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## Poverty Among Women in Sub-Saharan Africa: A Review of Selected Issues

By Hazel M. McFerson<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

Gender discrimination resulting in greater poverty among women is widespread throughout the developing world. However, the incidence of women poverty, as well as its depth and their vulnerability, is particularly marked in Sub-Saharan African countries of the tropical belt, albeit with significant rural-urban differences. The article reviews the interaction of traditional restrictions on women property rights, weak governance and violent civil conflict in perpetuating gender discrimination and women poverty in those countries. Statistics show some progress in women development indicators in Sub-Saharan Africa during the last decade, partly associated with improvements in governance and the end of civil war in some countries. Consolidating and advancing this progress requires targeted initiatives that take into account the circumstances of different groups of women while also encouraging the formation of bridging networks among groups and the provision of greater openings for women's "voice".

*Keywords:* Poverty, Gender and development, Africa, Governance, civil conflict, human rights, property rights

*"Poverty was there before I was born and it has become part of life like the blood through my veins...Poverty is watching your own children and grandchildren die in your arms but there is nothing you can do...I know poverty just like I know my father's name. Poverty never sleeps. Poverty never takes a holiday."*<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

The 'feminization of poverty' is a feature of much of the developing world, with females accounting for half of the world's population but 70 percent of the poor (Moghadam, 2005)<sup>2</sup> This article reviews major causal factors of poverty among women in Sub-Saharan Africa—mainly rural women in the countries of the tropical belt.<sup>3</sup> Of course, there are significant differences in the condition of different groups of women in the various countries. However, they share a common predicament, rooted in the interaction of three major factors: weak governance, traditional restrictions on women property rights, and violent civil conflict. Although each of these factors has been present at one time or another elsewhere, it is only in Sub-Saharan Africa that all three have been present in contemporary times--as shown among others by Collier, 2007, Cornwall, 2005, and Gordon, 1996. This interaction has had a severe negative impact on the status, condition and welfare of women in Sub-Saharan Africa (hereafter simply "Africa").

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### *The aspects of poverty*

Poverty results in hunger, lack of shelter, illiteracy, inadequate health care, and so on, but is not defined fully by any of them. The proximate causes of poverty include one or more of the following: low income; low assets (whether physical or human capital); lack of opportunities (whether from adverse location or other reasons); and social exclusion (often but not always associated with ethnic minorities). The worst forms of poverty are those that combine all four of these aspects: income poverty, asset poverty, opportunities poverty, and access poverty.

Accordingly, a distinction must be made between contingent poverty and structural poverty. Contingent poverty occurs as the result of a specific adverse event—e.g., a sharp rise in food or fuel prices, a natural disaster, and the like. Contingent poverty is inherently temporary (although the event may well cause households to fall into permanent poverty), and is reversible as soon as the adverse event ceases, albeit at a non-recoverable cost owing to the need for transitional sacrifices and adjustments. The appropriate policy response to contingent poverty is to address the effects of the adverse event and stimulate general economic activity and growth in the affected area. (“a rising tide lifts all boats...”). Structural poverty, by contrast, is deeply rooted in the economic, social and political fabric of the country, and no general policy of economic stimulus or investment will succeed in reducing it (“...except the boats stuck at the bottom”).<sup>4</sup>

In Africa, the *incidence* of poverty (the proportion of individuals who live on less than the equivalent of \$1.25 a day<sup>5</sup>) is second only to parts of South Asia: although the proportion of poor Africans has declined from 58 percent in 1990 to 50 percent in 2007, the absolute number of poor people has risen from under 300 million to over 400 million. Worse, the *depth* of poverty (how far incomes fall below the poverty line) is greater in Africa than anywhere else, and so is *vulnerability* (the probability that a person above the poverty line will fall into poverty in the future).

The greater depth of and vulnerability to poverty has resulted in human development indicators more unfavorable than even in regions with a higher poverty incidence (World Bank, 2009a.), and in greater deprivation. This is shown among other things by the systematic *Afrobarometer* surveys of “lived poverty”, quantifying how frequently people go without the basic necessities of food, clean water, medicines or medical treatment, cooking fuel, and minimum cash income. (Like the *Latinobarometro* for Latin America, the *Afrobarometer* is an independent, nonpartisan survey of African public opinion on social, political, and economic issues, conducted in a dozen countries and repeated on a regular cycle. ([www.afrobarometer.org](http://www.afrobarometer.org). See also Mattes, 2008 and 2009.) As will be shown later, rural women in Sub-Saharan African countries are more likely to be affected by structural poverty, and are disproportionately affected by all aspects of poverty—making them literally the poorest of the poorest.

### *Poverty: A Multi-Dimensional Perspective*

The earlier simplistic views of poverty as lack of money (or, in older times still, manifestation of laziness or divine will) have evolved into much richer perspectives. It is not possible in this paper to do justice to these perspectives, among which one may single out the concept of *structural violence* (Galtung, 1969; see also Gilman, 1983 and Farmer, 2006); the understanding of absolute poverty as a *violation of human rights* (Ho, 2007);

the view that poverty is fundamentally the result of *capabilities deprivation*, i.e., the absence of agency, options and opportunities (Sen, 1979); and the related argument that a set of “*basic human entitlements*” is a minimum requirement of justice (Nussbaum, 2000). Particularly relevant to the predicament of rural women in Sub-Saharan Africa are Nussbaum’s recognition of the poverty impact of exclusion from political participation, and the linkage between Sen’s conception of poverty and the need to foster the creation of social capital among women—both explained in the paper.

### **The Roots of Poverty Among African Women**

As will be shown later by the statistical trends, while life expectancy of African women is not significantly different than for men, their quality of life is distinctly worse—especially in the rural areas. At the same time, their contribution to economic activity and development is very substantial. *Any policy to reduce overall poverty in Africa must address the female face of African poverty.* To address this challenge, one needs to analyze the influence on African women poverty of a number of factors—beginning with the international environment

#### *Gender and globalization*

Globalization is often represented as an apolitical universal force, whereby the facilitating institutions are assumed to be neutral, and gender is rarely considered as relevant. Some have postulated links between globalization and the gendered dimensions of poverty (Moghadam, 2005), but the net impact on African women is unclear. On the one hand, the opening of the economy through globalization may lessen the economic dominance by the (typically male) ruling elite and, to that extent, can contribute to relieving women poverty. On the other hand, if globalization worsens income distribution (especially in poor countries), it has a heavier impact on women, who are disproportionately represented among the poor. (Hawthorne, 2004.)

