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Gender considerations and poverty reduction in West-Africa

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Abstract

The rising poverty levels in Africa remain a challenge to national governments and the international community. In many African countries, poverty has become one of the most intractable and prolonged socio-economic problems. The authors argue that since women are generally poorer than men, poverty reduction strategies should target women and address gender inequality in access to and control of resources. This article, therefore, advocates for a more comprehensive approach to poverty reduction by highlighting vital issues that contribute to the ever-widening poverty gap between men and women, and which invariably retard poverty reduction efforts in West-Africa. Specifically, this exploration of the literature focuses on (a) poverty reduction strategies from the 1980's to 2011, (b) poverty reduction initiatives and gender sensitivity, (c) gender inequality in resource acquisition and utilization and (d) women's contributions to development of West-Africa. The article concludes by bringing to light some implications of gender inequality and poverty reduction strategies for sustainable development in West-Africa.

Keywords: Feminization of poverty, Gender inequality, Poverty reduction, Resources, West-Africa

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1. Introduction

Over the years, poverty has become one of the most intractable and protracted socio-economic problems in many African countries, especially countries in West-Africa. The rising poverty levels remain a major global challenge and continue to generate concerns among African governments, as well as the international community. These concerns arose from research evidence of increasing population growth, which far outstrips the rate of decrease in poverty levels. The poverty surveys conducted by the World Bank revealed that almost half of the world's six billion people lived on less than US$2 per day, and 1.2 billion on less than $1 per day (World Bank Group, 2006). Thirtle et al. (2003) suggested that more than 90 percent of the 1.2 billion lived in South Asia, East Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. Besides, Chen and Ravallion (2000) argued that even though poverty levels declined from 1987 to 1998, especially in Asia, it did increase considerably in sub-Saharan Africa.

During the 1990s, 60 percent of the population of sub-Saharan Africa lived in absolute poverty (Crook, 2003; World Bank, 1994). In the year 2000, more than 45 percent of the population in sub-Saharan Africa was estimated to be in poverty, and this situation has not improved much to date (Jayne et al., 2003; World Bank, 2000). In the last twenty years, the annual population growth was nearly three percent, which exceeded economic gains and left many Africans poorer than they were in the mid 1970s (United Nations Population Fund, 2008). As the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2010) report indicates, socioeconomically, the poverty rate of 50 percent has not improved in the last 25 years in sub-Saharan Africa. The number of the extremely poor (earning under 70 cents a day) doubled from 200 to 380 million in 2008 (UNESCO, 2010).

Furthermore, there are some features of African poverty that make it peculiar when compared to other continents. In Africa, high fertility rates outpace the capacity of economies to generate a proportionate number of jobs (United Nations Population Fund, 2008). Sub-saharan Africa bears the burden of the AIDS pandemic and 30 million (54% of them are girls) of the world's 70 million out-of-school children are in Africa (UNESCO, 2010). About 153 million adults in sub-Saharan Africa lack basic literacy and numeracy skills required in everyday life and women account for more than 60 percent of the region's adult illiterate population (Education for All Global Monitoring Report, 2010).

The Education for All Global Monitoring Report (2010) further indicated that Nigeria is among the ten countries in the world with the largest number of illiterate adults. Additionally, in West-Africa poverty is more acute in rural areas than urban centres. Among others, it was estimated that almost 60 percent of rural Africans lived below the poverty line and almost 20 percent were classified as extremely poor (Oksanen et al., 2003). Since the severity of the African poverty crisis cannot be overemphasized, in order to address it, this paper advocates for a comprehensive approach to poverty reduction that takes into account gender inequality in access to and control of resources. In most nations in West-Africa, gender inequalities contribute immensely to women's vulnerability to poverty compared to men.

