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Freeing Rural Girls and Women from the Bondages of Gender-Based Violence to Have Quality of Life within the Global Village

Livingstone Malinge Gqeba and Nokuzola Gloria Gqeba

Abstract

In this article, the authors look at how rurality and poverty deprive young people from the rural parts of South Africa from benefiting from globalisation. Beyond explaining, what globalisation is and the benefits of being an active participant in the global village, the article explores the challenges faced by young women trapped in the rural areas. These include gender-based violence, diseases, and poor access to education. Through desktop analysis done through textual analysis of scholarly articles and books, the authors argue that, in spite of the positive aspects of globalisation, rural women still struggle to make ends meet, unlike their counterparts in the global space. Feminism in the African context is used as the theory to ground the study. The authors posit that the country, South Africa, can leverage on globalisation to deal with the negative social conditions associated with rurality. The authors posit that governments and metropolitan cities should act as motivational forces for improving the quality of life of the rural women through partnerships with other social partners.

Keywords: rurality, poverty, globalisation, self-actualisation, empowerment

1. Introduction

Different researchers have, over the years, offered different definitions of what globalisation is. Beaglehole and Yach [1] define globalisation as “the increasing interconnectedness of countries and the openness of borders to ideas, people, commerce, and financial capital-has beneficial and harmful effects on the health of populations.” Important to note about the above definition is that it not only focuses on the commercial and financial aspects but also on ideas. The reference to ideas is critical insofar as it relates to knowledge production and knowledge sharing. This is of pivotal importance in attempts to deal with such psychosomatic health issues as gender-based violence and HIV/AIDS. Furthermore, Turken and Rudmin [2] posit that globalisation is a process where global shifts in international politics have resulted in interconnectedness of people across the globe and it has removed physical as well social borders.

The above two definitions differ greatly with how Castles and Davidson in Chrysochoou [3] describe globalisation, merely in economic terms as an economic integration that involves the opening and crossing of borders. This is a myopic view that does not enhance the developmental agenda, particularly of third-world

countries, also known as the global south. It is this narrow view, amongst others, that is used as the basis of criticism against globalisation.

1.1 Criticism against globalisation

Critics of globalisation view globalisation as some form of coloniality, hence the term global coloniality, meaning “the heightened marginalisation and suppression of knowledge and culture of subaltern” [4].

This school of thought views globalisation as modernisation or the western informed form of development. The critics view globalisation as having failed to provide solutions for today’s current problems. To the critics modernity is a perpetuation of coloniality through continued conquest of being, knowledge, and power of the third-world countries and their peoples. This brings about the ideological tension and dichotomy that exist between social regulation (which is a core function of modernity) and social emancipation (which is the cornerstone of the struggles of the peoples of third-world countries). It is in this context that Davies’ J-Curve comes into play as a fitting explanation of the phenomenon described. The J-Curve is an illustration of the disjuncture that happens over time between the expectations of the people and the reality of their lived experiences as a result of modernisation (Cohen, 1975: 193; [5]: 6).

Below are definitions of industrialisation and modernisation as the two concepts that are central in any definition of globalisation and the definition of these concepts gives context to the concept of globalisation.

Industrialisation denotes “the wide transformation of society during which manufacturing and industrial activity became primary forms of social production.”

Modernisation refers to the “broader spectrum of changes in which society becomes complex, urbanised and differentiated, and in which production and social organisation is increasingly based on science”.

Sporer [6] posits “Globalisation is the latest stage in the permanent process of social change that started as industrialisation and modernisation in Europe but now is spreading globally.”

