

Research Article

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Women's contribution in african economies: It is time for a rethink

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Abstract: Explicitly defining orthodoxies about women empowerment in Africa reveal that, unlike men, women lack more economic opportunities, which contributes to their declining local economy and that of their respective nations. Although several studies have explored this claim further, most of their analytic portions have substantially surfaced the plausible causal link between other indicators and these nations' economic decline. This emphasis gives impetus to claims of a deliberate attempt by researchers not to posit causal relationships between women's inadequate economic opportunities and their respective nations' dwindling economies. In this regard, there are sketch speculations that any debate about women's role in a given African nation's economic growth is likely to be divided into arguments around their work efficiency. Within such debates, narratives around the responsiveness of such nations' governance systems to women, and their inherent societal norms, can be chiefly dialectical. By calling attention to issues limiting women's contributions to economies, this article demonstrates how increased investment in women's economic empowerment brings forth a positive impact on the economy. It borrows from Galtung's structural form of violence and Barnett and Hyde's expansionist theory in deriving an eclectic mix of expositions to support this position. . Based on these expositions, it concludes that discriminatory social norms and practices, and inadequate legislation, are the main impediments to women's economic empowerment. It proposes, in light of this conclusion, the need to delegitimize norms and ideas that perpetuate women's disempowerment and suggests that it can be achieved, through advocacy and policy interventions, which are context-specific.

Keywords – Empowerment, Dwindling economy, Local economy, Societal norms, Women

1. INTRODUCTION

In operating from a comparative framework, plausible standard references obtained from several archival sources' divergent narratives demonstrate how several countries in Sub-Saharan Africa rank dismally across various global economic indices. Much in evidence is provided by a series of recent studies, which reinforce this reality by augmenting quantitative data that confirms that of the poorest social contexts in the world, African countries occupy the lowest-ranking positions. These empirical facts are presented against the backdrop of such countries' self-rule for over two decades now, where a significant feature in their respective policy priorities and developments is enshrouded, perhaps, by the need for the quick and steady progress of the economy. Such a goal should not be far-fetched in the extreme because of these countries' operability of traditional and modern economic

systems and the abundance of natural resources, all of which can be referred to as beneficial coefficients for their respective economies' growth.

These countries' poor ranking has brought about an increase in subjective evaluations from various research outputs, which were designed, initiated, and conducted to establish and identify the pernicious habits that fuel the diminution or slow and unsteady growth of Africa economies. Such action-based projects are encouraged and deemed by economic experts as endemic, necessary, inevitable, and desirable in finding the panacea for such actions, which are manifestly detrimental to the economy. Indeed, as the first step, some of these projects have since provided a prognosis of the underlying problem. The overarching indicators that emerge in this context include poor governance and political instability, which engineer a buccaneering leap into profligacy, corruption, and prescription of ineffectual policy frameworks at the macro level that exacerbate, in turn, the high unemployment rates at the micro-level.

An observation than can be made is that of these indicators, unemployment seems to provide a vital backdrop in their logit analyses. This understanding can only mean that unemployment serves a catalytic role in the slow progress of economies and, for this reason, it is not surprising that it has garnered massive interest and exploration from a broad community of researchers. Closer scrutiny of some of these researchers' works reveals that their analytic portions focus more on how unemployment has inured different disenfranchised groups to a life of toil and hardship. Of these groups, one can effortlessly notice that women are not foregrounded, or in other words, their plight and factors behind their unemployment are evidenced by the vagueness of foci.

Such glaring avoidance or aberration forms a pedestal for developing this article's comprehensive narrative, as mounting incontrovertible evidence hazards an unending increase in the number of unemployed women across several countries in Africa. An interpretive synthesis of such corroborative quantitative evidence speaks about the need to provide equal employment opportunities to all, which is achieved through creating more job opportunities for women, and in this way, strengthening the antidote for debilitating economies. This embodiment affords this paper traction to reflect on problems fueling women's limited job opportunities in the region, resulting in their perceptible insufficient contributions to their respective nations' economic progress. It makes an ineliminable link to structural form of violence, and expansionist theory, in providing a perfect backdrop for a systematic and rigorous review in this article. The next discussion presents insights obtained from these concepts' core formulations, which provides essential reference points for this paper's discussion of findings.

2. STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE AND EXPANSIONIST MODELS

A partial consensus-based claim emerging from recent scholarship on practices enabling gender inequality is that such discrimination is fuelled, in part, by an indirect form of violence. Such violence, also referred to as structural or institutionalized violence, is understood relationally as social structures within the realms of economy, politics, legal, and culture that deny certain groups or individuals opportunities to meet their fundamental human needs. It follows that such denial is, to no small extent, realized or built by unequal distribution of power and resources (Galtung, 1969; Gilligan, 1997). It is based on this line of reasoning that this violence is further described by some theorists as different kinds of harm or damage to individuals, especially women, which are avoidable or preventable. This description is, in comparative terms, antithetical to the understanding of direct violence, which is the opposing form of violence, also referred to as personal or behavioral violence that is propounded based on the ease with which it is practically possible to establish the real identities of the actors committing such violence (Lewis, 2021).

Even though some theorists distill the above ease of recognition into their expressions of the main conflicting facets between structural and direct forms of violence, such ease can also be the case for the former since the actors fuelling it, or in other words, oiling the social machinery of marginalization are mainly individuals yielding power within the institutions of politics, culture, health, education, legal sector, and others (Farmer, 2004). These areas are

captured subtly in the initial articulation of structural violence by Johan Galtung, a Norwegian sociologist, in the 1960s (Galtung, 1969). This articulation has provided an essential backdrop for multiple layered accounts of peace studies, gender studies, and most recently, emergent discussions within paleopathological research projects (Klaus, 2012; Lewis, 2018). This useful supplementary source is the case, given that the concept of structural violence enables the emergence of more nuanced perspectives on the complex nature of the social, cultural, political, economic, and historical forces, which establish and spur social inequity and suffering for individuals and groups on varied levels.

The panacea for such inequity and suffering could require special ardor in reifying expansionist theory in societies perpetuating disenfranchisement of certain groups. This theory, proposed in 2001 by Barnett and Hyde, emphasizes a benign and powerful correlation between multiple roles such as employee, wife, and parent and their beneficial values to women and men (Barnett & Hyde, 2001). At this juncture, the review of the literature makes a virtually exclusive caution regarding how the accumulation of such roles must not be expressly used to deny women employment opportunities. It can be recognized in such literature that there are considerable benefits that employment opportunities present to women and their families. It is based on reflection of this claim that some theorists question nomothetic gender-based stereotypes, which suggest that employing women brings about a burgeoning number of stressed mothers and neglected children. It is in this vein that the expansionist model's complete oeuvre renders the pressing need of creating more job opportunities for women to enable a shift from a life of domesticity to one of professional and nonprofessional occupations (Epstein, 1988; Wang, Parker & Taylor, 2013).

To this end, it is clear that the articulation of structural violence and expansionist model is a crucial ingredient to any framework of analysis that can be built and used to establish and explore the degree of women's empowerment in Africa through formal and informal employment. The former concept's core formulation, regarding how those in positions of power can impede some individuals or groups from realizing their full potential and enable them to bring about desirable changes in their societies, is essential for such exploration. The latter concept's significant feature of the need to support women to venture into formal and informal employment, and enable a move away from a life of domesticity governed by gender role stereotypes, forms a vital backdrop for the analysis of this paper's retrieved secondary data. In this regard, given these two concepts' articulations, this analysis will be inextricably approached from the societal and institutional lenses. The following section demonstrates how this exploration will occur by detailing this paper's methodical approach.

