the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2020²⁷ has also been indicated that women are becoming more educated in comparison to men, yet the trickling down effect of employment and wages is not being seen. Life for women is further worsening due to climate change, which is forcing many women, especially in developing countries, to walk long distances in search of water and firewood.²⁸ This reduces their time for employment jobs. It also affects their health and makes them more susceptible to climatic hazards. In line with this, in many communities, it is the women who bear the brunt of food insecurity due to poverty as they are forced to reduce their food consumption.²⁹ Such cultural practices are still dominant in many areas, resulting in women having limited access to land ownership and land tenure and having restrictions on their finance and loans, which hinders their economic empowerment³⁰ and leads to the feminism of poverty.³¹

Gender differences in poverty were analysed at the global level using World Bank's Global Monitoring Database.³² The results indicate that it is mainly girls and women – 44 percent living in extreme poverty of less than \$2 a day, and with age, the poverty gap is widening and pushing more women into abject poverty. Furthermore, the analysis indicated that between the ages of 25 to 34, 122 women lived in poor households in comparison to every 100 men of the same age.³³ Here again, the feminism of poverty is highly portrayed. This explains why governments need to act faster to apply the principle of leaving no one behind³⁴.

²¹ UN. (2016). *ibid*

²² Nieuwenhuis, Rense, Teresa Munzi, Jörg Neugschwender, Heba Omar, and Flaviana Palmisano. *Gender equality and poverty are intrinsically linked: A contribution to the continued monitoring of selected sustainable development goals*. No. 759. LIS Working Paper Series, 2019.

²³ ILO. ILO monitor: COVID-19 and the world of work. Seventh edition Updated estimates and analysis, (2021)

²⁴ ILO. (2021). *ibid*

²⁵ International Labour Office. (n.d.). *World employment social outlook : trends for women 2018, global snapshot*.

²⁶ Women, U. N. "The World for Women and Girls Annual Report 2019-2020." (2020).

²⁷ United Nations. Department of Economic and Social Affairs. (n.d.). *World Social Report 2020 : inequality in a rapidly changing world*.

²⁸ Gender, Global, and Climate Alliance. "Gender and climate change: A closer look at existing evidence." *Global Gender and Climate Alliance: New York, NY, USA* (2016).

²⁹ UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs. (2020). *ibid*

³⁰ UN Habitat. *World cities report 2016 - Urbanization and development: Emerging futures*. Nairobi: UN-Habitat, (2016)

³¹ Pearce, Diane. "The feminization of poverty: Women, work, and welfare." *Urban and social change review* (1978). Pearce, Diana. "Farewell to alms: Women's fare under welfare." *Women: A feminist perspective* (1989): 502-515.

³² Munoz Boudet, Ana Maria, Paola Buitrago, Benedicte Leroy De La Briere, David Locke Newhouse, Eliana Carolina Rubiano Matulevich, Kinnon Scott, and Pablo Suarez-Becerra. "Gender differences in poverty and household composition through the life-cycle: A global perspective." *World Bank Policy Research Working Paper* 8360 (2018).

³³ Pearce. D. (1984). *ibid*

³⁴ UN Women. (2019). *ibid*

While the statistics may show an unfair and unjust picture, on the ground, a lot is being done to uplift women's economic profiles. Women are being equally empowered like their male counterparts to participate in existing and new job markets where they have access to decent jobs, can control their lives and time, add their voices, and indicate meaningful participation in economic wellbeing and decision-making at all levels. They are also being recognised for certain jobs where they were underpaid before. This is in line with Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development and the SDGs, which include SDG 5 on gender equality, SDG 8 on decent work for all, SDG 1 on reducing poverty, SDG 3 on good health, SDG 10 on reducing inequality, SDG 2 on food security, and SDG 17 on partnering with institutions. It also reflects the UN's vision of the "leave no one behind" principle. This is what section 4 on women's economic empowerment successes will be discussing.