1.1. Defining poverty: Who are the poor?

A basic policy problem that is making the poverty situation difficult to tackle is the labeling of individuals and groups as poor (Potts et al., 2003). According to Rahman (1993), such labelling can have harmful effects on development efforts. Another problem is that poverty defies a definite definition and therefore has an extensive range of explanations and understandings. Nonetheless, there are two major approaches to defining poverty; the absolute and the relative approaches. The absolute approach according to Zastrow (2004) emphasizes that a certain quantity of goods and services is necessary for an individual or family's welfare. Those who do not have this minimum quantity of goods and services are regarded as poor. The difficulty with this approach is that there is a disagreement regarding what constitutes minimum needs. Depending on the level used, the number, percentage and characteristics of the population defined as poor change considerably.

Also, the absolute definition does not take into account the fact that people are poor not only in terms of their own needs but also in relation to others who are not poor. Poverty can therefore be perceived as being relative to time and place (Zastrow, 2004). The relative approach on the other hand, suggests that a person is poor when his or her income is significantly less than the average income of the population. The major weakness associated with the relative approach is that it does not indicate how badly or well the people at the bottom of the income distribution actually live.

It is important to have an idea of not only how many people are poor but also how desperate their living conditions are (Zastrow, 2004). Similarly, Potts et al. (2003) contended that the relative poverty approach is to some extent problematic. These authors argue that while almost all people would accept on moral grounds that eradication of absolute poverty is important, the extent to which people are willing to accept a more equal distribution of income, wealth and power is strongly influenced by their perceptions of the importance of differentiation as an incentive. Most often, there is a difference between popular perceptions of communal good and the behaviour of people as individuals (Potts et al., 2003).

Although both approaches to the definition of poverty have their weaknesses, poverty reduction strategies cannot be implemented if both absolute and relative poverty are not considered. In this paper, we recognize United Nations' definition of poverty as multifaceted and includes lack of income and productive resources that are enough to guarantee sustainable livelihoods, hunger and malnutrition, ill health, inadequate or lack of access to education and other basic services, increased morbidity and mortality from sickness, homelessness and insufficient housing, dangerous environments, social discrimination and exclusion, as well as abstention from decision-making and from civil, social and cultural life (United Nations, 1995, p. 57). This definition is useful because it describes poverty in terms of an array of interconnected deprivations that women and girls in particular often experience.

2. Statement of the problem

Contemporary thinking on poverty reduction emphasizes that development involves distributional issues and that the continued existence of mass poverty is contrary to this development concept (Potts et al., 2003).

As a result, governments, international donors, and researchers have increasingly focused their attention on poverty reduction as a development goal (Jayne et al., 2003). While with the support of the World Bank strategic plans for poverty reduction have been prepared since 1998 by at least fifteen African governments (Jayne et al., 2003), not many West-African countries have paid much attention to gender inequality as a key contributory factor to the continent's poverty. If nations in West-Africa would like to reduce their poverty, then their poverty reduction strategies must be completely rethought and in so doing, address gender inequalities. This is essential because gender is not simply a system of classification of biological males and females, but also expresses universal hierarchy, power, and inequality between females and males (Kimmel, 2000).

Considering that insufficient allocation of resources to gender inequality issues is a barrier to development (United Nations Population Fund, 2008), and poverty reduction is essentially linked to development, researchers, policy experts, and practitioners cannot claim genuine progress in development (Potts et al., 2003) if they do not ensure that gender equality is emphasized in poverty reduction strategies. Gender equality is likely to enhance the poverty-reducing effects of poverty reduction strategies in West-Africa. Poverty stricken countries in West-Africa could be in a better position economically if they explore alternative approaches to poverty reduction because past and current poverty reduction initiatives have not been successful. This is evidenced by the prevailing high poverty levels in West-Africa, and the fact that Africa as a whole is less developed compared to other continents.