3. A QUALITATIVE RESEARCH DESIGN

As indicated earlier, this article endeavored to gain an understanding into the cause effect relationship between limited job opportunities for women in Africa or the absolute lack of these opportunities and such situation's impact on the growth of Africa's economies. Therefore, to achieve this objective, the first step entailed retrieving secondary data from the repertoire and repository of multiple reading materials on the broader subject of the causes for the increased rate of women unemployment in Africa, and such increase's ramifications on the region's economies, for analysis. It was expected that the obtained secondary data would portray the real situation of the causal conditions for such unemployment as they currently exist in several African countries. There was an assumption that the data that would best bring about this picture would be those retrieved from reading sources including books, high-level article journals, commissioned projects' write-ups, theses, conference proceeding papers, and relevant newspapers and websites reports. This presupposition was founded on the awareness that the key actors that gathered these secondary data as primary researchers were grounded on the higher degree of the unemployment of women, or otherwise put, their insufficient job opportunities in Africa.

Having identified, more broadly, an avalanche of secondary data that could be reviewed, the next step involved sorting out and settling on the most recent, as these were considered the most appropriate for analysis. This

consideration was founded on the duration the primary researchers collected and presented these data in their different forms, whether published or not, and it was decided, more precisely, that such data ought not to have been older than twenty years at the time of writing and publishing this article. Therefore, data that was collected and published in the above frame of time were chosen for review and analysis.

After identifying and settling on the above data, the crucial stage of analyzing them methodically using the integrative review design commenced. The researchers were confident that the brief analytical framework they established in Section Two would be significant by presenting essential points of reference for expressivity and interpretation of women's absolute lack of or limited job opportunities in Africa. In more particular terms, the articulation of the *concept of structural violence* would offer a perfect sounding board for analyzing this situation by deriving a more succinct delineation of what is causing women's higher degree of unemployment in Africa. There would be a need to surface evidence and expert opinions about this situation and the degree to which it is established and exacerbated by powerful native influences.

With the essential reference points in place, the core edifice of familiarizing with the obtained data to develop a better outlook regarding the lower employment levels among women, and the causal conditions for such, commenced. As this phase progressed, it was possible to draw out fundamental gendered lay perspectives about some factors serving a catalytic role in limiting women's employment in Africa. The researchers made a decision, thereafter, that these ideas had to be clustered into different small categories commonly known as the meaning units. The researchers came to a common understanding that it was important and necessary to further condense these units. The researchers conducted this process with utmost caution to ensure that the core meaning was not lost. Thereafter, they labelled the condensed meaning units by drawing-up codes and then grouping them into topics. Upon this grouping's completion, the core phase of analyzing and arriving at the relevant conclusions as a response to the main objective of this study followed.

4. WOMEN'S INVOLVEMENT IN THE LABOR MARKET IN AFRICA

This section presents the crux of this paper, which is the review and analysis of secondary data obtained from the archival materials described briefly in Section Three. In order to achieve a coherent, discussion, this section starts with demonstrating, more generally, and based on a comparative framework, the extent to which the African countries are poor globally, followed by the main factor that receives, repeatedly, the deepest opprobrium for contributing to this poor state. The analysis then gravitates towards a more detailed counterintuitive examination about how this factor brings about unemployment, especially among women, and the main reason why such a situation continues unabated. Thereafter, it focuses, more essentially, on solution based practices that can be pursued in mitigating against factors impeding greater employment of women in Africa. Thereafter, the discussion comes to a close by demonstrating how the insights obtained from the reviewed secondary data find purchase within the framework derived from the articulation of structural violence and expansionist models in section two of this paper.

It is important to note that at the very beginning that it is evident from the retrieved secondary data that even though the fastest growing economies are recorded in several other contexts of the world annually, many countries in the sub-Saharan Africa continue to post dismal performance in their economic growth. For example, empirical evidence demonstrates that from 1974 to the mid-1990s, the growth performance of these countries' economies was much lower, which reached a negative 1.5 percent between 1990 and 1994 (National Bureau of Economic Research, 2004). An explanation indexed in narratives contained within such statistics is about such a situation's final causation, which is manifestly detrimental in the fight against poverty in Africa. It is noticeable from high-level research and scholarship that poverty in the region is a consistent theme as African citizens, in their hundreds of millions, are poor, which translates to more than one-half of the African continent. This figure is a quantum leap from the one posted in 1975 of about 140 million poor Africans (National Bureau of Economic Research, 2004).

