Feminisation of Poverty among Girl Children: Towards Social Transformation

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Abstract

Poverty is an international societal impediment. Women and children are the most vulnerable populations to poverty which has led to the coining of the term 'feminisation of poverty'. This paper is based on literature review as it discusses the factors that promote the feminisation of poverty among girl children in selected African countries. Most of the factors which have been identified are as a result of the predominance of the system of patriarchy and rigid social and cultural traditions. The factors include sexual abuse of girl children; child and forced marriages; commercial sex exploitation of girl children; impact of HIV/AIDS and poor quality of education for girls. In light of the factors identified in the literature reviewed, the authors of this paper recommended social transformation in societies in order to reduce poverty among girl children. There is a need to make the communities aware of the girl child's rights so that they can prioritise the girl-child's best interests too. The government should prioritise instituting programmes and interventions to advocate for a cost-benefit analysis of cultural practices. This will help stop

certain cultural practices which exploit the girl child and make her vulnerable to poverty.

Keywords: *Girl-child poverty; patriarchy, sexual abuse, forced marriages; HIV/AIDS; education.*

Introduction and background

Africa is considered to be the poorest continent in the world and the vulnerable members of society who are particularly affected by poverty are children and women (SOS, 2018). Women face societal disadvantages and inequality and these make their experience of poverty different from that of men (McGinn and Eunsil, 2017). In other words, as put by Chant (2008), poverty is a gendered experience. She argues that even though women's poverty levels are at the centre of political discussions around the world as governments put into place deficit reduction plans, these discussions often fail to take into account the complex relationship between gender and poverty (Chant, 2008).

In an attempt to understand gender issues, much focus has been directed at the iniquities, strains and contradictions that occur in gender arrangements and the most audible narrative has centered on equitable gender relations (Saltzman, 2006). For example, it is recorded that several early founders of sociology assumed that men and women were innately different and unequal in their intellectual, emotional and moral capacities (Saltzman, 2006). This assumption of looking at gender issues is reactionary in nature and does not provide opportunities to address and unearth the real problems faced by women and the girl-child especially. Using this reactionary approach to gender issues, some authors note that children, especially girls, are on the receiving end of poverty and its ramifications (United Nations (UN), 2010; Chinyoka and Naidu, 2013). Only a few countries, especially in the developing part of the world, have moved from being reactionary and made provisions to treat the girl and the boy child equally (International Monetary Fund (IMF), 2012).

To address the problem of feminisation of poverty, mainstream social work which focuses on maintenance, fixing and engineering is clearly not needed. This type of intervention can only make a small difference (Gray and Webb, 2013). Gray and Webb (2013: 6) indicate that drawing together a new insight from sociology and political philosophies is motivated by a distinctive shift occurring in

contemporary times which acts decisively on social work. The two authors encourage a renewed desire for a testing and proving of critical thought which should be capable of bringing together social work's role in demands for justice and anti-oppression. This paper argues for critical social work towards promoting social change and justice, in this case promoting the protection of girl children from factors that cause poverty, through social transformational change. This paper maintains that, addressing girl children poverty requires a gender analysis of factors promoting feminization of girl children poverty in a patriarchal society to unearth the underlying problems faced by the girl-child.

Theory of feminisation of poverty in Africa

The term "feminisation of poverty" started to be used in the 1970s but has gained momentum among academics and activists in the past twenty years or so. In 1978, Diana Pearce coined the term after she observed that two-thirds of the poor in the US were women over the age of 16 and that women's economic status had declined from 1950 to the mid-1970s (Pearce, 1978). Feminisation of poverty is a phenomenon which included three elements as Cagatay (1998:1) argues: women have a higher incidence of poverty than men; women's poverty is more severe than that of men, and; over time, the incidence of poverty among women is increasing at a rate faster than that of men. Nevertheless, critics of the feminisation of poverty argue that the unequal distribution of poverty with the experience of women on poverty being higher than men is not a new phenomenon; it has always been there and ignored. In Africa, poverty has a woman's face. Therefore, it is important to discuss the factors promoting the feminisation of poverty for the girl-child so that appropriate measures can be taken to prevent girls from falling into the cycle of poverty and allow the society to reach one of the Sustainable Development Goals, especially Goal 1, the eradication of poverty (UN, 2017). The following section discusses the factors promoting feminization of poverty among girl children in selected African countries.