Women in many West-African nations have and continue to experience gender inequality in access to and control over resources. This has a negative effect on the achievement of the Millennium Development Goal 1 (poverty reduction) and indirectly, the other goals. As a result, this paper contends that meaningful discussions on poverty reduction strategies must address issues related to gender inequality, especially in access to and control of resources. Since a vital facet in reducing poverty in West-Africa is the establishment of an equitable playing field for both women and men, this paper, which is an exploration of the literature, focuses on the following:

1. Poverty Reduction Strategies from the 1980's to 2011
2. Poverty Reduction Initiatives and Gender Sensitivity
3. Gender Inequality in Resource Acquisition and Utilization
4. Women's Contributions to Development of West-Africa

3. Poverty reduction strategies from the 1980's to 2011

Over the years, African governments and donors have used different poverty reduction strategies at different times. However, poverty still persists in many parts of Africa and this has led to disappointment with existing strategies (Jayne et al., 2003; Staatz and Eicher, 1998). Poverty reduction strategies from the 1980's to 2011 included the (a) Structural Adjustment and Economic Liberalization, (b) Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers and (c) Millennium Development Goals. Examining these strategies, it can be argued that after independence, several African countries and the international donor community have not been unconcerned about poverty. Yet, West-Africa, compared to the rest of the world is very poor.

Generally, across most of the countries in the developing world, particularly West-Africa, the Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs), which were adopted in the early part of the 1980s as road maps to help salvage the underdevelopment of these economies have presented a bleak record of failed states and chronic poverty with 46 percent share of the total population in the region now living below the poverty threshold of one dollar a day (Songsore, 2006). The countries which were regarded as high performers under the SAPs are those that are deeply stuck in debt and poverty (Songsore, 2006). Similarly, other scholars like Mkandawire and Soludo (1999) questioned the effectiveness of the SAPs as a growth-inducing strategy.

Stewart (1995) argued that the overall impact of the SAPs was to increase the aggregate incidence of poverty in many adjusting and non-adjusting countries during the1980s. Additionally, the SAP's economic plan made Africa, especially West-Africa to persistently rely on the exportation of few primary products with little or no value added. This made the economies of these countries vulnerable to price fluctuations in the world market since prices were dictated by buyers from developed countries. These post-colonial West-African states were therefore compelled to become puppet states and serve as international capital tools (Songsore, 2006). In Ghana for instance, low earnings from the exportation of primary products implied low earnings in revenue, which negatively affected wealth creation (International Monetary Fund, 2003).

While the liberal economy made some gains in the mining and service sectors, it did little to produce and sustain growth in agriculture and manufacturing sectors resulting in stagnation of incomes and growth (International Monetary Fund, 2003). The stagnant growth of the economy produced less than acceptable level of poverty reduction. Subsequently, the adoption of the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) was intended to address poverty in a more comprehensive manner in the long run. According to Ryan and Toner (2003), PRSP refers to a document that outlines a government's own approach to addressing poverty. The PRSPs were intended to (a) guide donor assistance and coordination and (b) explain macroeconomic, structural, and social policies and programs that a country will embark on over a number of years to advance growth and reduce poverty, as well as external financing needs and related sources of financing (International Monetary Fund, 2009).

In spite of the fact that the principles that underpinned these papers were country-driven, participatory, partnership-oriented, as well as based on a long term perspective on poverty reduction, scholars, practitioners and analysts have shown some concerns about the PRSPs. In this regard, the PRSPs have been examined critically to ascertain whether progress have been made towards poverty reduction in West-Africa. Ryan and Toner (2003) for example, have questioned whether claims of governmental ownership of PRSPs are undermined by policy conditionality and a narrow idea of poverty reduction that is being forced on the process by international financial institutions. Additionally, these authors argued that emphasis on participatory strategies that promise greater inclusivity and responsiveness to the poor have often been taken over by local elites or adopted in a superficial manner by donors. Echoing his concern, Kanbur (2000) contends that paper conditionality is worthless in the face of the need of governments, agencies and aid personnel to maintain good relations.

The current international development blueprint, which aims at poverty reduction, is the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). These goals symbolize the world's commitment to deal with poverty at the global level. They provide a shared vision of a much improved and better world by 2015, where extreme poverty will be halved among other goals (World Bank Gender and Development Group, 2003; The Millennium Development Goals Report, 2008). Even though the MDGs agenda is recognized as a framework that emphasizes human rights and human poverty development policy issues, based on current rates of progress, especially in West-Africa, some scholars have argued that it may be very difficult to meet many of the goals by 2015. In view of this, Ki-Moon (2008) opines that the millennium development goals are ambitious and as such their attainment will require a serious and concerted unwavering global effort.