Women's Economic Empowerment Successes

Having described the social and economic challenges experienced by women globally, this section discusses diverse aspects of how women have claimed their empowerment. Paid employment is the best when it comes to women's empowerment as they can improve their livelihoods and make decisions.³⁵ With the "leave no one behind" principle, there has been an increase in women's employment in the service sector. This is because it has been observed that women can take on jobs like teaching, tourism, and beauty-related jobs as it allows them to take care of their homes and have flexible working hours. They also take on part-time jobs like teaching and home-based or casual activities like beauticians and nannies. Based on ILO, the comparison statistics of 1992 showed that women's employment in the service sector was 35 per cent, while in 2012 it grew to 47 per cent in comparison to men's jobs in this sector, which were at 34 per cent and later grew by 41 per cent in 2012.³⁶

What follows next is a discussion on the role of multinational companies, the role of migration and mobility, self-employment, women's initiative projects, policies and advocacy, gender groups, and the gig economy in moulding women's economic empowerment and removing them from the vicious cycle of poverty.

Role of Multinational Companies

SDG 17 on partnerships with institutions is playing a key role in increasing women's economic status. Many multinational companies (MNCs) have pledged their support for the UN Agenda 2030 and are encouraging women to participate in jobs that were earlier considered to be for men only, for example, drivers, chefs, and accountants. They have even gone a step ahead in removing the wage differences so women workers are paid equally to men.³⁷ This has been observed in developing countries where the MNCs are more geared towards the agricultural sector and operate modern supply chains. For example, in Senegal, it was found that 90 per cent of women worked in the bean sector while 60 percent worked in the tomato sector. This was the case because there were no middlemen and the MNCs directly employed workers, and preference was given to women.³⁸ The same was observed for the cut flower industry in Ecuador, Mexico, and Columbia, where there is the use of high-tech production practices and the MNCs prefer hiring female workers, and most of these jobs are permanent based on an annual agreement.³⁹

³⁵ Women, U. N. *ibid*

³⁶ International Labour Office. *Global employment trends for women 2012*. Geneva, Switzerland: International Labour Office, 2012.

³⁷ Kabeer, Naila. "Gender Equality, Inclusive Growth, and Labour Markets." In *Women's Economic Empowerment*, pp. 13-48. Routledge, 2021.

³⁸ Maertens, Miet, and Johan FM Swinnen. "Gender and modern supply chains in developing countries." *The Journal of Development Studies* 48, no. 10 (2012): 1412-1430.

³⁹ Deere, Carmen Diana. "The Feminization of Agriculture?: The impact of economic restructuring in rural latin america." In *The gendered impacts of liberalization*, pp. 115-144. Routledge, 2009.

Women were observed to be the preferred gender for the agriculture and textile industries especially in packaging as they are meticulous and show a sense of innovation in displaying the ware.⁴⁰ They were also well paid. Similar findings were made in Bangladesh in the agricultural and textile industries where women were empowered and paid well, were on permanent terms of employment, and got maternity leave, and medical and childcare facilities.⁴¹ Bangladesh has been put on record as being the only country globally where the gender pay gap is very narrow – at 2.2% while the global average is 21.2%.⁴² This has been possible because the state leader was a woman, Sheikh Hazina, for many years, and thus the policies developed have been gender friendly.⁴³ The country has encouraged MNCs to establish themselves, especially in the textile industries, as their mandate is ethics in trading, which influences equality in gender terms of employment. These MNCs are part of the Ethical Trading Initiative, where there are no explicit standards used and both genders are treated equally.⁴⁴ The MNCs are geared towards best practice mechanisms that are to the benefit of women as their living standards are improved. This indicates that the third wave of feminism was the real beginning of changes in women's socio-economic lives, as their empowerment meant poverty reduction.