Factors promoting the feminisation of poverty among girl children in selected African countries

In discussing the factors informing the feminisation of poverty among girl children in selected African countries, it is important to take note of one of the key characteristics of the nature of African communities, which is that it is still largely patriarchal. Patriarchy is defined by Walby (1990) as a system of attitudes and structures in which men hold power over women. From the definition, it can be deduced that patriarchal attitudes and structures may contribute to girl children exclusion and lack of opportunities. Girls Education Movement (GEM) (2017) reported that in a patriarchal society, girls are accorded lower social status and always find themselves under the control of men. The factors discussed in the following sections may be linked to the patriarchal nature of African communities.

Sexual abuse of girl children

Child abuse is one of the major public health challenges currently facing most African countries A report by UNICEF in 2017 indicated that around 120 million girls under the age of 20 worldwide have experienced forced intercourse or other forced sexual acts. Perpetrators of girl-child sexual violence are strangers and people who are known to the victim. One of the most disturbing findings by UNICEF (2017) was that most of the sexual violence against girls is perpetrated by people they know. In their data, 28 countries indicated that 9 in 10 girls who have experienced forced sex reported that they were victimized by someone they knew or were close to (UNICEF, 2017). This relates to why violence against children and adolescents remains hidden because the children will not report the cases as they are often victimized by people who they know.

There are reports of biological fathers accused of sexually abusing their girl child (Townsend, 2013). Many community members find it difficult to come to terms with this sad reality. While psychologists and psychoanalysts try to relate the problem to the abusive biological father's early childhood experiences, many individuals fail to understand why biological fathers stunt the development of their child and their chance of growing up with dignity (Maguire, 2002). Evidence from literature show that it is not only biological fathers who abuse the girl child but

even the boyfriends of the children's mothers or stepfathers (Townsend, 2013). Behaviorists indicate that the boyfriends or stepfathers who abuse their step children are sick and need serious therapeutic interventions. These behaviorists believe that they can enhance these perpetrators' self-esteem and therefore help to remove them from the apparent world of illusions (Maguire, 2002). Despite the explanations from psychologists and behaviorists, perhaps the issue of biological fathers, mother's boyfriends and stepfathers sexually abusing the girl child can be explained in terms of moral and ethical decay, erosion of values and norms that ought to inculcate the abusers with parental responsibility and accountability of nurturance and safeguarding the future of young girls (Breiner, 2013).

Sexual violence is not only perpetrated by biological fathers, stepfathers or mother's boyfriends. There is evidence that show that girls in Africa are also abused by their relatives, teachers, schoolmates and partners (Magwa, 2015; Gwirayi, 2013; Altinyelken and Le Mat, 2018). Researchers such as Abasiattai et al. (2007) and Alam, Roy and Ahmed (2010) have documented that an adolescent girl can be sexually abused in any setting, be it offices, homes, roadsides, bushpaths or motor parks. In a study by Prinsloo (2006), it was found that more than 30 percent of Southern African girls were raped in and around schools. Studies revealed that the main perpetrators of sexual abuse against primary school girls were classmates in Ghana, and teachers in the Central African Republic (Pinheiro, 2006).

Research shows that there is an undeniable link between sexual violence and poverty because sexually abusing a girl disturbs their social functioning. Sexual abuse does not only affect the girl child emotionally and physically but also exacerbates the risk of falling into poverty as the girl's opportunities for development are hindered. In some cases of sexual abuse, the girl child is impregnated (Stacky & Baily, 2015). The painful part is that in some cases the perpetrators do not only impregnate these girls, but also deny paternity and, in some cases, infect them with HIV (Mswela, 2009). In such cases, the young girls' future is destroyed. Some end up losing their self-respect and give up on living, going as far as to committing or attempting suicide (Plunkett et al, 2001). Based on the observations of the authors of this paper, in black rural communities, in cases where the girls' parents are dead, sexual and emotional abuse is

high which further leaves the girls in a condition of persistent vulnerability and poverty.

Sexual abuse also can jeopardise a girl child's economic wellbeing. Greco and Dawgert (2007) argue that sexual abuse can increase the likelihood that the victim will become homeless, develop mental health problems, and other daily stressors and struggles. Research also show that sexual abuse can seriously undermine a person's education. When a girl child's education is interrupted, this may have a direct impact on future job opportunities and economic resources. In a study by Silverman, Raj, Mucci and Hathaway (2001), female students who were physically and sexually assaulted were at increased risk for substance abuse and unhealthy weight control. The impact that sexual abuse has on the girl child highlights the need for serious considerations from stakeholders such as psychologists, social workers and policy-makers in dealing with girl child sexual abuse. A multidisciplinary approach with these different stakeholders will contribute to the realisation of two Sustainable Development Goals: Goal Number 1 - no poverty, and Goal Number 5 - Gender Equality which will empower the girl child as well as women generally (UN, 2017).