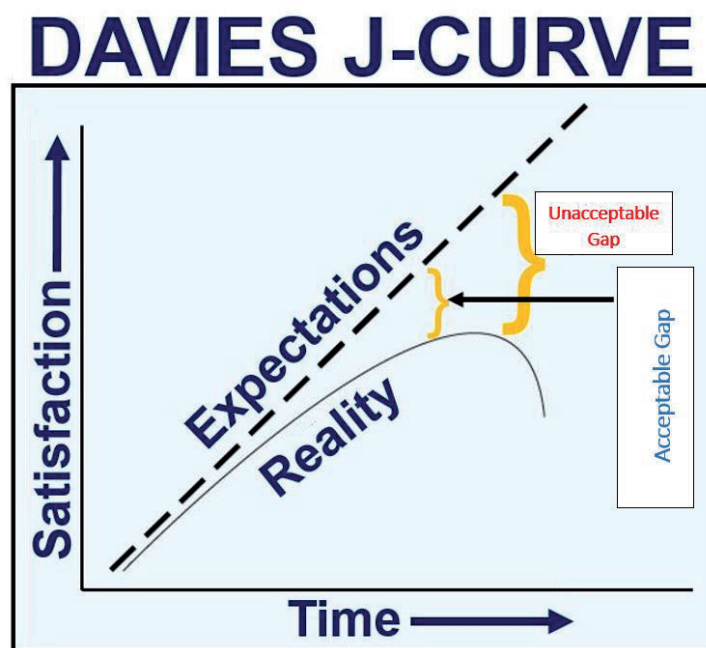


Figure 1.
Davies: J-curve (1962) 27: 5-19.

This clearly expresses what the critics of globalisation hold against globalisation as a Eurocentric process of industrialisation; some argue that it leads to the phenomenon called the J-Curve. The J-Curve is an occurrence where the gap between the expectations of people and reality widens over time (Figure 1).

2. Globalisation and its impact on South African rural women

Globalisation generally has its positive aspects that have contributed constructively to the lives of women. These include the global initiatives against child marriages, equality of genders, and eradication of all forms of discrimination. This has happened through global integration of ideas, improved communication technologies, and internationalisation of discourses and culture. In most cases, all these developments have not significantly changed the plight of women. This is particularly obvious in areas “including education, employment, health and civil rights [7]. Even though the UN has tried to ensure worldwide gender parity through the UN’s Millennium Development Goals, the adverse conditions against women have not fundamentally changed.

Another global initiative towards improving the lives of women in general and rural women in particular is the consortium “Girls Not Brides” and the African Union Campaign to End Child Marriage. These initiatives have not stopped the practice where young girls are forcefully married off to older men under the guise of a cultural practice called *ukuthwala*. Mwambene [8] describes *ukuthwala* as “the mock abduction of an unmarried woman or girl for the purpose of a customary marriage.” The practice is rife amongst the IsiXhosa speakers of the rural parts of the Eastern Cape and amongst IsiZulu speakers of KwaZulu-Natal [8–10] *Ukuthwala* is a form of gender-based violence against women and girls. In spite of globalisation, such practices as *ukuthwala* perpetuate the stereotype of male superiority.

Furthermore, even though labour relations have been liberalised globally, women in rural areas continue to suffer in the workplace. Women who face sexual harassment at work are faced with difficult choices. The women either decide to continue to work and endure the pain and humiliation of continued sexual harassment or they can opt to leave work and face the possibility of starving or dependence on their partners. Dependence on their partners brings problems of its own as it can lead to harassment and abuse of different kinds. Rural women are more likely to be illiterate or drop out of school early as no emphasis and importance are usually attached to educating the girl child in rural areas. Their illiteracy opens them up to abuse and exploitation in the workplace. With limited access to education, women get deprived of an opportunity to act as competitive and equal partners in the global village [7].

Rural women also face poverty of the worst kind as compared to their urban counterparts. According to Casale and Posel [11] “poverty rates are highest amongst rural women: in 2008, 70% of all African women living in rural areas were poor, compared to 55% of rural men, 42% of urban women and 30% of urban men.” This renders rural women the most vulnerable marginalised group in the country. Bower [12] posits that in South Africa “to be a child ... is to walk a fragile path to adulthood and to be a woman is, for far too many, to be poor, disempowered, and vulnerable to appalling high levels of sexual violence.”

In addition, poverty is further exacerbated by unemployment as a result of globalisation [12]. A reflection of poverty is the poor access to basic services such as running water, electricity for lighting, and telecommunications [13–15].