Many of the MNCs are geared toward promoting women in senior positions. In Africa, the Tigo MNC company, which used to operate the telecom sector in Tanzania, Madagascar, Senegal, Togo, Ghana, Uganda, Comoros, and Reunion, had been empowering women to rise in senior management positions before it closed down its operations in April 2022. From 2013 to 2015, the company increased the percentage of women in senior positions from 7% to 26%.⁴⁵ The company had an equal pay policy for both genders. It also tried to invest in countries like Ghana, which do not recognise gender empowerment to increase the visibility of women as well as mentor them, like in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) due to cultural practices. DRC is a war-ravaged country with high incidences of poverty and underdevelopment where both men and women face social and economic challenges, and most jobs are given to expatriates due to the country's colonial legacy. There are cultural norms hindering women from doing outside jobs. For example, women are not allowed to work in mines and offices as they are considered a sign of bad luck.⁴⁶ They also consider working outside the home immoral as they believe that it is associated with all evils of society namely prostitution, drinking and violence⁴⁷.

However, the MNC of Tigo wanted to break this barrier. In Ghana, the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of Tigo Ghana was a woman – Roshi Motman. The company's other three team leaders, from a total of eight, were also women—the directors of strategy and planning, human resources, and corporate affairs.⁴⁸ Under the female CEO, the company had the policy to retain and recruit women, enable career development perspectives, and have job satisfaction.⁴⁹

⁴⁰ Kabeer. N. (2021). *ibid*

⁴¹ Akter, Sonia, and Bishawjit Mallick. "The poverty–vulnerability–resilience nexus: Evidence from Bangladesh." *Ecological Economics* 96 (2013): 114-124.

⁴² Gap, Global Gender. "Report 2020." In *World Economic Forum, Geneva*. 2020.

⁴³ *ibid*

⁴⁴ Connor, Tim, Annie Delaney, and Sarah Rennie. "The ethical trading initiative: negotiated solutions to human rights violations in global supply chains?" *Non-Judicial Redress Mechanisms Report Series* 18 (2016).

⁴⁵ Millicom. Corporate Responsibility Report, 2015. Retrieved from www.millicom.com/media/4733478/mil0009_millicom_cr_2016_-full-_v5_online-1-spreads.pdf.

⁴⁶ Baah-Boateng, William, Pricilla Twumasi Baffour, and Emmanuel Akyeampong. "Gender differences in the extractive sector: A case study of mining in Ghana." *Mimeographed, University of Ghana International Institute for Advanced Studies* (2017).

⁴⁷ Buss, Doris, Blair A. Rutherford, Jennifer Hinton, Jennifer M. Stewart, Joanne Lebert, Gisèle Eva Côté, Abby Sebina-Zziwa, Richard Kibombo, and Frederick Kisekka. *Gender and artisanal and small-scale mining in central and east Africa: Barriers and benefits*. No. GWP-2017-0 2. 2017.

⁴⁸ Tigo. Mana gement team, (2020). Retrieved from <https://www.tigo.com.gh/team>.

⁴⁹ ILO. (2012). *ibid*

Power of In-Migration and Mobility

In the Asian and North African regions, women's empowerment has grown due to in-migration.⁵⁰ This is because migrations have an impact on identity, gender roles, family dynamics, as well as education. Once people migrate to places where gender equality is valued, upon returning to their home countries, they emulate these good practices. With good practices from Europe and North America, the Asian and North African migrant populations have adapted to having smaller families, late marriages, becoming educated and encouraging the participation of women in the labor markets.⁵¹ This has led to women's sustainable future in countries like Nepal and Morocco where women are getting married later in their lives, they can purchase and own land which was against cultural practices, and they have begun to work in male-dominated industries⁵².

Another example is Burma, where the migrant community of the *Padaung* minority was forced to seek asylum as refugees in the neighbouring country of Thailand. The *Padaung* women have a very rich culture of producing, marketing, and selling their traditional artware. They make beautiful brass neck coils and sell them to tourists, thereby supporting their families and improving their livelihoods. In Burma, the women were struggling with the cultural barrier where women were not allowed to do business, whereas in Thailand, the locals and tourists visited their villages and motivated them to produce their jewellery, which empowered women economically.⁵³