Child and forced marriages

In a report by the United Nations Population Fund (UNPF) (2018), it was shown that globally, one in every five girls is married, or in a union, before reaching the age of 18. Child marriage occurs around the globe, and cuts across countries, cultures, religions and ethnicities. Statistics from UNICEF (2005) indicated that 45% of girls under 18 are married in South Asia; 39% in sub-Saharan Africa; 23% in Latin America and the Caribbean; 18% in the Middle East and North Africa. Worthy of note is Niger which has the highest prevalence rate of child marriage in the world with 76% of girls getting married before the 18th birthday, while Central African Republic has the highest prevalence of girls getting married before their 15th birthday at 29%. In Malawi, among the traditional Yao people, as soon as a girl reaches puberty, she considered ready enough for marriage.

Child marriage is a human rights violation. There are various laws against it but the practice remains widespread. The practice of forced child marriage also counters the contents provided in the United Nations

Convention on the Rights of a Child, (Article 3), which hugely advocates for the best interests of children to be the primary concern in making decisions that may affect them. Girl marriage has been a concern from a global, regional and national setting. This is evident in the United Nation's 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda where goal number five in particular focuses on achieving gender equality and empowerment of women and girls, with specific emphasis on ending harmful practices, such as girl marriages (UN, 2017). The African Union, Agenda 2063 for the Africa We Want, emphasises that by 2063, Africa is expected to be a people-centered continent that puts children first and has full gender equality (African Union, 2015:8). Agenda 2063 also aspires that, by 2063, barriers to quality health and education for girls, such as harmful social practices, like girl marriages, should be eliminated (African Union, 2015:9). With the laws in place and different agendas to stop the practices of child marriages, the fact still remains that the practice of child forced marriages is still widespread. There are different causes for the persistence of child marriages in different countries and they are discussed in the following paragraphs.

In Africa, there are a variety of causes of the widespread of forced child marriages. In Zimbabwe, PLAN (2012) found out that if a girl becomes pregnant, she is considered ready for marriage and is forced into marriage with the father of the child, even in circumstances where the pregnancy was the result of forced sexual relations. The results from a study conducted by Dzimiri (2017) in Zimbabwe indicated that the major causes of child marriage in the Mashonaland province in particular are religious beliefs and practices. Other factors highlighted by Dzimiri (2017:74) include lack of serious sex education in schools due to cultural beliefs and practices, socio-economic background of learners, early socialisation, parental expectations and level of education and also lack of adequate knowledge on the children's rights and other legal systems that support them. Because of poverty, poor parents often marry their daughters off, believing that the marriage will protect the child and provide a much more secure future for the child. However, evidence from the International Center for Research on Women (2007), show that girls who marry young are more likely to be poor and remain poor.

There are some cultural practices which favour forced child marriages such as the practice of *Ukuthwala* in South Africa. This is a cultural practice that involves abducting young girls into forced marriage

with their relatives' husbands after their relatives have passed away (Tau, 2015). Though largely a Xhosa cultural practice, it is also embraced by many other communities in the country. Reports also show that girls aged 12 to 15 are normally the target of this practice. This raises concerns regarding the extent to which the practice is denying these girls of making an informed choice about marriage (Myers & Harvey 2011). In Kenyan communities such as the Maasai and the Turkana, forced marriages take the same form as *Ukuthwala* even though it does not bear the same name.

Forced marriages of young girls can be a cause of poverty among girls. This is so because in countries like South Africa where the *Ukuthwala* practice is still a norm, it is one of the leading disturbing reasons behind girl children stopping their studies (Mwambene & Sloth-Nielsen, 2011). Child marriages lead to girls dropping out of school. Once a young girl's education has been disrupted or completely stopped, the chances of ending up poor is heightened as they will not have the qualifications to secure employment. Thorpe (2011) revealed that young girls in South Africa who are forced into marriages due to the practice of Ukuthwala are at risk of contracting HIV/AIDS.

The practice of forced child marriages is one of the factors that promotes feminisation of poverty among girl children. As indicated earlier, forced child marriage disrupts girls' education, threatens their economic lives and health, therefore limiting their future prospects. This means that forced early marriage has a significant impact on the vulnerability of the girl child to poverty. It perpetuates the cycle of girl poverty as the girl children born in these marriages are likely to marry young as well (UNICEF, 2014). The young girls in forced marriages continue to be in poverty and they are more susceptible to suffer abuse from their husbands. The authors of this paper suggest that societies need to subject their cultural practices to a cost-benefit analysis in order to abandon or discourage practices like *Ukuthwala* which violate the rights of the young girls and make them vulnerable.