One of the features of globalisation in the workplace is the casualization of the workforce where full-time jobs are replaced by casual jobs. This unfortunately affects women more than men. This change in labour patterns has also introduced the employment of workers through labour brokers, even on farms. Employment of workers on seasonal contracts is more cost-effective for employers (though exploitative for employees). Through casualization of labour, farmers can rely on off-farm employees, thus avoiding such costs as granting security tenure to workers living on farms [16] Casualisation has also led to the proliferation of informal settlements that are unserviced. Casualisation together with farm evictions is the main cause of the development of sprawling, under-serviced informal settlements. Women are the hardest hit under these conditions from having to make ends meet for their families to being attacked and raped. Women also fall victim to diseases as a result of the poor living conditions and lack of immediate access to medical care.

This adds to the vulnerability of rural workers, particularly women who have to depend on men for security (sometimes on complete strangers). This opens women up to such practices as gender-based violence. There are many different forms of gender-based violence that rural women get exposed to.

3. Forms of gender-based violence

3.1 Physical violence

Physical violence is the most severe form of gender-based violence that sometimes leads to death. Substance abuse and alcohol in particular is the most prevalent cause of physical violence. Seilberg (2014) posits that physical violence is “an act that may result in pain, injury, impairment and can even lead to death.” Physical violence can take many forms such as beating, shaking, tripping, punching, burning, pulling of hair, slapping, gripping, pushing, pinching, kicking and the use of physical restraints. The other prevalent form is sexual violence.

3.2 Sexual violence

Sexual violence includes such violations as rape even by marriage partners and/or lovers. This is rooted in the false belief that men own women, which as a result of the patriarchal system on which rural life is centred. According to Clatora (2013), sexual violence constitutes any attempt to engage in sexual acts forcefully or even any unwanted sexual comments directed against a person's sexuality. It also includes using coercion of any person regardless of their relationship to the victim. To demonstrate the extent of sexual violence in South Africa, Turmen (2003) found that 30% of girls said their first intercourse was forced, 71% had experienced sex against their will, and 11% had been raped. If these statistics reflect the experiences of women in general, the situation is worse in the rural areas. What most people do not consider as gender-based violence is emotional violence.

3.3 Emotional violence

Emotional violence can take different forms as it can happen overtly or covertly. Iwaniel (2006) argues that emotional violence projects victims as worthless, flawed, unloved, unwanted, and endangered. This form of violence includes spurning,

terrorising, isolation, exploitation, and denying emotional responsiveness, and it includes verbal and non-verbal demeaning communication.

3.4 Economic violence

This is another common form of violence in the rural areas where women are mostly economically dependent on men. This is because of discriminatory employment practices and casualization of workers, particularly women, as noted above. Mark and Melville (2011) posit that economic violence may involve a situation where the perpetrator creates dependence by the victim through withholding money for basic necessities, e.g. food and sanitary towels. It is ironic that in South Africa condoms are provided for free yet sanitary towels are still a scarce and expensive necessity for women, particularly in the rural areas [17]. This is worse in South Africa in a country where women constitute less than a quarter of land beneficiaries. Women still carry the cost of oppression and marginalisation by the land reform programme. Even land inheritance is done on a gender basis in favour of males. In this case, legislation ignores the fact that women are in majority in rural areas and as part of the labour force in commercial farms [18]. This is also in spite of the fact that women are the primary users of agricultural land in rural countries.

4. Alcohol abuse amongst rural women

Rural parts of the Western Cape are known for practising the “dop system” which was a system where farm workers were paid some of their salaries in the form of alcohol [19]. This invariably led to a number of children being born with foetal alcohol syndrome. Children born of parents who abuse alcohol and with siblings and partners abusing alcohol live in an environment where alcohol abuse and consumption become the modelled behaviour. The reality is that this behaviour gets perpetuated, as there are hardly any health awareness programmes in these areas compared to elsewhere in the global village.

Alcohol advertising has also worsened the situation, particularly amongst rural adolescents. Young women are now the target of marketing by alcohol companies. This has led to a situation where alcohol is a major contributor to the global burden of disease [20].