Self-Employment

In many parts of the world, women who are educated are taking economic empowerment into their own hands. They opt to go for self-employment as it helps them take care of their domestic work and other responsibilities. This has been observed in Ghana, Kenya, and Tanzania, where women have more profitable returns though less than in paid jobs and even engage more women in entrepreneurship, skills, and empowerment.⁵⁴ According to World Bank Open Data, 88.5 percent of Ghanaian women, 80.7 percent of Kenyan women, and 77.7 percent of Tanzanian women work for themselves.⁵⁵ This is entrepreneur-based but they earn only two-thirds of what men earn.⁵⁶

Women's Initiative Projects

In many developing countries, there has been a women's economic empowerment initiative under the Growth and Economic Opportunities (GrOW) projects. The aim is to encourage women to take up paid jobs in order to have better livelihoods. In Bangladesh, under the GrOW initiative, women got married late, and this was associated with higher education and resulted in employment for women.⁵⁷ In Kenya, Ghana, Burkina Faso, Tanzania and Uganda, research indicated that early child marriages led to a slow start in women's empowerment economically.⁵⁸ In East and

⁵⁰ UN. (2020). *ibid*

⁵¹ De Haas, Hein, and Aleida Van Rooij. "Migration as emancipation? The impact of internal and international migration on the position of women left behind in rural Morocco." *Oxford development studies* 38, no. 1 (2010): 43-62.

⁵² Gioli, Giovanna, Amina Maharjan, and Manju Gurung. *Neither heroines nor victims: Women migrant workers and changing family and community relations in Nepal*. New York: UN Women, 2017.

⁵³ Grant, P., & Minority Rights Group International. (n.d.). *State of the world's minorities and indigenous peoples 2016 : events of 2015, focus on culture and heritage*.

⁵⁴ Hampel-Milagrosa, Aimée. *The role of regulation, tradition and gender in doing business: case study and survey report on a two-year research project in Ghana*. No. 60. Studies, 2011.

⁵⁵ World Bank. World Bank Open Data, (2020). Retrieved from <http://data.worldbank.org/>.

⁵⁶ Index, African Gender Equality. "Empowering African women: An agenda for action." *African Development Bank Group*. Retrieved February 1 (2015): 2017.

⁵⁷ Pimkina, Svetlana, Iman Sen, and Nina Buchmann. "Age at marriage, women's education, and mother and child outcomes in Bangladesh." (2018).

⁵⁸ McKay, Andy, Mary O'Neill, Alejandra Vargas, and Martha Melesse. "From school to work in six African countries: how are women faring?-policy brief." (2017).

West Africa as well as Bangladesh research showed that there was a relationship between marriage, childbirth, and employment.⁵⁹ The girls had to get permission from their in-laws to go to work and in most cases, it was never approved. This was because of the traditional gender norms and cultural practices. To reduce child marriages and teenage pregnancies, the GrOW project was implemented in Bangladesh with a sample size of 15,739 girls.⁶⁰ The girls received six months empowerment program or a financial incentive to delay marriage or both. This was done because 59 percent of Bangladeshis aged between 20 to 24 years were married before 18.⁶¹ This is because early marriages have been of economic value as families are paid dowry for every daughter, they give in marriage.⁶² The results of the GrOW project after four and a half years of its implementation indicated that girls were not being married until 18 years, fewer births took place before the age of 20, and more girls were in school even after the age of 20. This is progression as it eventually led to more women working, getting paid, and empowering themselves.

Kenya has also benefited from the GrOW project. This has been in unpaid care work, especially childcare, which hinders mothers from participating in employment. The project was aimed at encouraging mothers, especially single moms, to take care of their children but with lowered costs, indicating that they could work and simultaneously have their children taken care of at daycare centers. To lower the cost of childcare and make women realise the benefits of being employed, a random sampling experiment approach was undertaken in Nairobi's Korogocho slums. The slum was selected based on its high fertility rate and each woman having 2.8 children.⁶³ Mothers who did not take their children aged between one and three years of age to daycare centres were given vouchers to take them to selected daycare centres. The result indicated that 80 percent of women used the vouchers to send their children to daycare centers, and they searched for paid jobs as it reduced their burden of childcare. This empowered them economically, and they were able to take better care of themselves and their children. Moreover, women were given reduced working hours when they had young children. This is in line with the SDGs of reducing poverty, improving health and catering to education. It also fits into the principle of leaving no one behind. If women are to be well taken care of, then advocacy is needed in terms of women's rights to take care of their children; at the same time, women need decent jobs and a balance between home care unpaid jobs and paid jobs, especially for single mothers and mothers living in urban low-income areas.⁶⁴