Regardless of the improved economic performance in some continents, the overall gross domestic product growth rate in Africa is below the six to eight percent that is required over a ten-year period in order to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (United Nations Population Fund, 2008). In 2004 for example, only six countries out of forty-eight gained a growth rate equal to or greater than the seven percent threshold considered necessary for halving poverty by 2015 (Institut de Recherche Pour le Développement, 2008). Moreover, based on a review of fifty country studies regarding what it will take to achieve the millennium development goals, it was found that while the number of poor people is declining, the absolute number of the poor in Africa is increasing (UNDP, 2010). These clearly reflect the significant increases in poverty rates and the decline in economic performance in the sub-region.

Research on the impact of gender inequality on the structural adjustment programmes, poverty reduction strategy papers, and the millennium development goals specific to nations in Africa is scarce. Thus, it is necessary to examine the effects of gender inequality on poverty reduction strategies in Africa and address the policy and operational implications. Of particular interest is the implication that it has for economic empowerment of women in West-Africa, where the majority of women are poor compared to men.

4. Poverty reduction initiatives and gender sensitivity

Several research findings indicate that women are poorer than men, especially in West-Africa. This has resulted in the development of the concept of feminization of poverty that has provided gender a place within international dialogues on poverty reduction initiatives (Chant, 2008). Feminization of poverty is used to refer to a variety of ideas, which include the fact that (a) women compared to men have a higher incidence of poverty, (b) poverty is more severe in women than men, and (c) there is a trend to greater poverty among women due to the rising rates of female headed households (FHHs, BRIDGE, 2001; Cagatey, 1998). In the context of the economic crises in the 1980s, as well as adjustments in sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America, feminization of poverty is related to the rise of female participation in low income informal sector activities in urban areas (BRIDGE, 2001).

According to UNDP's Human Development Report (1995), poverty has a woman's face because out of the 1.3 billion people living in poverty in the world, 70 percent were women. Research has also shown that more than half of the poor people living in heavily indebted developing countries are women and gender-based power relations imply that women experience poverty more than men do (Cagatey, 1998; Whitehead, 2001). In his study on feminization of poverty in Nigerian Cities, Adepoju (2004) argued that as poverty intensifies and becomes more pervasive, women are continually under pressure more than men because of the additional burden and pressure on women to sustain their families.

While men and women play multiple roles in society, women's labour time is much more constrained than men because men are usually able to focus on a single productive role and play other roles sequentially. Women on the other hand, juggle multiple roles simultaneously and must balance competing claims within a limited period of time (Blackden and Bhanu, 1999; Blackden and Wodon, 2006; Moser, 1989). Furthermore, women tend to engage and specialize in unpaid reproductive or caring labour compared to men. Also, women earn less income despite the fact that their combined paid and unpaid labour time is greater than that of men (UNDP, 1997). As Adepoju (2004) notes, since poor women lack choices and resources, they are usually forced into poor working conditions, long hours of work and are always ready to accept very low wages. In West-Africa, the majority of women's work is not socially and economically recognized and therefore, does not generate any income.

Because of their reproductive and caring roles, women are less mobile than men and for that reason they prefer jobs that would enable them perform their reproductive and nurturing responsibilities whilst engaged in paid jobs (Cagatay, 1998; ILO, 1997). Though invisible, the reproductive and nurturing activities women perform have kept societies moving and enduring. Even when they are engaged in paid jobs, they receive less pay compared to their male colleagues because the majority of women play subordinate roles in their work environments (UNDP, 1997). In some societies of the world, especially in West-Africa, women do not have control or command over their own labour because most men prevent their wives from working outside their matrimonial homes and this limits the labour potentials of women. In some cases, when women are employed in paid jobs, men may take their earnings from them because of men's control over the labour of women (ILO, 1997) through various ways.

