



# ADDRESSING POVERTY IN THE ERA OF COVID-19: A FOCUS ON THE GIRL-CHILD

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## Abstract

*Poverty is a complex phenomenon that has various roots, branches, and fruits. Incidentally, various theories of poverty seem to emphasize its social and economic dynamics at the expense of the psychological, moral, and spiritual aspects. Children living with poor parents have their own concerns and challenges. With the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, poor people have been really exposed, with women and girls being disproportionately impacted as in most cases. When the COVID-19 pandemic broke out in Ghana, the government instituted a lockdown in parts of Greater Accra, Tema, Greater Kumasi and also, Kasoa. Some of the poor people were supported with food items and money. Similarly, the church also supported the poor with food items. In all, teenagers were not considered. Much of the attention was on the basic food needs and the packages went to adults. This paper highlights some of the challenges two poor teenage girls in Accra, Ghana, faced in the wake of the COVID-19 lockdown. It then proposes how the church and society can help affirm their presence. It argues that for a comprehensive approach to poverty reduction, the psychological, moral, and spiritual needs of the poor, especially the girl-child, must be taken seriously.*

## Introduction

Poverty is a precarious experience to all, but for children, especially teenagers, it raises multiple risks that solicit various responses from church and society. The girl-child for instance often carries a burden of the family amidst stigma and desperation when their parents are poor leading them to be vulnerable. Some of them end up in the streets or in the hands of men who abuse them. This paper highlights some of the challenges poor teenage girls in Accra, Ghana, faced in the wake of the COVID-19 lockdown and proposes how the church and society can help affirm their presence. It highlights the vulnerability and uncertainty faced by the girl-child who lives with the family using stories from two girls. One of them is a fifteen-year-old girl and the other a seventeen-year-old girl living in Accra,

the capital of Ghana, who were detained for moving about after a government operation: “stay at home”, was issued due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It argues that lack of attention from the church and society contributes to their inability to have a decent and acceptable living, together with diminished self-respect. Their problems can be addressed if the church and society understand how these persons define their poverty indicators.

## Forms and Types of Poverty

Poverty is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon that can be understood from various angles. According to the Longman Dictionary (2008:1280), poverty is defined as “the situation or experience of being poor ... impoverished.” The Chambers Dictionary (2005:1286) also defines poverty as “a multidimensional concept reflecting clusters of disadvantages affecting people and making them vulnerable and powerless.” Ajakaiye et.al. (1999) say poverty is “a living condition in which an entity is faced with economic, social, political, cultural and environmental deprivations.” These definitions show how multidimensional poverty can be. However, the definitions do not touch the inner disposition of the poor person.

Ted Bradshaw (2006) mentions five theories of poverty. The first theory focuses on poverty as caused by Individual Deficiencies. It holds that individuals are responsible for their own poverty situation. Such a theory is reinforced by religious beliefs and doctrines that equate wealth with the favour of God and poverty as punishment for either one’s sins or their parents’ sins. It affirms an individualistic theory from a “moralizing perspective” and notes that the poor are “afflicted with the mark of Cain. They are meant to suffer, indeed must suffer, because of their moral failings. They live in a deserved hell on earth” (2006:6).

The second theory is that poverty is caused by Cultural Belief Systems. It suggests that poverty is created by a set of beliefs, values, and skills transmitted over generations that are socially generated. Individuals are not necessarily to blame because they are victims of their dysfunctional subculture or culture. For instance, poor people raised in ghettos, rural areas, or oppressive social contexts develop a shared set of beliefs, values, and norms that make them psychologically unready to take full advantage of changing conditions or improving opportunities that may develop in their

lifetime (Bradshaw 2006:8). They develop a culture that hinders their development and makes them unable to depart from it.

The third theory holds that poverty is caused by Economic, Political, and Social Distortions or Discrimination. Here, it is believed that these external social factors cause people to have limited opportunities and resources with which to achieve well-being. The economic system makes people earn low wages, prevents poor families from getting better jobs, thereby complicating their situation (Bradshaw 2006:10).