5. Human trafficking

Globalisation has created the illusion that the global markets are able to attract everybody for employment. Whilst this is true for certain professions, disciplines, and industries, it is not true for everybody. The possibilities are slim for illiterate, unskilled women. The illusion of work for all in global markets has opened a loophole for criminal elements. Young women, mostly from rural areas and desperate for employment, are lured into human trafficking. Criminals have taken to establishing recruitment agencies posing as labour brokers. Visas and air tickets are made available to job seekers only to find themselves in serious cases of sexual assault and physical abuse [21]. The UN defines “trafficking in persons” as the purpose of exploitation by means of the threat or use of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve consent of a person having control over another person for the purpose of exploitation [21]. Traffickers mainly target the poor, and in worse-case scenarios, some parents sell their children to traffickers.

6. Rural women through a feminist lens

The authors have used Ntantala [22] and Maathai [23] as feminists and humanists to ground the study. In her autobiography, Ntantala reflected on the patriarchal society that has made women properties of men. She cites the one-family one-lot system of land tenure that pertained in the segregated South Africa. Under this system, polygamous men could acquire vast tracks of land based on the one-lot per family system. In this case, women were treated as resources owned by men and used to justify acquisition of more land.

Ntantala [22] also reflects on the migrant labour system that led rural women to live like widows, as their husbands had to leave their rural homes to sell their labour in the cities. Women became victims of capitalism sometimes more so than men. The women had to remain behind in the rural areas and look after their families in a system that undermined them as people. The migrant labour system opened up women whose husbands left for long periods to unscrupulous men with resources. These men would support these women in exchange for sexual favours and in some instances even impregnate them. This is the point also stressed by Maathai [23] where she reflects on the double exploitation of women in terms of gender and as part of the oppressed population. She makes an argument for the mobilisation and conscientising of rural women. Both Ntantala and Maathai make it clear that there cannot be freedom when women are still oppressed. This is captured in a quotation by Ntantala [22]: “Though I seemed free, there could be no freedom where others were not free and that in fact, nobody in South Africa, or any other country, was free while others were not.”

7. Potential counselling and therapy strategies

The multiplicity of abuses experienced by rural girls and women inevitably leads to psychological distress. These posttraumatic stress disorders manifest themselves in a range of secondary problems particularly mental problems. Unless these are addressed, the situation worsens with no end in sight. The situation requires timely psychological interventions particularly on children and adolescents to mitigate the risk of chronic mental disorders playing out later in their adult lives. These chronic mental disorders may include suicidal behaviour and/or self-harming behaviour. Part of the interventions to deal with posttraumatic disorders may include the training of lay health workers to work with abused women.

Amongst the suggested therapies particularly for rural girls and women is cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT). Salient aspects of cognitive behavioural therapy are joint efforts between the therapist and the client, and the therapy is based on an educational model. The therapy is premised on the understanding that feelings and behaviours are informed by thoughts and not external things (people, situations, and events). The ultimate benefit of the therapy is that victims can change the way they think to feel and act better even if the situation does not change. Compared to other therapies like psychoanalysis, CBT brings about rapid results. CBT requires an average of 16 sessions, whilst psychoanalysis takes years. It is not an open-ended, never-ending process. It is a process where the ultimate end of formal therapy is arrived at between the therapist and client [24].

8. Conclusion

Globalisation has not proven to be helpful for rural South African women. Instead of improving their lives for the better, it has contributed to the misery and

hardships. Globalisation has merely exposed them to a life they cannot obtain. Whilst other parts of South Africa are reaping the fruits of globalisation, rural women have not really moved out of the colonial and traditional power relations and lifestyles.

The problems faced by rural women point to the urgent need for a directed government intervention. It is an accepted fact that the government alone cannot surmount the challenges faced by rural women. Any meaningful intervention would necessitate multiple-partner collaborations between government and other social partners. There also needs to be focussed programmes to deal with socio-economic problems that compromise the quality of life of rural women. The authors suggest that the social partners to be identified by government must be multifaceted to include organisations that have a voice in the rural communities. These include but are not limited to faith-based organisations, cultural organisations, and community-based organisations. Even though the study is located in rural South Africa, the findings from it have a bearing on and meaning to most rural women in Africa in general.

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Author details

Livingstone Malinge Gqeba and Nokuzola Gloria Gqeba*
University of Fort Hare, South Africa

*Address all correspondence to: ngqeba@ufh.ac.za

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