The limits placed by globalization on states’ ability to provide social protection pose a challenge to programs to respond to the needs of the more vulnerable and less visible groups, especially women and children. The shrinking of the welfare state has constituted a uniformly negative outcome for poor women in general: shifting the costs of social protection from the public sector to the household results in increasing women’s workload within the household. The shock of market fluctuations, yet another outcome of integration into the global system with special impact on poverty, is also disproportionately absorbed by poor women working harder both inside and outside the household. Paradoxically, then, because of the weakness of social protection in African countries and their peripheral position in the international economy, the adverse impact of globalization on poor women has been less serious in Africa than in other poor regions. Conversely, as African economies become more integrated into the global system, policies will be needed to maximize any beneficial impact on the poor in general, and explicitly take into account any adverse effects on poor women in particular. *However, the roots of the special poverty problems of African women are to be found not in globalization but in restricted property rights, weak governance and frequency of civil conflict--themselves interrelated.*

### *Gender property rights*

The economic vulnerability of poor African women flows mostly from their weakly defined property rights to major productive assets, such as land or cattle, in the many countries where a combination of custom and laws restrict their ability to own and manage land. Perversely, restrictions on women's rights to land coexist with the reality that women are the main cultivators--undertaking about 80 percent of the work in food storage and transportation, 90 percent of the work of hoeing and weeding, and 60 percent of the work in harvesting and marketing. (IFPRI, 2000.) In Kenya, for instance, women are five percent of registered landowners but 80 percent of the agricultural labor force.

The consequences of weak property rights are clearest in the termination of marriage. In the event of divorce or widowhood, in most African countries women are often stripped of the right to use their husband's land, which they may have tended for years, thus losing their main source of income. The cycle of poverty is intensified when the children of women expelled from their former husband's land must drop school to find work, thus compromising their economic future.

International institutions such as the African Development Bank and the World Bank have promoted land registration and titling for the poor, partly in order to provide them with the collateral to qualify for credit, which can then be invested in income-producing activities. However, most such initiatives have not adequately considered the customary restrictions on women's ownership and control of land, and may have inadvertently perpetuated gender inequality and aggravated women poverty. (Esfahani, 2006.) In addition to considering the impact on women when designing land titling and registration regulations, laws are needed to explicitly protect women's rights of access to property.

In fact, several African countries have promulgated legal statutes to address women's lack of land rights. However, these laws have been largely ineffective, either because they have deferred to customary law or because they have simply not been enforced. For example, while Kenya's constitution outlaws gender discrimination, it also upholds customary law on marriage, divorce and inheritance. In Tanzania, two land acts invalidate customary laws that exclude women from property ownership, but they are not fully implemented, in part from lackadaisical enforcement by the male-dominated judiciary and in part because women are not aware of their legal rights. Dissemination of information could therefore have a significant positive impact on women property rights and poverty alleviation.

"Affirmative efforts" are required, both in the enforcement of new legislation and to address gender-specific disadvantages in effective and concrete ways. Formal reforms are not sufficient to lessen poverty among African women. It is important to note that such efforts would not only improve the situation of poor women, but also have a positive impact on the effectiveness of national policies. For example, attention to gender differences in property rights can improve the outcomes of natural resource management policies. In order for environmental protection to be effective, it is important to identify the nature of the rights to land, trees, and water held by women and men, and how these rights are acquired and transmitted between users (Meinzen-Dick, et al, 1997. See also Lastaria-Cornhiel, 1997). *Gender is a key dimension of sustainable development.*

### *Gender and time*

The issue of time use adds an important dimension to the gender and poverty paradigm in Africa. (Kes and Swaminathan, 2006). “Time poverty” impacts particularly poor women and girls, who are required to contribute time and labor to various tasks and as a result forgo education. (Canagarajah and Coulombe, 1998.) Contrary to the argument (Collier, 1998) that the poor have a lower opportunity cost of time, because of their unemployment and underemployment, African women in rural areas suffer from extreme time scarcity. Not only is time scarcity more severe for women during “normal” circumstances, but it is further aggravated in conflict situations, in which women and girls as young as 10 are forced to handle all the time-intensive activities necessary to sustain daily life for the male combatants.

Time poverty can make income and asset poverty worse in several ways. Blackden and Wodon (2006, p.17) identify the main links between time and income poverty as follows: “...low-productivity in many non-market tasks renders them time- and labor-intensive, thus reducing the availability of time to participate in more economically productive activities. Second, due to the gendered division of labor that causes poor substitutability of labor allocation in non-market work, individuals, particularly women, are unable to take full advantage of economic opportunities and participate in income-generating activities. Third, time poverty also impedes individuals’ ability to expand capabilities through education and skills development, thereby enhancing economic returns in the market place.” Moreover, Pandolfelli et al. (2007) note that time scarcity severely limits women’s participation in collective actions which are time-intensive but crucial to improve their economic condition—and/or lead to downloading additional household tasks to young girls, thus impairing their schooling and future life chances.

Agriculture accounts for 35 percent of Africa’s GDP and 70 percent of its employment, and it is here that the gender time disparity is most evident. Rural women and girls are responsible for fetching water, fuel and fodder and for most of the work of carrying produce to markets. Environmental degradation has forced them to walk farther and spend more time, and the occurrence of civil conflict aggravates the situation tremendously, by adding the fear and insecurity linked to the high incidence of rape by combatants from all sides. As African women do most of the agricultural work, they have averaged almost eight hours per day, compared to about six hours for men. (African Union Commission, 2004) In addition, of course, women perform a number of other chores related to children and the maintenance of the home. So, whether or not Collier’s argument is right that the poor, in general, have a lower opportunity cost of time (which is itself dubious), the argument is flatly wrong insofar as poor African women and girls are concerned. Indeed, anyone who has personally witnessed the realities of life in the African hinterlands knows full well that women and girls are more than “fully employed” from sunup to long after sundown. Indeed, the opportunity cost of their time is often so high as to make the difference between life and death.