Another example from Kenya is the Base Titanium Company, which is geared towards building sustainable livelihoods for women. This company is working with Business for Development (B4D) with the aim of benefiting the Muslim community living around the Kwale Titanium mine. The B4D collaborates with the Australian Cotton On Group, which has advocated for purchasing sustainable cotton by 2023.⁶⁵ This model is aimed at supporting local development and empowering farmers to have a sustainable income. It is improving the farmers' agricultural knowledge, educating them on best practices, supporting the management of crops, and equipping farmers

Mariara, Jane, Andy McKay, Andy Newell, and Cinzia Rienzo. "Gender gaps in the path to adulthood for young females and males in six African countries from the 1990s to the 2010s." *IZA Journal of Development and Migration* 8, no. 1 (2018): 1-19.

⁵⁹ African Development Bank Group. (2015). *ibid*

⁶⁰ Buchmann, Nina, Erica Field, Rachel Glennerster, Shahana Nazneen, Svetlana Pimkina, and Iman Sen. "Power vs money: Alternative approaches to reducing child marriage in Bangladesh, a randomized control trial." *Unpublished Manuscript* (2017).

⁶¹ African Development Bank Group. (2015). *ibid*

⁶² Maertens. M. and Swinnen. J. (2012). *Ibid*

⁶³ Emina, Jacques, Donatien Beguy, Eliya M. Zulu, Alex C. Ezeh, Kanyiva Muindi, Patricia Elung'ata, John K. Otsola, and Yazoumé Yé. "Monitoring of health and demographic outcomes in poor urban settlements: evidence from the Nairobi Urban Health and Demographic Surveillance System." *Journal of Urban Health* 88, no. 2 (2011): 200-218.

⁶⁴ Muthuri, Stella K., Maharouf Oyolola, and Cheikh Faye. "Trends and correlates of single motherhood in Kenya: Results from the demographic and health survey." *Health Care for Women International* 38, no. 1 (2017): 38-54.

⁶⁵ Business for Development. Kwale Cotton, (2021). Retrieved from <http://businessfordevelopment.org/kwale-cotton/>.

with resources to have a sustainable harvest. The program mainly targets women farmers and aims to break cultural norms in the conservative Muslim community. Under this program, couples are trained. However, due to cultural taboos, if the wife does not attend the training, the B4D, when going for their regular farm visits, trains the wives on-site. This has enabled women to participate in a large number of fields, and by 2016, 40 per cent of cotton farmers and 95 per cent of poultry farmers were women.⁶⁶

Policies and advocacy

Many governments have been trying to reduce their inequalities and based on this, the number of people living in poverty has been declining.⁶⁷ Countries like China have uplifted the lives of people. In 1988, 40 per cent of the global population living in the bottom 10% in terms of incomes lived in China.⁶⁸ By the year 2010, China's economic growth had increased, and this has uplifted people, especially women, from poverty. A majority of women have been educated under China's policy of free education, and this has empowered women to get decent jobs. However, there is still a contrast between educated women from wealthy families and those from poor families, as the former earn better incomes than the latter due to the unevenness in society.⁶⁹ This explains that the theory of feminism of poverty in the second wave is still in existence.

Advocacy can also be done at individual company levels. Safaricom, Kenya's leading mobile network service provider, has incorporated advocacy for working mothers. Under its maternal policies, it allows mothers to have 16 weeks off with fully paid leave; it provides reduced working hours for the first six months; the work station has a standby doctor; it has all child care facilities in case a mother decides to bring the child to work; full medical cover for mum and child; as well as private care and feeding rooms.⁷⁰

Gender groups

In many minority communities around the world, women are not allowed to join gender groups. These are for men only. Around Kenya's Maasai Mara National Reserve, many private conservancies have been set up and women have benefited through gender groups.⁷¹ These groups aim to break cultural barriers where in the past, only men could be members.⁷² The conservancies are keen on attaining SDGs, especially that of gender equality.

