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Hunger and poverty in Ethiopia: Public policy reform to address gender discrimination and a rapidly growing population

Ethiopia is home to about 80 million people, bringing it to the position of being one of the most populous countries on the African continent. However, an astounding 45 percent of all Ethiopians live below the poverty line, and that number is steadily growing at a rate of 3.2 percent. Those who have managed to find employment there only earn about 50 cents a day and less than \$530 annually, which is not nearly enough to sustain even the smallest of families.

For example, the average Ethiopian woman has about 6 children, although the widespread unavailability of contraception leads to far more children born into extreme poverty. In addition, many of these children die in infancy or suffer from other health problems due to lack of funds for medical treatment, with the mortality rate for children under five being 122 out of every 1000.

The high prevalence of the HIV/AIDS epidemic throughout Africa has also left many Ethiopian children orphaned. Because of this, many orphans are left to find food to feed themselves as well as their surviving family members. In 2005, it was estimated that 35 percent of children had suffered from malnutrition.

Almost ten percent of female adolescents between the ages of 15 and 19 had children of their own. If these children do make it into adulthood, their life expectancy is not very high when compared to that of other countries. Most people do not live past their early fifties, although that age is not low when compared to that of other African nations where average life expectancy lingers in the mid-forties.

A major barrier toward advancement of agricultural productivity in Ethiopia is its water supply. It is estimated that only about 10 percent of the land in Ethiopia is arable and not having access to irrigation is a huge problem. The majority of Ethiopians reside in rural areas and depend on subsistence farming for a food source. Because of this, people rarely grow enough food to survive.

Because there are so many people and not nearly enough land for everyone, it is at times impossible for people to each have a fair share. There is a very limited number of food sources that can be successfully grown in the African climate. Crops such as sorghum, coffee, and potatoes, which are able to withstand drier climates, are commonly cultivated. However, these types of foods do not have a very high sustainability because there are not enough resources to maintain them nor do they hold much value where the economy is highly underdeveloped.

In addition, such agricultural efforts have been annihilated by severe droughts that have devastated Ethiopia in recent years. These periods last for months at a time and leave millions of people in dire need of nourishment. Then other countries have to intervene with relief organizations such as UNICEF so that people will not die from starvation. They will provide meals and water for these people, but it does not help to better the issue in the long term. What is also straining to these organizations is that many of the nations located on the African continent have come to depend on such relief organizations.

The majority of the population of rural Ethiopian communities survives entirely on international

aid. These organizations have proposed many solutions to this national food insecurity crisis that has plagued Ethiopia for many years. However, one solution that could greatly improve the situation is the formulation of public policy initiatives that will allow Ethiopians to gain independence and allow them to live healthier, happier lives.

The most important public policy that should be developed is one that prevents gender discrimination. This is a major problem that is not just exclusive to Ethiopia; it affects many other countries throughout the world. Women in Ethiopia face great disadvantages because of a highly prejudiced and traditional cultural basis.

Most people do not see how great of an asset to the Ethiopian economy women could be, especially because the economy is in such a dire state. If women were allowed to exhibit their full potential, it could lead to a better economic structure, and as a result, food insecurity would not be as much of an issue.

The general outlook of an Ethiopian woman's life can be considered incredibly bleak when compared to the lives of the women in more developed countries. About 75 percent of women are forced to undergo genital mutilation, thus enforcing the commonly held belief that women are inferior to men. What is even more shocking is that there are currently no laws to prevent this procedure from being performed. It is just accepted as a part of life and the government does not see it as wrong.

In addition, most girls do not attend school for more than seven years and only about 35 percent of the female population is literate. Families sometimes require their daughters to stay home and help with household chores or to take care of siblings. It is also common for them to drop out of school at a young age so that they may get married. The idea of going to a college or university is unheard of and the money to do so is nonexistent. Some brides are as young as 15 and most girls are married by 19.

This is due to the ideas held by family and community members, who often pressure girls to conform to tradition. Many families push them into marriage so that they may receive food and other gifts from the groom's family. Most men do not want their wives to be educated or have higher positions in life. Spousal abuse, forced prostitution, and marital rape are also major issues that often go unaddressed due to lack of legal protection by Ethiopian law.

The lives of Ethiopian women are devoted entirely to serving men. Many women are forced into prostitution at a very young age. Because of lack of government funded education and campaigns, many of these women forced into prostitution are unaware of the dangers of sexually transmitted diseases. However, this also affects married women or those who are not involved in prostitution. In addition, safer sex practices and contraception are not widespread nor encouraged even though it would greatly benefit the health of Ethiopian women. These women are often at the mercy of the men who treat them as if they are all stupid and worthless.