Time poverty is in part due to women’s much lower access than men to labor, fertilizer, and other inputs. Without this discrimination, their productivity would increase substantially. Crop yields can increase by about 25 percent when rural women obtain the same education, experience, and farm inputs as the average male farmer. (Quisumbing, 1996). Thus, *redressing gender discrimination in time use would not only alleviate rural women poverty, but also be good for the agricultural sector as a whole.*

### *Gender and governance*

Governance and corruption problems are of course not exclusively African, but their incidence has been higher in Africa—for a variety of reasons, both internal and exogenous, which cannot be explored in this paper. (See McFerson, 2009d for an elaboration.) Governance is generally defined as the manner in which state power is exercised (rather than the manner in which power is acquired or the purposes to which it is put) and corruption as the abuse of public power for private gain. (Schiavo-Campo and McFerson, 2008). Because bad governance and corruption are harmful for development and especially bad for the poor and the less well-connected, governance improvements can benefit particularly women, who are a higher proportion of the African poor. (Baden, 1999.)

However, the probable impact of malgovernance on the *relative* poverty of women is not obvious. If malgovernance has an especially severe impact on those among the poor who otherwise would have *some* choices and opportunities, then it would tend to level downwards gender inequality of among the poor themselves. In this case, *improving governance may increase gender inequality at the same time as it reduces overall income inequality*. This is only a hypothesis, that would require careful in-depth investigation, but it is consistent—albeit in a different area—with the demonstrated impact of a “rigid racial tradition” (based on the rule of hypodescent) on leveling downwards the social status of the subordinate racial group—thus attenuating intragroup differences—while increasing the socio-economic distance between that group and the superordinate racial group. (McFerson, 1979.)

Nonetheless, improvements in governance are almost certain in time to lead to an *absolute* improvement in the economic situation of the poor—men *and* women. Moreover, weak governance interacts with traditional patriarchal structures and customs to perpetuate women poverty, largely through denying women the rights of property and use of essential economic assets.

In addition, the link to poverty works partly through the role of malgovernance as contributing cause of civil conflict. (Collier, 2007; McFerson, 2008 and 2009a.)<sup>6</sup> In 2006, with 13 percent of the world’s population Africa had 82 percent of UN peacekeepers (more than 51,000); half of the “most failed” states in the Failed States Index (and six of the top seven); and 25 percent of people identified as vulnerable by the UN High Commission for Refugees--UNHCR. (Englebert and Tull, 2008.) As sobering as these averages are, they mask the notoriously even more vulnerable situation of women during civil conflicts, as discussed next.

### *Gender*

The realities of gender inequality in Africa result in “diminished citizenship” of women, which is in turn reflected in gender-based violence. The World Health Organization defines gender-based violence as “physical, mental, or social abuse that is directed against a person because of his or her gender or gender role in society or culture”, and sexual violence as “any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic women’s sexuality, using coercion, threats of harm or physical force...” (WHO, 2008). Although in some cases gender-based violence can be directed against men seen as effeminate and perceived as weak, it is almost a synonym for sexual violence against women. However, at its core, *gender-based*

*violence is not a sexual issue, but fundamentally a human rights issue, with public health consequences (Borwanker et al, 2008.)*

Gender-based violence is both an obvious effect of poverty (because of weak physical and political ability to resist or retaliate) and a contributing cause of poverty (with its destruction of self-confidence and severe impact on health and basic capabilities). It is a universal problem, irrespective of wealth, education, religion, economic or social status--seen throughout the world--and typically goes unreported and shrouded in a culture of silence, largely because any social penalty tends to attach to the victim rather than the perpetrator. Once again, however, the syndrome has been particularly pronounced in Africa.

Gender-based violence has been most obviously perpetrated in conflict situations, including especially in Sierra Leone, Liberia, Ivory Coast, Burundi, Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Somalia, Sudan, and, very recently, in Guinea,<sup>7</sup> but rape is also used as an instrument of political intimidation. A recent survey found that the percentage of women (15–49 years) who had experienced physical violence was very high in most of Africa, whether or not civil conflict occurred—ranging from 30 percent in Malawi, Rwanda, and Zimbabwe to 50 percent in Cameroon, Kenya, and Zambia, and as high as 60 percent in Uganda (Borwanker et al, 2008).

A particularly egregious health consequence of gender-based violence is genitourinary fistula, resulting from gang-rape or forced penetration of objects into the vagina or the rectum—all too common in civil conflict situations. A fistula is an abnormal connection between organs or vessels that are normally unconnected, rendering the victim incontinent.<sup>8</sup> In addition to the grave physical symptoms of their condition, women also bear the psychological consequences, as well as the triple social stigma from the unpleasant manifestations of incontinence, the diminution of sexual attractiveness, and the degradation of their social status as a victim of sexual assault.

Gender-based violence has a power dimension, stemming from unequal power relationships between men and women. Violence is directed specifically against a woman *because* she is a woman--whether within the family, within the community or violence that is perpetrated or condoned by organs or agents of the state. Thus, gender-based violence is best viewed as part of Galtung's "structural violence" and Sen's "capabilities deprivation" mentioned earlier, as it has wide-ranging implications for depriving women of their fundamental capacities, including the ability to move about, to participate in the social life of the community, and make choices about their lives.

### *The special risks of motherhood*

In rural Africa, "...one of the grimmest risk to human life ...despite threats from warlords and exotic disease, is something even deadlier: motherhood. One of the most dangerous things an African woman can do is to become pregnant". (Kristof, 2009.) Although there has been some reduction in maternal mortality, at under one percent per year between 1990 and 2005 the progress has been much slower than the 5.5 percent required to achieve the Millennium Development Goal of reducing maternal mortality by three-quarters between 1990 and 2015. (Meyerhofer and Sahn, 2006). All developing regions are off track on this goal, but sub-Saharan Africa and parts of South Asia most seriously so. As of 2005, Africa had the highest maternal mortality ratio at 78 deaths per 10,000 births, twenty times greater than in Europe. Maternal morbidity and mortality are



particularly acute in rural areas with lack of access to medical care, and as many as 3,000 African women die every week from treatable complications of pregnancy and childbirth (World Bank, 2008).