Commercial sexploitation of girl children

While female prostitution is a common practice and as old as history, child prostitution is a relatively newer practice, perhaps unknown in many societies of the world. The rise in child prostitution in many

societies of the world can be linked to the need for children to also partake in the task of contributing to their family income (Hosken, 2014). States of economic desperation, hopelessness and despondency prompt and motivate the younger girls, usually under the direction of their mothers or other elderly women, to engage in prostitution. In some areas in South Africa such as KwaZulu-Natal, girls are being turned into sex slaves (Myers & Harvey 2011). In countries such as Rwanda and Zambia, child prostitution is a common practice in order to fight off episodes of poverty (UNICEF, 2014). Commercial sex is widespread and a commonly acknowledged practice amongst school-age girls. It is posited by PLAN (2012) that poverty is the most common factor motivating girls to enter into selling their bodies for money to get different basic but unaffordable necessities. Also, luxury items such as mobile phones and perfumes are motivations for transactional sex.

A negative outcome of child prostitution is loss of interest and concentration in schools. This is in addition to increased vulnerability to abuse from men with whom the deal with. Child prostitution interrupts the girl child's education by taking her away from school to a life that would make huge demands of them physically, socially, emotionally and psychologically (Aulette-Root et al., 2013). Once the girl child has turned into prostitution, her chances of being poverty-stricken increases. The early introduction of girls to sexual intercourse also puts them at risk of contracting HIV/AIDS or developing cervical cancer later in life. Child prostitution largely makes young girls perfect candidates for poverty and being susceptible to contracting HIV/AIDS (Republic of South Africa, 1996).

Orphanhood due to HIV and AIDS

Statistics indicate that globally, there are about 17.5 million children who have been orphaned by HIV/AIDS and more than four-fifths (14. 2 million) of these children are resident in sub-Saharan Africa (UNAIDS, 2015). Orphanhood affects all aspects of a child' development, whether socially, physically, emotionally and psychologically (Uys and Cameron, 2003; Casky, 2009). The girl child appears to be more vulnerable (Juma and Klot, 2011). Literature also show that one-tenth of orphans are prone to missing school, with a large number being the girl child (HGSF, 2014). Girl children are more vulnerable to truancy due to the

overwhelming need to provide for their families (Kapungu, 2007). Girl children take on parental roles before they are socially, physically, emotionally and psychologically mature to do so, a concept called parentification of the girl child (Hooper, 2011).

The impact of HIV and AIDS on the girl child as described above greatly reinforces female disempowerment as the girl child assumes roles that hinder her own development and participation in education and economic development. As a result, girl children who find themselves in such circumstances easily fall into poverty as they lack support to improve and carry on with their lives. Orphanhood due to HIV and AIDS must be treated as a causal factor that promotes the feminisation of poverty among girl children.

Poor quality of schooling among girls

The education of girls is core to development in Africa, but this goal has proved to be so difficult to achieve in terms of quality. Of course, the quantity has been achieved as many African countries have made significant progress in expanding girls' participation in schooling. In South Africa for example, in terms of girls and women's access to education in the 2017 national budget, education and training received the lion's share of investment, with an estimated allocation of R320.5 billion (National Treasury, 2017). This has resulted in an increase in the enrolment of girls and women in learning institutions. But the reason why girls continue to be in poverty is because many girls remain unable to access and benefit from quality education on an equal basis with boys. A gender benchmarking study found that even though South Africa boasts that women have more opportunities available to them than ever before, their participation in the science, technology workforce remain low and women remain severely under-represented in degree programmes for engineering, physics and computer science with only 28.5% women graduates (ONE, 2015).

Furthermore, the quality of education for African girls is compromised because they face important obstacles not shared by their male peers. A study done in Lusaka, Zambia, identified obstacles like discriminatory treatment that reflects the persistence of sexist ideas about the position and capabilities of girls; sexual abuse of schoolgirls, including constant harassment by boy pupils and requests for sex by male

teachers; and issues of sexuality involving teen pregnancy and societal attitudes toward sex (PLAN, 2012).