Shah's study indicated that many women joined the gender groups. However, when it came to attending the gender group meetings, 95.5 percent of the registered male members and 75 percent of the female members attended the meetings. This was very encouraging, especially when compared to the past when women were not even allowed to be members of these groups.⁷³ Women were keen on breaking the cultural norms and improving their livelihoods. In the gender groups, they shared traditional knowledge on enhancing food production and managing natural resources like forest

⁶⁶ Muthur. S., Oyolola. M. and Cheikh. F. (2017). *ibid*

⁶⁷ Ravallion, Martin. *Are the world's poorest being left behind?* No. 20791. National Bureau of Economic Research, Inc, 2014.

⁶⁸ Lakner, Christoph, and Branko Milanovic. "Global Income Distribution: From the fall of the Berlin wall to the great recession." *World Bank Economic Review* 30, no. 2 (2016).

⁶⁹ Kearney, Melissa S., and Phillip B. Levine. "Income Inequality, Social Mobility, and the Decision to Drop Out of High School." *Brookings Papers on Economic Activity* (2016): 333.

⁷⁰ Murage. E. Why and how to support mothers to combine breastfeeding and work. African Population and Health Research Center, (2015). Retrieved from www.safaricom.co.ke/sustainabilityreport_2015/public/uploads/Employees.pdf.

⁷¹ Shah. P. Changing gender partiality amongst indigenous communities: The case of the Maasai around the Maasai Mara Conservancies in Kenya. *Pathways to African Feminism and Development* 5(1), 102-117, (2020).

⁷² *Minority-and-indigenous-womens-right-to-culture*. (n.d.), (2016)

⁷³ Shah. P. (2020). *ibid*

products. These groups have facilitated income-generating projects for women like bead-making, jewellery, and retaining their culture; beekeeping and selling honey and surplus milk; their marketing skills have improved; they have been provided with bursaries for education; they have benefited from health facilities; they have been given regular updates on family planning and its benefits to women and child health, and they have been allocated funds for business start-ups. To add to this, the members also benefit from borehole facilities as they pay a very low amount to get water. This has saved the women's long-distance journeys and led to a reduction in human-wildlife conflicts and improved their health. The women were also able to engage in paid jobs like teaching in schools or starting small shops where they sold jewellery, honey, and milk. This has made them independent, reduced poverty, and improved their living standards.⁷⁴ The overall goal is to improve the lives of women and that of the future generation.

Other successful women's groups in Kenya include the Isecheno Women's Conservation Group in Kakamega County and the Wasini Women's Group in Kwale County, where both women's groups have benefited from ecotourism. The Isecheno Women's Group is located on the western edge of Kakamega National Park. The group is well known for its ecotourism entrepreneurship, business skills, and training of women to get paid jobs and time-protecting the environment by stopping illegal activities like charcoal making. Tourists pay the women's group when they visit their village to see the empowering charms of women's job security and income generation.⁷⁵

Another example is the Wasini Coral Island project, which was initiated by the European Union (EU) for the women of Wasini. The project aims to protect corals. With a 100 per cent success rate in protecting the corals, the EU encouraged the women to convert the coral island into an economic entity solely run by women. In turn, the women have empowered men to collect tourists via boats from the mainland to see Coral Island. The women take care of the corals and charge an entry fee to view the corals.⁷⁶ They also make and sell traditional cultural items like slippers and jewellery, made from seeds and bark. This has made women enterprising and innovative. In the last four years, they have set up a tourist hotel where tourists can relax. In this way, the women can feed their families and send children to school.