Since the informal sector is a major source of employment for women than men (United Nations, 2000), women participate less in formal sector activities. In many countries in West-Africa, the informal sector is characterised by low earnings and job insecurity. Due to the concentration of women in casual labour, which is a characteristic feature of the informal sector, legislative policies have generally tended to exclude them or not critically enforced (BRIDGE, 2001). Also, because of the weaker and conditional basis of women's entitlements, they are generally more vulnerable to poverty and once poor, they have fewer options in terms of escape (BRIDGE, 2001). By and large, women are poorer than men because they continue to be vulnerable to poverty and systematically they have poor command over the situation. This limits the livelihood options for women and therefore requires specific poverty reduction strategies that will ensure that women's economic security is significantly enhanced.

5. Gender inequality in resource acquisition and utilization

There is a relationship between gender equality and poverty and this relationship has been described by Cagatay (1998) as a complex and controversial one that has seen extensive debate by scholars. Gender equality has become an important terminology in international and national development discussions to the extent that its usage has in many instances been misconstrued. Nonetheless, currently, there is a mutual understanding within the development community that development policies and strategies that do not consider gender inequality and do not tackle gender gaps are likely to be ineffective and have grave cost implications (World Bank, 2003). Certainly, in the design and implementation of poverty reduction models, gender inequality cannot be ignored because there is no region of the developing world that women and men are equal (Gender and Development Group, 2003; World Bank, 2003). The group further notes that gender gaps exist and are prevalent in access to and control of resources, power, rights, and political voice.

According to Asian Development Bank (2010), gender equality refers to equal opportunities and outcomes for females and males and gender equity is the process of achieving the aims or outcomes of gender equality (Asian Development Bank, 2010, p. 8). Based on this definition, gender inequality can be explained as unequal opportunities and outcomes for men and women. Even though gender equality is necessary in efforts that aim at empowering women economically, these endeavours often neglect differentials between men and women in terms of their access to income, resources and services (BRIDGE, 2001). In many countries in West-Africa, women have more limited opportunities to improve upon their economic conditions and access services than do men (Zuckerman, 2002). Thus, women are more vulnerable to chronic poverty as a result of gender inequalities, particularly in access to and control over resources.

In most countries of the world, access to and control over productive resources and social services is unequal between women and men (Asian Development Bank, 2010; Gender and Development Group, 2003; World Bank, 2003). In many developing countries, especially those in Africa, women still lack independent rights to own land, manage property or engage in business activities (World Bank Policy Research Report, 2001). Women continue to have poorer command over a range of productive resources, such as education, land, information and financial resources. In spite of recent increases in females' educational attainment globally, women continue to earn less than men in the labour market even when their educational levels and years of experience are similar. Most often, women in developing countries are limited to certain occupations, are usually excluded from management positions in the formal sector and they earn 73 percent of what men earn (World Bank Policy Research Report, 2001).

Women's work tends to be in the low-wage part of both formal and informal sectors of employment and thus the gender gap that exists in earnings is significant (Asian Development Bank, 2010). Women, particularly those who head households in West-Africa may face greater difficulties than men in gaining access to labour markets, credit, housing and basic services, and sometimes there are additional layers of discrimination (Asian Development Bank, 2010). In many countries in Africa, women obtain land rights mainly via their husbands and these rights are lost when they are divorced or widowed (Gray and Kevane, 1996; World Bank Policy Research Report, 2001). As discussed by some authors (Kumar, 1994; Udry, 1996; World Bank Policy Research Report, 2001) even when women do own land, their plots are usually smaller than the plots owned by men. In Nigeria for example, female-headed farms are only a third of the size of farms headed by males and the farms owned by females are normally on inferior lands (Saito et al., 1994; World Bank Policy Research Report, 2001).

The World Bank Policy Research Report (2001) further argues that compared to men, enterprises that are run by women tend to be undercapitalized due to poor access to machinery, fertilizer, extension information and credit. Female headed households also encounter problems associated with one adult having to combine income earning activities with household management and child rearing. Generally, this implies that these single mothers can only take on part-time or informal jobs with low earnings and few, if any fringe benefits (BRIDGE, 2001). Gender discrimination in households and the labour market can lead to unequal distribution of resources resulting in women experiencing a greater severity of poverty than men (BRIDGE, 2001).