Poor quality of education as highlighted above in the form of discriminatory practices that girl children face contributes to girl children failing or dropping out of school. The disruption in the education may cause girl children to fall into poverty. Also, their low participation in programmes such as science and technology shows that societal attitudes and beliefs about the prescribed gender roles where women are expected to pursue "caring" and "nurturing" jobs still exist. This is not to say that professions which are caring and nurturing are insignificant, but such professions are low-paying. Women mostly find themselves in such professions and they will continue to be vulnerable to poverty. There is a lack of commitment in redressing power imbalances as girl children continue to face discrimination, unequal opportunities and unfair treatment in schools, even though in numbers, many countries have more girls enrolled for school.

The disproportionately high rate of poverty among women and girls as compared to boys and men is as a consequence of a patriarchal society. Many of the causes of girls' poverty are deeply rooted in gender inequalities which are exacerbated by a system of patriarchy which prohibits girls from acquiring education to develop and empower themselves and even if they do are seen as a danger to the society (Vaugh, 2016). In a study done by PLAN (2012), it was revealed that there are entrenched assumptions about girls' roles as carers, mothers, brides and household labourers. These assumptions give girl children a negative perception on the value of education, life and career choices available for them.

The negative perception of the value of education does not start with the girl child but with the society surrounding her, especially the parents who make choices between girls and boys based on traditional gender roles. There is evidence that where there is positive perception from girls regarding education there is still a tendency for support from parents given to boys over girls. For example, it was reported by PLAN (2012) that in Mali about 48% of parents surveyed opted to keep boy children in school rather than girls if forced to make a choice as compared to merely 28% who would opt to keep their girl children in school. The patriarchal society consequences are seen also in countries like Ethiopia, Kenya, Ghana and Senegal where parents noted that men felt threatened by and

were reluctant to marry educated girls unless they were educated themselves (PLAN, 2012). If girl children perceive education in a negative way, there is a likelihood that they will not pass or will drop out of school. This will mean that when girl children are not educated consequently they will fall into the poverty trap as they will not have any means to economically survive in a world where education is a requirement to secure a job.

Rigid traditions are seen to be deeply-rooted in other individuals as they are not convinced that there is any value in investing in a girl's education as a result of long-held beliefs embedded in pre-colonial traditions. In Kenya, researchers found beliefs held by parents, guardians, and the community that education is for boys (Warrington and Kiragu, 2012). There is pressure on girls to marry rather than go to school. The parents are unwilling to pay school fees to send a girl back to school after pregnancy. With the rapid change in the postcolonial period, one would expect that attitudes would change, but that is not the case when it comes to girls' education. As a result the girls are left vulnerable and undeveloped and more at risk of being impoverished.

Another persisting and rigid tradition which causes poverty among girls is the division of domestic labour. In some African families, girls are expected to do all of the household work such as cooking, cleaning, doing laundry, caring for children, elderly and family members who are ill, and related tasks. This becomes a big problem for schoolgirls as they are expected to perform a lot of household chores, causing them to have no time to complete their school work, a problem not usually faced by their male counterparts. This causes the girls to perform poorly in class and may drop out of school, forced to marry and remain in poverty. According to PLAN (2012), over 40% of girls surveyed in Guinea-Bissau reported that they worked on household chores for five hours every day. This makes it difficult for them to go to school regularly or concentrate as they will be tired. At home they cannot study as well as they will be expected to perform their household chores. As a result, the girls are overwhelmed and they become absent from school and eventually dropout of school.

Conclusion

Acknowledging an array of abuses and practices that make the girl child susceptible to poverty is critical if robust interventions to tackle the predicament are to be instituted in countries where the girl children are a victim of cultural and social practices. This paper has identified the various practices that need to be challenged in some African countries. The goodwill of respective governments is critical if the communities that put girl children at risk of ending up in poverty are to be challenged. The authors for this paper believe that since cultural practices are dynamic, the governments of respective countries should initiate fora for societies to do cost benefit analysis of cultural practices such that harmful practices can be discarded and progressive ones retained.

Recommendations

In light of the factors discussed on the promotion of feminisation of poverty among girl children in this paper, there is a need for social transformation in communities to fight against poverty amongst girl children. There is need to sensitize and conscientise every community member to stand up against some practices which violate girl children's rights and make them vulnerable to fall into poverty. The governments of various countries where children are largely abused need to institute programmes and strategies to educate the communities on the rights of girl children. Cultural practices such as *Ukuthwala* and early and forced marriages pursued by some African communities need to be stopped. Perhaps the governments should encourage national campaigns to carry a cost benefit analysis of these cultural and traditional practices, in order to discourage practices that are detrimental and retain and strengthen those that are both developmental and child-friendly.

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