Gig economy

The gig (digital) economy is defined as the "exchange of labour for money between individuals or companies via digital platforms that actively facilitate matching between providers and customers on a short-term basis".⁷⁷ In many cases, freelance workers, especially women, are employed as it gives them flexibility. This economy has enabled women to prove their worth through skills and the development of more products.⁷⁸ In this economy, women can balance office work and the home. They can engage themselves in paid jobs. Many app-based companies are keen on having women work for them as their jobs are based on demand and supply. One example is the Uber app, which states, "Freedom is helping drive another wave of women's empowerment: the opportunity to fit work around life, rather than the other way around." For women around the world, Uber offers something unique: work on demand, whenever you

⁷⁴ Safaricom. Safaricom sustainability report, (2015). Retrieved from www.safaricom.co.ke/sustainabilityreport_2015/public/uploads/Employees.pdf.

⁷⁵ Irandu, Evaristus M., and Parita Shah. "The Role of ecotourism in promoting women empowerment and Community Development: some reflections from Kenya." *Journal of tourism and hospitality management* 2, no. 6 (2014): 245-259.

⁷⁶ Girard, N. (2016). *ibid*

⁷⁷ BEIS. The characteristics of those in the gig economy. Research Paper 2018 (2). London: Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS), UK Government.

⁷⁸ World Economic Forum. "The future of jobs: Employment, skills and workforce strategy for the fourth industrial revolution." *Global Challenge Insight Report* (2016).

want it. "Drivers can make money on their terms and set their schedules."⁷⁹ Furthermore, the Uber app is also a blessing for women—"The Uber app is liberating for 'the single mom' who can turn off the app to pick up her kids from school, and then turn it back on once they've been dropped off at soccer practice."⁸⁰ Many women are now working from the comfort of flexibility between work and home as indicated, "TaskRabbit has enabled me to have the flexibility to work around the schedule of being a full-time mom."⁸¹ According to the freelancing platform Upwork (formerly Elance), "the majority of women working for labor platforms find it easier to be hired for a job online while working for multiple clients than to compete for a full-time job in a traditional fashion."⁸²

In Egypt, one in every four entrepreneurs is a woman, and two out of every 10 established business owners are women. With the rising access to technology and education in Arab countries, the "gig" economy is increasingly recognized as a potential venue for increased women's employment. There have been a growing number of people, particularly women, seeking freelance work, and middle-class Egyptians are now familiar with women offering to drive children to school via social media networks, and other working women offering to deliver ready-made meals from restaurants.⁸³

Another successful platform in Kenya is Lynk. It started its online business in 2017 and since then, it has been working with the informal sector workers, of whom there are currently over a thousand, and the main target is women. The focus of the platform is to understand women's needs and create paid jobs for them. The online platform provides training tools and cheap loans. The platform's initial research indicated that 38 per cent of blue-collar workers were women. Yet they earned only 16 per cent of the total incomes generated online. This was because of the types of jobs women concentrated on, and these included cleaning, childcare, hospitality, and beauty care. Very few women concentrated on technical jobs.

Women expressed their failure to take up more income-generating jobs because of lack of education, limited or lack of start-up capital and training programs, as well as support to set up companies and other issues to do with legal documents. To help women overcome these hurdles, it has been encouraging women to participate in male-dominated jobs. It has started doing this by introducing Fundiworks, which is a business incubation pilot where workers are encouraged to join in furniture making. Fundiworks provides working space for women as well as the latest tools and machinery. It also helps them find competing markets, buy materials at subsidised prices, and gets them micro-loans. This pilot project has been a success, with women earning 73% more than men in beauty and 88% more in technical jobs. Based on the assistance women got from Lynk, 93 per cent indicated that their livelihoods had improved after joining Lynk and 64 per cent stated that they had acquired new skills.⁸⁴

When the UN members adopted the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development in 2015, they aimed to have an equitable world with human rights for all. Under this, every woman is entitled to gender equality and there would be no hindrance to their empowerment. This was not only stated in SDG 5 but in all SDGs as there is a nexus between gender equality and all SDGs. This is in line with the Beijing Platform for Action (1995), where both international and national policies have steered the move towards gender equality, which in turn has resulted incorporation and the market providing more economic opportunities for women.