Largely reflecting the poverty of mothers, the impact of poverty on young African children of both sexes is staggering, e.g., Africa accounts for 20 percent of the world's children under five years of age but half of all child deaths. *The single best way of improving the survival chances and development potential of African children is to address the extreme poverty of African mothers.*

### **African Women Poverty: The Statistical Evidence**

The empirical evidence strongly supports the presumptions of gendered poverty and inequality in African countries as well as the close association between malgovernance and the special poverty problems of African women, but also shows hopeful signs of progress during the past decade. In a nutshell, statistics show that currently *African women do not have shorter lives than African men, but do have harder lives.*

#### *Selected human development indicators*

Table 1 shows selected indicators and Table 2 compares women's life expectancy and literacy with the nation-wide statistics. Among other things, between 1994 and 2005:

- maternal mortality declined by 15 percent, from 90 to 78 in 100,000; <sup>9</sup>
- continent-wide, the life expectancy of women increased somewhat, from under 52 years to over 53, but drastically declined by 10 or more years in the Southern Cone—South Africa, Lesotho, Swaziland and Botswana (in part from the higher incidence of HIV/AIDs.) Thus, life expectancy in the rest of Sub-Saharan Africa increased by well over three years.
- women's life expectancy has remained about the same as life expectancy of men;
- there has been a remarkable increase in female literacy, by almost one third.

Table 1. African Women and Children: Key Human Development Indicators, 1994-2005 (\*)

COUNTRY	Maternal Mortality		Infant Mortality		Life Expectancy		Women Literacy		% Women seats in Parliament		% Children Underweight	
	1994	2005	1994	2005	1994	2005	1994	a/ 2005	1994	b/ 2005	1994	2005
Angola	1,500	1,400	120	154	...	43.3	...	54.2	...	15.0	....	26
Benin	990	840	87	89	56.8	56.5	23.0	23.3	...	8.4	...	18
Botswana	250	380	55	87	53.7	48.4	81.2	81.8	8.5	11.1	30	11
Burkina Faso	930	700	101	96	47.5	52.9	8.6	16.6	8.8	11.7	37	32
Burundi	1,300	1,100	122	114	45.0	49.8	21.0	52.2	...	31.7	14	35
Cameroon	550	1,000	62	87	56.5	50.2	49.5	59.8	12.2	8.9	14	16
Cape Verde	...	210	48	26	66.1	73.8	59.8	75.5	11.1	15.3	...	...
Central Afr. Rep.	700	980	99	115	50.9	45.0	43.9	33.5	3.5	3.5	...	24
Chad	1,500	1,500	121	124	48.7	51.8	32.7	12.8	...	10.5	...	37
Comoros	...	400	88	53	56.6	66.3	49.4	63.4	2.2	6.5	...	25
Congo (B)	890	740	90	81	...	55.2	...	79.0	...	10.1	24	11
Congo DRC	870	1,100	94	129	...	47.1	54.1	54.1	5.0	7.7	...	28
Cote D'Ivoire	810	810	89	118	53.5	48.3	27.5	38.6	...	8.5	24	16
Djibouti	...	650	113	88	...	55.2	...	79.9	...	10.8	...	24
Equatorial Guinea	...	680	114	123	50.2	51.6	67.3	80.5	8.8	18.0	...	19
Eritrea	1,400	450	103	50	51.6	59.0	...	75.1	...	22.0	...	35
Ethiopia	1,400	720	115	109	49.8	53.1	24.1	22.8	...	21.4	48	33
Gabon	500	520	91	80	55.8	56.9	51.8	79.7	...	13.7	...	8
Gambia	1,100	690	129	97	47.2	59.9	22.7	49.9	...	9.4	...	16
Ghana	740	560	79	68	58.5	59.5	51.0	49.8	...	10.9	27	13
Guinea	1,600	910	131	98	45.6	56.4	20.3	18.1	...	19.3	...	26
Guinea-Bissau	910	1,100	138	124	44.8	47.5	41.7	60.0	...	14.0	...	15
Kenya	650	560	70	79	54.8	53.1	67.8	70.2	...	7.3	23	16
Lesotho	610	960	79	102	59.4	42.9	60.9	90.3	11.2	25.0	21	20
Madagascar	490	510	87	74	...	60.1	...	65.3	...	8.4	34	36
Malawi	560	1,100	147	79	41.5	46.7	40.6	54.0	5.6	13.6	30	15
Mali	1,200	970	156	120	48.3	55.3	20.2	15.9	2.3	10.2	31	27
Mauritania	930	820	98	78	53.7	65.0	25.6	43.4	0.7	17.6	23	32
Mauritius	120	15	17	14	74.2	75.8	78.4	80.5	7.6	17.1	16	...
Mozambique	1,500	520	116	100	47.5	43.6	22.1	25.0	25.2	34.8	...	20
Namibia	370	210	63	46	...	52.2	...	83.5	...	26.9	...	24
Niger	1,200	1,800	121	150	48.7	54.9	5.6	15.1	...	12.4	36	34
Nigeria	1,000	1,100	82	100	52.6	47.1	43.8	60.1	...	...	36	24
Rwanda	1,300	1,300	145	118	...	46.7	...	59.8	...	45.3	29	18
S. Tome/Principe	...	...	...	75	...	66.7	...	77.9	...	7.3	...	7
Senegal	1,200	980	66	77	50.9	64.4	21.2	29.2	...	19.2	20	14

Seychelles	...	12	...	12	...	....	...	92.3	...	23.5	...	...
Sierra Leone	1,800	2,100	200	165	35.2	43.4	16.7	24.2	6.3	14.5	29	25
South Africa	230	400	51	55	66.8	52.0	81.2	80.9	23.7	32.8	...	10
Sudan	660	450	86	62	52.4	58.9	31.3	51.8	5.3	16.4	...	41
Swaziland	...	390	72	110	60.5	41.4	73.3	78.3	8.4	16.8	...	5
Tanzania	770	950	85	76	51.7	52.0	54.3	62.2	8.4	30.4	29	17
Togo	640	510	89	78	52.2	59.6	34.4	38.5	...	8.6	24	22
Uganda	1,200	550	121	79	41.1	50.2	48.7	57.7	...	29.8	23	20
Zambia	940	830	110	102	43.3	40.6	69.3	59.8	9.1	14.6	28	15
Zimbabwe	570	880	70	81	57.3	40.2	79.0	86.2	14.7	22.2	16	12
<b>Average</b>	<b>920</b>	<b>786</b>	<b>98</b>	<b>90</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>53</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>56</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>21</b>

(\*) Source: UNDP, *Human Development Reports*, 1997 and 2007/08, and UNICEF (www.unicef.org/infobycountry).