In most families, gender inequality underpins the unequal sharing of resources (UNDP, 2005) because the household is a major setting that perpetuates gender discrimination and subordination with women at a disadvantage (BRIDGE, 2001). Poverty data on households do not consistently explore the comparative ability of different household members to command resources and this affects women negatively because they bring less cash into the household and therefore may have much reduced access to shared income (Asian Development Bank, 2006). Even if women control income, they use it first for their children and food security, while most men keep a greater proportion of the income they earn for their own needs, and this renders women's welfare at greater risk in low income households (Asian Development Bank, 2006). Additionally, time is a very important resource and the idea that poverty is a function of time is well documented (Harvey and Taylor, 2000). Gender division of labour defines women's and men's economic opportunities and determines their ability to allocate labour time for economically productive activities, as well as respond to economic incentives (Blackden and Wodon, 2006).

The work burden on women and the disproportionate cost borne by them as regards reproductive work in the household not only limit the time they can spend on economic activities but limit them spatially and culturally to activities compatible with their domestic obligations (Blackden, 2002; Blackden and Wodon, 2006). In West-Africa, compared to men, women have very little leisure time and this may be further restrained as poverty increases (BRIDGE, 2001). There are instances that either the little resources women have access to are controlled by men (Goetz and Gupta, 1996) or men limit their support to households when women increase their contributions to their families (Bruce, 1989). Additionally, in instances where women are able to increase their access to resources, they may end being overburdened with labour and stress in return (BRIDGE, 2001, p. 6).

In instances where women may have control over resources, they may be unable to effectively mobilise these resources to support sustainable livelihoods because they may feel compelled to invest the resources, including their labour, in family businesses or in children (Baden and Milward 1995; Baden, 1999). Given that women's limited access to resources and weaker ability to generate income restrict their power to influence resource allocation and investment decisions (World Bank Policy Research Report, 2001), they tend to be more vulnerable and have limited ways to move out of poverty. Inequality in resource allocation in West-Africa requires more attention because a considerable body of literature shows that men and women experience poverty differently. Although research is available in the area of gender and poverty, gender inequality in access to and control of resources has not been studied extensively.

In addition, research on issues regarding discrimination and gender inequalities in the labour market, informal and part-time employment and the gender pay gap is scarce in West-Africa. Ensuring equality in resource acquisition and utilization will offer an enabling environment in which men and women can equally participate productively in society. Policies and investments that deepen markets and even out gender differences in resources strengthen incentives for gender equality in economic participation (World Bank Policy Research Report, 2001). Research evidence suggests that when women earn income outside the home, gender biases in resource allocation within the household may diminish (Baden and Milward, 2000).

Increasing gender equality in access to and control of resources would have positive impact on equality in education, health and political participation. However, since this will not happen automatically, there is the need for policies and programs that will remedy the age-old inequalities between women and men. In West-Africa, household responsibilities usually require extended hours of work, which limit girls' ability to continue their education and constrict mothers' capability to actively engage in formal sector jobs (World Bank Policy Research Report, 2001). Nonetheless, education is vital to females' ability to contribute to higher living standards for themselves and their families. In mainstream economic theory, education represents an important aspect of human capital, which has a positive effect on productivity (Baliamoune-Lutz, 2007). Thus, gender inequality in education and employment negatively impacts economic growth and poverty reduction (Dollar & Gatti, 1999; Hill & King, 1995; Klasen, 1999) because it has both direct and indirect effects on economic growth (Klasen, 2002).

Directly, lower female education reduces the average level of human capital and as a result, has a negative impact on growth and poverty reduction strategies. Knowles, Lorgelly and Owen (2002, p. 119) have noted that "female education, especially in developing countries produces social gains by reducing fertility and infant mortality, improving family and child health, increasing life expectancy and increasing the quantity and quality of children's educational attainment". Better-educated women raise healthier and well-educated children and this is a positive spill over from investment in females' education (Barro, 1997). Besides, both development and economic scholars recognize health as essential to poverty reduction and socioeconomic development (Murray, 2006). As concluded by Adepoju (2004, p. 151), "poverty is strongly linked to poor health, and women represent a disproportionate share of the poor".