⁷⁹ Uber Newsroom. On this international women's day, women take the wheel. 7 May, (2016). Retrieved from <https://newsroom.uber.com/driven-women>

⁸⁰ Uber Newsroom. Meet the Uber team driving our women partner, 27 July, (2015). Retrieved from <https://newsroom.uber.com/2015/07/meet-the-uber-team-driving-our-womenpartner-program/>

⁸¹ TaskRabbit. Changing the face of diversity in tech: Our CBC tech 2020 African American inclusion plan', the hutch by TaskRabbit, (2016). Retrieved from <https://blog.taskrabbit.com/2016/04/21/cbc-tech-2020-diversity-inclusion-plan/>

⁸² Elance. Women in technology, (2013). Retrieved from <https://www.elance.com/q/women-in-technology>

⁸³ Barsoum, Ghada. "Educated, but will she work." *The Cairo Review of Global Affairs* 29 (2018): 35.

⁸⁴ Lynk. Lynk addresses inclusion in the informal sector. Case study August, (2020).

All these developments reflect the third and fourth waves of the theory of feminism of poverty, where women's being very diverse by working at home and work and managing both places through unpaid and paid employment, have shown no limits to embracing women's empowerment. Education and financial power have helped women be empowered. The fourth wave has been more dynamic, showing the real strengths of women, especially during COVID-19, where women have become better empowered and have proved that with the technology they can multitask – work from home and manage both office and home. In this way, families and societies are managed better and poverty is a dream of the past.

Conclusion

In other parts of the world, policies and legal frameworks to protect women are either weak or nonexistent. Lack of regulations results in novel imbalances in the relationship between workers and companies. There is a possibility that companies may escape certain responsibilities touching on the rights of workers. Unsolved systemic challenges can also lead to strengthening the unequal position of men and women in their work. Due to toxic masculinity, women can only be seen as suitable for work in the domestic sphere. Clients might refuse to be served by female service providers because of sexism in society.

This paper has highlighted the interlinkages, on the one hand, between patriarchy and gender inequality and, on the other hand, policy approaches toward gender equality that have supported women's economic empowerment. It explains how women suffer higher levels of vulnerability and discrimination than men. With the growing international policy and legal frameworks set out to protect and support women, as evidenced by the ILO, UN Agenda 2030, and the feminist movements, women are bridging the gender inequality gap. Despite this, women's economic participation depends largely on how much access is accorded to them in terms of contribution and protection.

Recommendations

The following three recommendations are made to improve their access to social and economic resources:

The trend amongst the increasing number of women is to juggle more than one job as they look for a bigger pay cheque to cover their living costs, including leisure and fashion, as well as other family expenses. Today, the implementation of ICT in society is exacerbating the gender divide, especially in usage patterns between men and women. Therefore, all governments need to step up to ensure that they establish a knowledge-based society. ICT initiatives like e-strategies, free internet access, and personal computers need to be launched in all homes so that women can enjoy these facilities. ICT is part of the fourth industrial revolution and can be used as a tool to empower women. This can be done through programs like promoting ICT training, increasing ICT access and usage for women, and encouraging their employment in ICT-related sectors. This reflects the theory of feminism of poverty in its fourth wave.

Developing countries need to invest in digital literacy and STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) programs that focus on increasing the engagement of under-represented groups, especially girls. These initiatives aim at increasing girls' and women's participation in STEM; hence, bridging the digital gender divide. There is a growing trend toward automation that will continue to ramp up in the years ahead as advances in technology and artificial intelligence are made. While automation will eliminate many old jobs, it will also create many new ones, many of which require training and experience in the STEM fields, where women are vastly under-represented.

Legislation and social protection mechanisms at the workplace need to be in place to prevent any type of harassment of women, including infringing on their rights to

equal pay, promotions, and maternal leave. If all this is in place, the SDGs related to women's economic empowerment will be achievable by 2030, the principle of leaving no one behind will be fully implemented, and the feminism of poverty will only remain in theory and not in practice.

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