The fourth theory states poverty to be caused by Geographical Disparities. Here, disparities between the rural and urban localities define poverty and it calls attention to the fact that people, institutions, and cultures in certain areas are disadvantaged to generate well-being and income, and that they lack the power to relocate or claim redistribution (Bradshaw 2006:12).

The last theory is that poverty is caused by Cumulative and Cyclical Interdependencies. The cyclical interdependencies are most complex and to some degree build on components of other theories in that they look at the individuals and their community as caught in a spiral of problems that create a cumulative set of problems to exacerbate poverty (Bradshaw 2006:14). For example, “a lack of employment opportunities leads to out-migration, closing retail stores, and declining local tax revenues, which leads to deterioration of the schools, which leads to poorly trained workers, leading firms not to be able to utilize cutting edge technology and to the inability to recruit new firms to the area, which leads back to a greater lack of employment” (2006:14). This cycle also repeats itself at the individual level, affecting psychological abilities and spreading to society and social structures in cycles.

Another theory can be mentioned where poverty is subdivided into three types namely: absolute poverty, relative poverty, and subjective poverty. First, absolute poverty is measured in terms of access to basic necessities, a state of severe deprivation of basic human needs. It is a situation where an individual is constrained with limited financial resources and unable to meet the basic needs of life. Absolute poverty is defined in the World Summit’s Declaration of Copenhagen 1995 as: “A condition characterized by severe deprivation of basic human needs, including food, safe drinking water, sanitation facilities, health, shelter, education, and information. It depends not only on income but on access to social services.” Second, relative poverty is about economic inequality that occurs in particular localities where people live. It describes a situation where an individual or

household is considered poor when goods and services which other persons in another society acquire cannot be afforded. A relatively poor person has fewer opportunities than others in their society since the income is less than the average income of the population in the society being considered. Lastly, subjective poverty is based on a perception an individual can have about oneself due to the standard of living (see Haralambos and Holborn 2004). These three types – absolute, relative, and subjective – focus on only physical and material needs. They settle on the social dynamics and give little attention to the individual's own potential and spirituality that gives a human being an identity.

Eric Jenson (2009) goes beyond the above three and adds situational poverty, generational poverty, urban poverty, and rural poverty. Situational poverty describes a situation caused by a sudden disaster or crisis or loss and is often temporary. Situational poverty may depend on the overall state of the global and national economy or be triggered by a crisis specific to those experiencing poverty. Generational poverty is where at least two generations in one's family have undergone situations of poverty. Families living in this type of poverty are not equipped with the tools to move out of their situation. Urban poverty occurs in metropolitan areas with populations of at least 50,000 people where the population struggles with inadequate services. Rural poverty occurs in nonmetropolitan areas with populations below 50,000 where the population has less access to services, support for disabilities, and quality education opportunities. Jenson's categories also dwell on social dynamics.

Mcferson (2010:50-73) also classifies poverty into two types: Contingent poverty and structural poverty. Contingent poverty is where there are inadequate resources due to a particular adverse event or activity. This type of poverty can be reversed whenever the cause of the event stops. Structural poverty exists where various factors make it difficult to reduce the intensity of poverty no matter the general policy of economic stimulus or investment adopted. Here, too, the individual does not come into focus in Mcferson's classification.

Eegunlusi (2016) gives a more comprehensive view when he mentions the dimension of Mental/Psychological Poverty. Mental poverty is the inability to engage the mind in intellectually productive means and achieve good results that facilitate personal or national development, deficiency in knowledge acquisition, appropriation, and exhibition such that one is not abreast with certain important facts necessary for knowledge-enriching

enterprises, or inability to cope with diverse systems of learning or highly theoretical issues. An aspect of mental poverty is moral poverty, which is to lack a good sense of moral judgment that can promote healthy personal and societal moral values. It is the failure to exhibit good human character as a result of the depravity of the human mind (2016:373). Another aspect is emotional poverty, a sense in which there is the human deficiency to control one's emotion, thus, an emotional display devoid of meaningful rational reflection (2016:374).