The above reality can be confirmed as true given that in the aggregate, today's sub-Saharan Africa's per capita income is lower than it was in 1974, which has diminished with more than 11 percent. It is for this reason that the African region continues to experience a high rate of unemployment. It is in the context of such unemployment that it is possible to notice an observable pattern from a shred of mounting evidence that men and women do not enjoy equal employment opportunities across many countries in Africa (Africanews, 2019). Indeed, recent studies regarding this inequality demonstrate that more than half of the women population is unemployed. An example can be given of the localized context of South Africa, where the rate of unemployed women stood at 36.8 percent in the second quarter of 2021, which was higher than the 32.4 percent recorded in men (Statistics South Africa, 2021). It is based on such findings that most authors agree that African labor markets are indeed more favorable to men than it is for women (Ben-Har, 2006).

Built upon the premise of this disparity, a number of experts argue that several powerful actors, especially those in top positions of decision making and policy interventions, contribute to women's unemployment because of the perception that women should only take up roles of caregivers and mothers. Incontrovertible evidence reinforce this perception by indicating that any function that women perform outside the above is taken as an extension of their domestic roles and hence discouraged. Indeed, within such evidence, some commentators proffer an observable pattern regarding how several ordinary Africans hold that it is wrong for a woman to have or pursue a paid job outside her home, given her responsibility of looking after this home or family. It is based on reflections of this conviction that many women continue to report how some of their immediate family members disapprove of their aspirations to work outside the domestic tasks. Such disapproval is perceptible dependent on the understanding that women are targets for social assistance while men are targets for formal or informal employment based on the notion that the latter are the breadwinners (Andinet, 2020; Eboiyehi et al., 2006; Sedghi, 2011).

One of the many proposals that emerge in the context of the above rendering is a greater degree of investment that is required to prevent or avoid such division of labor, which has brought about an increasing level of poverty among women and, in turn, suppressed large gains in the economic growth. Various empirical studies suggest that equitable involvement of women in Africa's labor markets brings about a substantial gain in the economy, given that women constitute a bigger chunk of the region's most economically productive population. For this reason, there is an endogenous need to ensure that there is no discrimination of any gender in terms of employment and labor, as data shows that if African countries achieve gender inclusion to the standards of the advanced countries in the North, the region will achieve a greater number of women that are involved actively in its economy (Africanews, 2019; Sedghi, 2011).

In this brief discussion, we have seen the degree in which women in Africa generally participate in the region's labor market by way of formal and informal employment. By the very nature of the extent of this participation, we have seen the main factor fueling their disenfranchisement in this market. It has been demonstrated that this marginalization is primarily driven by restrictive gender roles, whose support, and opposition, were captured in Section Two's brief discussion of structural violence and expansionist model, respectively. The next section proposes recommendations founded on such marginalization.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The analysis in Section Four of this paper is pungent and redolent of the degree of involvement of women in Africa labor markets as inadequate, and this position can be confirmed and reaffirmed from the number of women holding formal and informal employment in the region. Indeed, it has been demonstrated that many women are unemployed, and this record is mainly attributed to both influential and ordinary people's internalized values system that is greatly founded on the concept of restrictive traditional gender role beliefs that manifest as structural violence against women.

In light of this manifestation, it can easily be concluded that women's full participation in labor markets in Africa, through formal or informal employment, cannot be achieved with such structural violence unaddressed. Rather, it is the concerted efforts of influential actors, such as those in governance and the policymakers, which will ensure that equitable participation of women in labor markets is successfully achieved. To ensure this success is attained, it will be valuable for these actors to design and enforce strong anti-discrimination labor laws that, to no small extent, will go a long way in relaxing restrictive gender roles. As part of doing this, attention should be paid to working closely with other actors such as religious leaders and male partners in 'reifying' expansionist model by abolishing strong stigma against women in formal and/or informal employment.

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