Despite the fact that good health is an essential resource that enables people to take part in productive activities, gender-specific health risks adversely impact women's ability to have access to and utilize resources (World Bank Policy Research Report, 2001). Particularly, women are at risk of gender-related violence, HIV and AIDS and domestic abuse, which have direct and indirect effects on their physical and emotional health and well-being (World Bank Policy Research Report, 2001). Women's disadvantaged position perpetuates poor health, inadequate diet, early entry into motherhood, as well as frequent pregnancies (Adepoju, 2004) and these may prevent women from participating in and taking advantage of economic opportunities. Since poverty interacts with health in diverse ways and undermines a whole range of human capabilities, possibilities and opportunities (Murray, 2006; Müller and Krawinkel, 2005) women enduring poverty are likely to be caught in a poverty web.

Increased participation of women in political decisions enhances and legitimizes public trust in new institutions and strategies (Whitman and Gomez, 2009), such as poverty reduction initiatives. However, significant barriers prevent women from assuming political leadership, including getting elected into political offices. Most often, women's limited control over resources serves as an obstacle to their ability to participate as active agents and influence political decisions in their communities and at national levels (World Bank Policy Research Report, 2001).

The Bank Policy Research Report (2001) also concluded that the few women who did hold cabinet appointments were more likely to be in ministries of women's or social affairs than ministries of finance, economics, or planning, which made major policy and budgetary decisions. As a result, women compared to men are powerless when it comes to issues concerning resource allocation and investment decisions. Since women are often underrepresented in decision-making circles, policies that will impact their socio-economic well-being are made on their behalf mostly by men. Consequently, the sliding spiral that maintains women's poverty continues (Murray, 2006) because despite the fact that women provide support that allows their families and communities to survive, they are mostly marginalized in decision-making processes.

6. Women's contributions to development of West-Africa

As discussed earlier, the majority of women, especially poor women encounter many challenges in their quest to contribute to the development of their families, communities and nations. In spite of these obstacles, women have and continue to make huge contributions towards progress in different parts of the world. According to Allah-Mensah (2005), there is reasonable evidence to show that women have potentials that can be tapped to enhance social, economic and political development of countries. Constituting over 50 percent of Africa's population, African women have contributed quite significantly to socio-economic development of the continent overtime (Muhibbu-Din, 2011). Before colonialism in Ghana and other parts of West-Africa, women played very important roles in ensuring peace, stability and development of their societies (Allah-Mensah, 2005) and they still do same in post- colonial era.

Ellis, Manuel and Blackden (2006) argue that women in Africa have historically been workers, property owners and entrepreneurs contributing in various capacities to the growth of their respective societies. Women are a powerful force and key actors in development because they contribute immensely to the development of the next generation (Ellis et al., 2006; Muhibbu-Din, 2011). Women's significant contributions in their households, food production systems and national economies are more and more being recognized across Africa and by the international community (Manuh, 1998). In West-Africa, among the majority of rural and low-income urban residents, females are responsible for all household chores in addition to engaging in farming and trading activities. Moreover, females are expected to take care of vulnerable family members, such as children, persons who are ill and the aged, as well as perform important social functions in their communities (Manuh, 1998).

Women provide the backbone of the rural economy because about 80 percent of the economically active female labour force is employed in agriculture and women comprise about 47 percent of the total agricultural labour force (Manuh, 1998). Based on a United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) survey in 1996, Manuh noted that African women are responsible for 70 percent of food production, 50 percent of domestic food storage, 100 percent of food processing, 50 percent of animal husbandry and 60 percent of agricultural marketing. Aryeetey (2000) suggested that Ghanaian women for instance, have traditionally occupied key positions in the production of goods and services both for subsistence and for the market.