Therefore, women are taught to believe that they are only valuable as wives, mothers, sex slaves, or as bargaining chips for their families. They do not have enough education or resources to seek out better opportunities for themselves and even the government itself prevents them from doing so. There are no strong female role models in Ethiopia because nothing has really changed from the way it was hundreds of years ago.

Women still have a difficult time in obtaining property of their own. This means that they will also have a hard time trying to grow crops for their own survival as well as their families. If they

do manage to obtain land, they have to juggle taking care of children, maintaining their household, and doing all the physical labor of growing crops to feed their families. Most of the time it is just too difficult for them to handle such enormous amounts of pressure all at one time. Living a life of poverty and a constant fight to stay alive has become a way of life for women.

Therefore, the main problem is that women are socially and mentally prevented from becoming assets to economic process is that there are very few legal policies that protect the rights of women. They are taught to believe that they have little value in society outside of having children or being a bargaining chip for their families.

They are routinely degraded by men, their communities, and even their own government system. If women in Ethiopia were given a bit more respect, they would feel more valued. If they feel more valued, then they will without a doubt become an important asset in improving the state of Ethiopian economy and human welfare.

Government reforms should also be made in order to address the rapidly growing population of Ethiopia. As previous mentioned, this is also a huge factor in the lack of food security. There are too many people in one country without enough resources to provide food for all of them. As previously mentioned, the average woman in Ethiopia has about 6 children. This number is relatively high when compared to other countries in Africa. There is also a high prevalence of AIDS in many African countries, and Ethiopia is no different. All of these can factor into the food insecurity problem.

A rapidly growing population needs adequate health care in order for people to get out of the cycle of poverty. In Ethiopia, there are not enough doctors to meet the needs of all the children, women, and people infected with HIV/AIDS. It is very difficult for children to receive proper treatment by a pediatrician, and many of them suffer from malnourishment which they receive little to no treatment for. In addition, people who have HIV/AIDS also have an incredibly difficult time in obtaining testing or treatment. It is not always formally diagnosed, and by the time it is, it is often far too late.

Because of lack of AIDS treatments, thousands of Ethiopian children are left helpless when their parents die. In addition, women do not have adequate pre-natal care nor are their bodies physically suitable for child bearing because they are not well nourished. Many women also face birth complications due to genital mutilation that they underwent when they were younger. Poor medical care is responsible for a high death rate amongst infants born in poor, rural areas of Ethiopia. However, it is very difficult for doctors to gain access to these areas because there is neither an adequate road system nor a sturdy public health care program.

Public policies should be made in order to increase the awareness of HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases. If people learn how to protect themselves from becoming infected, then less children will be orphaned because of AIDS killing their parents. Less women will struggle to feed their families without a husband, and people will have an overall healthier life. By bettering the health of Ethiopians, it will allow them to help better the food insecurity problem. In addition, if HIV/AIDS awareness is increased, poverty levels will go down.

Overall, the state of these issues in Ethiopia has not improved by a substantial amount. Up until recent years, women in Ethiopia still were undereducated and faced gender discrimination. Rural women still suffer the most when compared to the lives of those who live in urban areas such as Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia. However, urban women still only earn about one fourth of

what men doing the same jobs as them earn. Most Ethiopian women still do not finish school or attend college. Women still hold little to no role in any governmental decisions.

However, in 2001, the Ethiopian Women's Initiative Project joined the World Bank in launching a program that aims to empower women to take charge of their own lives and change government policy. They provide educational resources so that women can become financially independent and proactive.

They do this by allowing them to pursue entrepreneurships and use their earnings to invest in their own futures. Most of these entrepreneurships involve agriculture, which helps bring down the number of people suffering from hunger. The Ethiopian Women's Initiative Project has helped more than 11,000 women since its inception in 2001.

In addition, the International Ethiopian Women Organization is working to change the lives of women who still suffer in this impoverished country. They are currently working to raise awareness of women's issues and to help gain rights for them. They are also establishing networks communication networks through ought the country to provide support for underprivileged women who are mistreated and underprivileged. In addition, IEWO also organizes seminars and helps to raise money in order to help change the way Ethiopian women live.

Even though there has not been a substantial amount of change in policy, progress is not impossible for Ethiopia. The government needs to formulate public policies that empower people to take more responsibility for their lives so that they may break the terrible cycle of poverty. They have the ability to make sure that no one goes hungry if women become a bigger part of government and have more opportunities to provide for themselves or their families.

The rapidly growing population of Ethiopia does not need to be so firmly rooted in tradition to the point of ignorance. Progress is only possible if the government educates its people and encourages them to not depend on the aid of other countries for survival. It is up to the Ethiopian nation as a whole to change so that hunger is not as much of a problem. When change occurs, the economy will be stimulated and then it can thrive on its own. When everyone is happier, progress is possible.

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