46 Sub-Saharan African countries; reliable data are not available for Liberia and Somalia. Maternal mortality in deaths per 100,000 live births; infant mortality per 1,000 live births; life expectancy in years; literacy in percent of women population; underweight children in percent of children under 5. **a/**: 1995-2005 average; **b/**: 2007.

Table 2. **Life Expectancy and Literacy Rate, African Women and National Rates, 1994-2005 \***

COUNTRY	LIFE EXPECTANCY				LITERACY RATE			
	1994		2005		1994		2005 a/	
	Overall	Women	Overall	Women	Overall	Women	Overall	Women
Angola	47.2	...	41.7	43.3	42.5	...	82.9	54.2
Benin	54.2	56.8	55.4	56.5	35.5	23.0	47.9	23.3
Botswana	52.3	53.7	48.1	48.4	68.7	81.2	80.4	81.8
Burkina Faso	46.4	47.5	51.4	52.9	18.7	8.6	31.4	16.6
Burundi	43.5	45.0	48.5	49.8	34.6	21.0	67.3	52.2
Cameroon	55.1	56.5	49.8	50.2	62.1	49.5	77.0	59.8
Cape Verde	65.3	66.1	71.0	73.8	69.9	59.8	87.8	75.5
Central Afr. Rep	48.3	50.9	43.7	45.0	57.2	43.9	64.8	33.5
Chad	47.0	48.7	50.4	51.8	47.0	32.7	40.8	12.8
Comoros	56.1	56.6	64.1	66.3	56.7	49.4	63.9	63.4
Congo (B)	51.3	50.1	54.2	55.2	73.9	...	90.5	79.0
Congo DRC	52.2	...	45.8	47.1	76.4	54.1	80.9	54.1
Cote D'Ivoire	52.1	53.5	47.4	48.3	39.4	27.5	60.8	38.6
Djibouti	46.8	...	53.9	55.2	45.0	...	79.9	79.9
Equator. Guinea	48.6	50.2	51.8	51.6	77.8	67.3	93.4	80.5
Eritrea	50.1	51.6	56.6	59.0	25.0	...	71.5	75.1
Ethiopia	48.2	49.8	50.5	53.1	34.5	24.1	50.5	22.8
Gabon	54.1	55.8	56.2	56.9	62.6	51.8	88.5	79.7
Gambia	45.6	47.2	58.8	59.9	37.2	22.7	49.9	49.9
Ghana	56.6	58.5	59.1	59.5	63.4	51.0	66.4	49.8
Guinea	45.1	45.6	54.8	56.4	34.8	20.3	42.6	18.1
Guinea-Bissau	43.2	44.8	45.8	47.5	53.9	41.7	60.0	60.0
Kenya	53.6	54.8	52.1	53.1	77.0	67.8	77.7	70.2
Lesotho	57.9	59.4	42.6	42.9	70.5	60.9	73.7	90.3
Madagascar	57.2	...	58.4	60.1	45.8	...	76.5	65.3
Malawi	41.1	41.5	46.3	46.7	55.8	40.6	74.9	54.0
Mali	46.6	48.3	53.1	55.3	29.3	20.2	32.7	15.9
Mauritania	52.1	53.7	63.2	65.0	36.9	25.6	59.5	43.4
Mauritius	70.7	74.2	72.4	75.8	82.4	78.4	88.2	80.5
Mozambique	46.0	47.5	42.8	43.6	39.5	22.1	54.8	25.0
Namibia	55.9	...	51.6	52.2	40.0	...	86.8	83.5
Niger	47.1	47.5	55.8	54.9	13.1	5.6	42.9	15.1
Nigeria	51.0	52.6	46.5	47.1	55.6	43.8	78.2	60.1
Rwanda	22.6	...	45.2	46.7	59.2	...	71.4	59.8
S.Tome/Principe	67.0	...	64.0	66.7	67.0	...	92.2	77.9
Senegal	49.9	50.9	62.3	64.4	32.1	21.2	51.1	29.2

Seychelles	70.2	...	72.7	....	88.0	...	91.8	92.3
Sierra Leone	33.6	35.2	41.8	43.4	30.3	16.7	46.7	24.2
South Africa	63.7	55.0	50.8	52.0	81.4	81.2	84.1	80.9
Sudan	51.0	52.4	57.4	58.9	44.8	31.3	71.1	51.8
Swaziland	58.3	60.5	40.4	41.4	75.2	73.3	80.9	78.3
Tanzania	50.3	51.7	51.0	52.0	66.8	54.3	77.5	62.2
Togo	50.6	52.2	57.8	59.6	50.4	34.4	68.7	38.5
Uganda	40.2	41.1	49.7	50.2	61.1	48.7	76.8	57.7
Zambia	42.6	43.3	40.5	40.6	76.6	69.3	76.3	59.8
Zimbabwe	49.0	57.3	40.9	40.2	84.7	55.8	92.7	86.2
<b>Average</b>	<b>50.1</b>	<b>51.8</b>	<b>52.6</b>	<b>53.3</b>	<b>54.0</b>	<b>45.1</b>	<b>70.0</b>	<b>55.7</b>

(\*) Source: UNDP, *Human Development Reports*, 1997 and 2007/08. Life expectancy in years. a/:1995-2005 average