Despite the many challenges over the years, women all over the world have contributed directly or indirectly to political activities. In Africa, the 2009 report of the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) indicated that Rwanda's parliament made history when its lower house elected the majority of women members (56.3 percent) and in Angola women took 37 percent of the seats in its first post-conflict election. According to the report, other countries from within Africa that have made impressive gains by including women in politics are Burundi (30.5%), Mozambique (34.8%), South Africa (33%), Tanzania (30.4%) and Uganda (30.7%).

Similarly, today, West Africa can boast of an increased number of women occupying very sensitive positions within the executive, judiciary, legislative and other public offices. For instance, for the first time in the political landmark of West-Africa, there is a female President in Liberia. The election of Liberia's female president has been described by Kellow (2011) as a groundbreaking development for women's political participation, not only in Liberia but across the African continent. In Ghana for example, women have contributed greatly towards Ghana's political life (The Women's Manifesto for Ghana, 2004).

As at December 2012, women were occupying two of the three Arms of the Ghanaian government; the Speaker of Parliament and the Chief Justice. The Convention Peoples Party, a political party in Ghana also recently elected a female as its Chairperson. This is the first time in the annals of Ghana's political history that a female has been elected to such position in a political party. These political achievements are commendable because as Cool (2010) concluded, it is usually accepted that a more fair representation of women in parliament is necessary to guarantee that women's varied interests are considered in national development efforts, including poverty reduction initiatives.

7. Conclusions and implications

The burden of poverty has particular implications for different individuals depending on their gender. A critical analysis of current approaches to understanding and strategising to reduce the high levels of poverty in West-Africa points to the need for a rethinking because gender inequality issues have not been extensively integrated into these approaches. As noted by BRIDGE (2001, p. 5), "a lot of concerns have been advanced about gender issues becoming a subset of poverty discourse with attention being focused solely on poor women, rather than gender inequality". In order to capture an accurate picture of poverty in Africa, particularly West-Africa, there is the need for commitment and capacity to obtain gender-sensitive facts that can have positive multiplier effects on poverty reduction and ensure sustainable development.

Although some poverty reduction strategies have included gender issues, just incorporating them in a poverty agenda may not yield measurable outcomes. Focusing on poverty without considering gender inequality in access to and control over resources does little to address the disparities that result in women's susceptibility to poverty. There is therefore the need for a critical gender analysis that can systematically address why and how gender inequality impact poverty. Even if a gender analysis approach to poverty reduction is employed, it must be carefully structured because not all women are poor and not all poor persons in West-Africa are women.

Examining gender inequality is essential in reducing poverty because inequalities exist in key policy areas, such as education, health and political voice and these have repercussions for poverty reduction efforts. Instead of targeting women who form the majority of poor people in West-Africa, poverty reduction strategies in the past have relied more on traditional measures, such as the percentage of people who are poor and household incomes, rather than on how these strategies can help reduce gender gaps in poverty or make significant contributions to women's socio-economic and political empowerment. This may underlie the ineffectiveness of most of these poverty reduction strategies.

It is important to emphasize that the effectiveness of gender equality in access to and control over resources approach to poverty reduction does not lie in rhetoric but the extent to which the ideas are implemented. In order for poverty reduction strategies to be successful in West-Africa, questions regarding extreme poverty need to be raised and addressed. In this regard, existing poverty reduction policies and strategies need to be evaluated and assessed. Since the one-size-fits-all recipes to poverty reduction have proved to be unsuccessful in developing countries, as well as the developed world from which they originated (Atal, 997), poverty reduction strategies must be based on an in-depth understanding of national and international differences and challenges.

Poverty reduction strategies that are tailored to the specific needs of poverty-stricken countries are likely to yield better results and eventually contribute towards eradicating the various dimensions of poverty that continue to plague many developing countries in West-Africa. Furthermore, the differential patterns of poverty within West-African countries suggest not only the need for country specific interventions, but also strategies that focus on rural and urban areas in these countries. Moreover, through increased female participation in the planning and management of poverty reduction strategies, awareness creation and appreciation of the experiences of the poor, valuable information needed for the design and implementation of focused interventions can be gathered and utilized by both researchers and policy actors in West-Africa.

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