### *Infant political progress*

These developments should be seen in some part as a reflection of the other noteworthy sign of gender progress since 1994—the increasing political participation of African women. Cases in point include the election of Africa’s first female president (in post-conflict Liberia); the appointment of women to powerful ministries such as finance and foreign affairs in several countries (Nigeria, Uganda, Tanzania); and the doubling of women’s representation in African parliaments—with some countries now having a higher percentage of women in parliament than in the U.S. or parts of Europe. Thirteen countries (about one in four) now have at least 15% women in parliaments—the threshold generally considered a “significant minority” (Connolly, 2004). Rwanda’s parliament is the world’s first where women hold a majority— 56 percent, including the speaker’s chair (McCrummen, 2008)—and women also hold one third of all highest-level positions, including foreign minister, education minister, Supreme Court chief and police commissioner. As a result, Rwanda has banished patriarchal customs that are still enforced in many other African societies, has passed laws to end domestic violence, and is now combing through the legal code to purge it of other gender-discriminatory laws.

Rwanda is an exception, and unlikely to be replicated any time soon. Also, in certain countries (such as the Republic of Congo or Equatorial Guinea) women representation in parliament is as meaningless as are the parliaments themselves—rubberstamps or laudatory choir for the regime. And the overall gender gap remains vast: the literacy rate of African women is still half the rate for men; women’s representation in executive organs has lagged far behind their improvement in parliamentary representation; and, of course, there is a very long way to go between a 15 percent representation in parliaments and eventual gender equality. That said, the political progress of African women, albeit still fragile, has been a novel and significant reality during this century and augurs well for the future in light of the critical importance of women’s empowerment for successful poverty reduction.

### *The association between malgovernance and women poverty*

The empirical evidence also supports the theoretical presumption of the linkage between bad governance and absolute women poverty. Among the many available indicators of governance, it is appropriate in this case to use the index elaborated

particularly for the continent—the Ibrahim Index of African Governance ([www.moibrahim.org](http://www.moibrahim.org)).<sup>10</sup> Table 3 shows for all African countries the Ibrahim Index, alongside the Transparency International index of corruption perceptions and the UNDP Gender Development Index; Table 4 lists the ten worst countries in terms of corruption and governance; and Table 5 shows the human development indicators pertinent to women and children for that group of countries.<sup>11</sup>

**Table 3. Corruption, Governance, Women Literacy and Gender Development Indicators, 2006 (\*)**

COUNTRY	CORRUPTION PERCEPTION GOVERNANCE		WOMEN LITERACY	GENDER DEVELOPMENT	
	World rank	African rank			African rank
Angola	142	33	43	26	30
Benin	121	21.5	13	40	33
Botswana	37	1	4	5	6
Burkina Faso	79	8.5	20	43	42
Burundi	130	26	35	29	35
Cameroon	138	29.5	25	23	16
Cape Verde	...	...	3	14	2
Central Afr. Rep.	130	26	42	36	41
Chad	156	38	45	46	40
Comoros	...	...	14	18	9
Congo Brazza.	142	33	28	11	13
Congo Kinshasa	156	38	46	27	36
Cote d'Ivoire	151	36.5	41	34	34
Djibouti	...	...	26	9	18
Equatorial Guinea	151	36.5	36	7	8
Eritrea	93	13.5	40	15	25
Ethiopia	130	26	31	41	37
Gabon	90	12	8	10	3
Gambia	121	21.5	27	31	23
Ghana	70	6.5	7	32	11
Guinea	160	41	39	43	29
Guinea Bissau	...	...	30	21	44
Kenya	142	33	17	16	17
Lesotho	79	8.5	12	2	12
Madagascar	84	10.5	16	17	14
Malawi	105	17.5	11	28	31
Mali	99	15.5	23	44	39
Mauritania	84	10.5	32	33	11
Mauritius	42	2	1	8	1
Mozambique	99	15.5	22	38	38
Namibia	55	4	6	4	5
Niger	138	29.5	24	45	43

Nigeria	142	33	38	20	27
Rwanda	121	21.5	18	23	28
Sao Tome&Princ.	...	...	9	13	7
Senegal	70	6.5	10	37	24
Seychelles	63	5	2	1	...
Sierra Leone	142	33	37	39	45
South Africa	51	3	5	6	4
Sudan	156	38	44	30	20
Swaziland	121	21.5	34	12	15
Tanzania	93	13.5	15	15	26
Togo	130	26	29	35	22
Uganda	105	17.5	19	15	21
Zambia	111	19	21	23	32
Zimbabwe	130	26	33	3	19

*Sources:* Transparency International ([www.transparency.org](http://www.transparency.org)) for corruption perceptions; Rotberg and Gisselquist, 2008, for the Index of African Governance; UNDP, 2007/08 for gender development index. Liberia and Somalia are not included. TI global rankings cover 163 countries; higher rank indicates worse corruption. Ibrahim Index rankings are for Africa; higher rank indicates better governance. (Dots indicate the information is not available.)

Table 4. **Ten countries highest in corruption perception and lowest in governance index (\*)**

<b>CORRUPTION PERCEPTION</b>	<b>AFRICAN GOVERNANCE INDEX</b>
Angola	Angola
Chad	Central African Republic
Congo Democratic Republic	Chad
Congo Republic (Brazzaville)	Congo Democratic Republic
Cote d'Ivoire	Cote d'Ivoire
Equatorial Guinea	Eritrea
Guinea	Guinea
Nigeria	Nigeria
Sierra Leone	Sierra Leone
Sudan	Sudan

(\*) *Source:* Table 3. Countries are listed in alphabetical order. (See Table 3 for rank order.) Recall that Liberia and Somalia were not included because of insufficiently reliable data on human development indicators during the period in question.

Table 5. *African Women and Children: Key Human Development Indicators*,  
Countries with Lowest Governance Index in 2006, 1994-2005 (\*)

COUNTRY	Maternal Mortality		Infant Mortality		Life Expectancy		Women Literacy		% Women seats in Parliament		% Children Underweight	
	1994	2005	1994	2005	1994	2005	1994	2005	1994	2005	1994	2005
Angola	1,500	1,400	120	154	...	43.3	...	54.2	...	15.0	....	26
Central Afr. Rep.	700	980	99	115	50.9	45.0	43.9	33.5	3.5	3.5	...	24
Chad	1,500	1,500	121	124	48.7	51.8	32.7	12.8	...	10.5	...	37
Congo (B)	890	740	90	81	50.1	55.2	...	79.0	...	10.1	24	11
Congo DRC	870	1,100	94	129	...	47.1	54.1	54.1	5.0	7.7	...	28
Cote D'Ivoire	810	810	89	118	53.5	48.3	27.5	38.6	...	8.5	24	16
Eritrea	1,400	450	103	50	51.6	59.0	...	75.1	...	22.0	...	35
Guinea	1,600	910	131	98	45.6	56.4	20.3	18.1	...	19.3	...	26
Nigeria	1,000	1,100	82	100	52.6	47.1	43.8	60.1	...	...	36	24
Sudan	660	450	86	62	52.4	58.9	31.3	51.8	5.3	16.4	...	41
<b>Average</b>	<b>1,093</b>	<b>944</b>	<b>102</b>	<b>103</b>	<b>50.7</b>	<b>51.2</b>	<b>36.2</b>	<b>47.7</b>	<b>4.6</b>	<b>12.6</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>26.8</b>
<b>Rest of Africa</b>	<b>860</b>	<b>741</b>	<b>97</b>	<b>86</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>53</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>19</b>

(\*) *Source:* Tables 1 and 3.

Simple statistical measures of the association between rankings of countries yield the following results:

- the coefficient of rank correlation between women life expectancy and either the corruption index or the governance indicator is very low and statistically not significant. This is consistent with the earlier finding that the discrimination and structural handicaps suffered by African women make their life harder, but not shorter;
- By contrast, the correlation between the ranking of countries by women literacy and by the governance index is statistically significant and in a positive direction—with a correlation coefficient of +0.42—suggesting a positive impact of good governance on women empowerment;
- The relationship between the governance index and the overall gender development index is also positive and significant, with a rank correlation coefficient of +0.62. (The correlation is almost perfect if one excludes a couple of countries whose official national statistics do not pass the laugh test—e.g., Equatorial Guinea with its alleged eighth place in Africa in terms of gender development, or Sudan, supposedly in the top half of African countries in this respect.).



The association between malgovernance and women and children poverty emerges most clearly when the data for the “ten worst” governed countries are aggregated. As shown in Table 5, the human development indicators for the ten countries that rank lowest in terms of quality of governance and highest in terms of corruption, taken as a group, are significantly worse in every respect than for the rest of Africa. On average, in the ten worst-governed African countries:

- two more women out of every 1,000 die in childbirth;
- women die two years sooner, on average;
- 10 percent fewer women are able to read and write;
- women had six percentage points fewer seats in parliaments;
- 17 more children out of 1,000 do not survive to their third birthday; and
- eight more children out of 100 are underweight.

### **Uganda: A Contemporary Test Case**

Designed in part to protect women's property rights in marriage and divorce, a Marriage and Divorce Act has been introduced in early October 2009 to amend the legislation on domestic relations. (See Uganda Law Reform Commission, [www.ulrc.go.ug](http://www.ulrc.go.ug).) The bill aims at correcting at least some of the structural obstacles to women empowerment in the marriage relationship--forced marriage would be outlawed; in particular, "inheriting" widows (normally by the brother-in-law of the deceased) would no longer be allowed, and a man may marry his relative's widow only if the widow freely consents; the "bride price" would no longer be a prerequisite for marriage; formal agreements with respect to ownership and distribution of property on dissolution of the marriage would be permitted; and certain protections would be extended to unmarried women after long periods of cohabitation.

These provisions have been criticized by some women groups as too timid. (See, for example, Tebajjukira, 2009.) And yet, even such limited modernization has triggered fierce opposition. Confirming the persistent influence of traditional structures on the lower socio-economic status of African women, the most active opposition to the bill comes from leading patriarchal figures in both the religious and social spheres. Thus, criticism from traditional leaders has been joined by attacks on the proposed law from the spokesman for the Muslim leadership, Sheikh Kirya, as well as the Reverend John Senyonyo of Uganda Christian University, based on the argument that the proposed bill will foster a "materialistic-founded relationship in marriage" (Abimanyi, 2009.) This is a rather transparent rationalization for continuing uncontested the husband's and male relatives' dominance over family and property and the ensuing disempowerment of wives and widows.

The controversy is especially interesting in light of the comparatively strong countervailing power of women organizations in Uganda. It is also complicated by the declining popularity of President Yoweri Museveni and ensuing need to marshal all support from traditional structures for the presidential election of 2011--need evident among other things in his recent attempts at reconciliation with the Kabaka (king) of Buganda, Ronald Mutebi. The fate of the proposed legislation is thus a test case of whether even modest modernization measures to protect African women's property rights and basic freedom of choice will be defeated by traditionalist men-dominated forces. If

not, Uganda may show other countries the way for removing some of the worst traditional restrictions on women.

## **Conclusions**

### *General policy directions*

Four general policy directions flow from the above analysis and empirical evidence:

- Poverty among women cannot be reduced in lasting ways unless all four dimensions are addressed: lack of income, lack of assets, lack of opportunities, and lack of access.
- Attention must be paid to the political economy of the state, and sustainable reduction of poverty among women will require improvements in governance.
- Attention must also be paid to the impact of traditional social structures. Although changes in deep-rooted cultural practices are by definition long-gestating, it is critical to consider them explicitly when designing programs to reduce women poverty and gender inequality.
- It has long been recognized that economic growth is necessary but not sufficient to reduce poverty, and that persistently high inequality is good neither for growth nor for social stability. It is now clear, as well, that reducing poverty and inequality overall may not help the economic situation of women—especially if traditional society is male dominated as is the case in most of Africa. Therefore, special initiatives targeted explicitly on women are needed, not to replace but to complement the growth-promotion and the general poverty-reduction programs.

### *The link to social capital, networking and empowerment*

National gender policy must take into account the specific condition of different women groups in different locales. However, in the rural areas of countries from Sierra Leone to Uganda and most of the ones in between, the argument of "local conditions" have also been used by male power elites to obstruct reforms to redress gender discrimination on the grounds that the reforms did not fit the local needs of women which they claim to know much better than the female troublemakers in the capital. (Uganda is a case in point.) It is critical therefore to work to create social capital by fostering bridging networks among different groups of women.

In a nutshell, the concept of social capital originated with Pierre Bourdieu (1983) and is generally associated with Robert Putnam (e.g., Putnam, 1993, 1995), who emphasizes two kinds of reciprocity networks that can lead to social collaboration and more effective institutions. "Bonding" networks connect people who are similar and create a sense of in-group solidarity, and "bridging" networks help to generate mutually beneficial relations between different groups, fostering cooperation and information exchange. The concept thus carries a kinship with Amartya Sen's view of poverty reduction as a process of empowerment and expansion of the basic capabilities of the poor. Also relevant is the finding by Knack and Keefer (1997) that the stock of social trust is greater in countries with more equal incomes, and Collier's conclusion (1998) that the poor are necessarily more reliant upon social capital and thus that the formation of social capital is likely to be proportionately more beneficial to the poor. And Nancy Birdsall (2001) noted that income inequality may adversely affect some of the correlates of social capital. In the pithy expression of Woolcock and Narayan (2000), the essence of the social capital

concept is “it’s not what you know, it’s who you know”. Social capital is in effect “connections capital”.

As shown earlier, gender discrimination in Africa stems largely from the exclusion of women from traditional and patrimonial networks of economic and political power and their “connections”. Accordingly, the main direction of improvement should be the systematic encouragement and support of collective action. A variety of possibilities in that direction exist, depending on the characteristics and circumstances of the specific country. (The highly successful Grameen Bank in Bangladesh and similar microcredit initiatives are only one example.)

The topic of collective action is too broad to summarize here. (See Ostrom, 1990, for an early general analysis, and more recently Pandolfelli et al, 2007, for a discussion of collective action and gender.) It is worth noting, however, that in light of the nature of much of traditional society in tropical sub-Saharan Africa, mixed-gender collective action groups in Africa are highly likely to be taken over by men--conceivably aggravating gender discrimination even further. The first stage of collective action by poor African women should thus concentrate on fostering bonding networks among poor rural women themselves, as well as bridging networks to women groups in urban areas. (Bridging networks to other poor and vulnerable segments may be encouraged later, when women groups are already on a solid and sustainable basis.)

But, finally, gender inequality and poverty among African women cannot be reduced in a lasting way unless one *listens* to them. Armchair theorizing and benevolent top-down initiatives have their place, but through an affirmative outreach by governments and civil society, with constructive pressure from aid donor agencies, *it is critical to open up new channels for women “voice” wherever and however it can be done*—including through building the capacity and integrity of African media.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *One Poor African*. [www.cozay.com/index.php](http://www.cozay.com/index.php). Accessed June 14, 2009

<sup>2</sup> This is why, for example, in Bangladesh Nobel prize winner Mohammed Yunus focused his microcredit initiatives on women—the poorest of the poor

<sup>3</sup> The circumstances of African women are very different in the southern cone—Namibia, South Africa, Lesotho and Botswana, although in Swaziland and to some extent in Zambia they share strong similarities to the situation in countries of the tropical belt.)

<sup>4</sup> An analogy used by Rev. Jesse Jackson.

<sup>5</sup> The new poverty threshold replaces the earlier "dollar a day" threshold, which has been widely used as the international standard for extreme poverty.

<sup>6</sup> Note that the influence of governance on poverty is independent of and additional to the adverse impact of civil conflict, because many countries with bad governance are also politically stable with firmly entrenched regimes—Equatorial Guinea comes to mind.

<sup>7</sup> During the 28 September 2009 military crackdown on demonstrators in Conakry against the military coup, hundreds of women were beaten or raped by marauding soldiers. "We all collapsed in tears. It is unspeakably painful what happened here in Guinea," Aïssata Daffe of the Union des Forces Républicaines political party told IRIN. A 15-year-old girl was gang-raped by soldiers: "...one after another. When we saw her she could not even sit." ("Guinea—In The Aftermath of Rape," <http://www.irinnews.org/report.aspx?ReportID=86527>, accessed on October 10, 2009.)

<sup>8</sup> There are no solid estimates of the prevalence of traumatic gynecologic fistula, but it makes up a substantial proportion of the overall genital fistula caseload in places where rape has been used as a weapon of war or instrument of political struggle. (See USAID, "Traumatic Gynecologic Fistula Resulting from Sexual Violence"

[www.fistulacare.org/pages/what-is-fistula/traumatic-fistula.php](http://www.fistulacare.org/pages/what-is-fistula/traumatic-fistula.php). USAID. Accessed on June 18, 2009. See also "Traumatic Gynecologic Fistula as a Consequence of Sexual Violence in Conflict Settings: A Literature Review." 2005.

[www.acquireproject.org/fileadmin/user\\_upload/ACQUIRE/traumatic\\_fistula\\_review--final.pdf](http://www.acquireproject.org/fileadmin/user_upload/ACQUIRE/traumatic_fistula_review--final.pdf). Accessed on June 18, 2009.

<sup>9</sup> Infant mortality has also declined, but by only 9 percent—suggesting that improvement in care during childbirth, however deficient it may remain, has been slightly higher than in caring for the infants after they were born.

<sup>10</sup> The Ibrahim Index of African Governance was developed by Harvard's Kennedy School of Government at the request and with the support of the Mo Ibrahim Foundation,

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in part to respond to the argument that, in addition to measuring good governance by its attributes, it is necessary to pay attention to key verifiable outcomes as well—in terms of basic safety and security, quality of government services to the public, economic opportunity, and human development. Although the index has weaknesses, mainly in subsuming under “governance” unrelated variables such as macroeconomic stability, it represents an improvement over pure “process” and perception-based indicators. (See McFerson, 2009c.)

<sup>11</sup> The primary data from which the indicators are assembled are gathered from national statistical sources of less than perfect reliability. (See the UNDP methodological notes for details, and McFerson, 2009c for a discussion of the shortcomings of the governance indices.)