A very comprehensive theory has been put forward by Compassion International. They categorize poverty under the following: social poverty, educational poverty, health poverty, environmental poverty, economic poverty, and spiritual poverty. The social aspect of poverty focuses on conditions of scarcity to aspects of the distribution of resources and power in a society. It recognizes poverty as a function of the diminished capability of people to live the kind of life they value. According to Eegunlusi (2016:376),

Social poverty is the poverty resulting from deficiencies in human interaction. This is the underlying factor in criminal activities and wars. It is based on human ill-will or nonchalance in relating well with others such that mutual survival, mutual help, mutual benefits and mutual development are hampered. Obviously, good social relations should guarantee bilateral or multilateral benefits. In human relations, there are behavioural traits that are spoilers of social relations.

Hence, social poverty falls under human relations. Social poverty, in an online publication by Compassion International, "Types and Characteristics of Poverty" includes people groups that are undervalued and have few rights; people who have no say and their rights are minimized.

Similarly, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) sets various indicators in its Human Development Index (HDI) to measure poverty, particularly within social poverty. These include:

- life expectancy at birth
- average school attendance period
- expected school attendance period as well
- per capita income

Educational poverty is where people lack education and that creates a lack of options. Lack of education makes people vulnerable and unable to maximize their knowledge, skills, and training, making them trapped in the

cycle of poverty. Health poverty describes a situation where a person due to an unhealthy condition is unable to work and develop positive relationships. Environmental poverty including climate, housing options, land availability, water supply, insects that carry disease, water-borne illnesses, weather, drought, and much more plays a large role in a person's wellbeing and poverty level. Economic poverty is where a household's income is less than \$2.50 a day. This is where there is a lack of money to provide oneself with basic needs.

Oftentimes, economic poverty is overemphasized against other forms of poverty. That is to say, poverty is seen as a lack of access to the basic amenities of life such as a lack of clean water, shelter, and health care. It also includes little or no opportunity to go to school or learn a trade. Such a category captures social, health, educational, and environmental poverty. The World Bank, for instance, emphasizes the economic aspects of poverty focusing on material needs. According to an online World Bank publication on "Poverty" updated on 16 April 2020, poverty is limited "access to good schools, health care, electricity, safe water, and other critical services remains elusive for many people, often determined by socioeconomic status, gender, ethnicity, and geography." The World Bank (worldbank.org 2020), in effect, recognizes the multidimensional view where all other aspects are included, but the focus is more on "consumption, education, and access to basic utilities is approximately 50 percent higher than when relying solely on monetary poverty." The report states that the standard measure for the Poverty Line is on households who have less than US \$1.90 a day to live or about US \$700 per year.

Compassion International rightly adds spiritual poverty as one of the categories. However, they claim that spiritual poverty can be summed up by the word "hopelessness." In my estimation, when people have spiritual poverty, they may have all the material and physical resources to live on. Hence, they tend to have hope, but the sense of inner hollowness distorts their personality. Spiritual poverty predisposes a person to a state of emptiness, purposefulness, barrenness, boredom, or alienation from the self. It could also be seen as a lack of human virtues. A spiritually poor person may be financially sound and economically stable but feels unfulfilled. It puts a person into a state of worry. Some people have all the basic necessities of life and lots of money but cannot use the resources due to ill-health or disability. There are those under spiritual covenants that forbid them to use their abundant resources. Some have houses but sleep at the

cemetery or under tents for fear of breaching the laws of the gods. For instance, there are those who through “sakawa” (a type of juju that intends to make a person rich), acquire much wealth through spiritual means but must abide by the restrictions of the spiritual powers or deity, like not sleeping in their own houses, fishing for used menstrual pads from the waste bins and extracting the blood to prepare concoctions they have to drink, having sex with only psychologically unstable people, etc.

From the above discussion on the theories and categories of poverty, it is worth saying that poverty has to do with wellbeing: body, soul, and spirit. It is not only concerned about incomes one accrues, for having money but being unable to have a good sleep is as bad as not having money but having a good sleep. Having money and not having the opportunity to buy what is needed due to incarceration is a sad situation. A country may have the best of health care facilities yet some of its people are unable to get access to the best health care service. It is like building good facilities for education, yet people cannot get a quality education. It is like owning all the military might, yet people are constantly exposed to violence, theft, and insecurity. It is like creating an atmosphere for a plethora of media firms, yet the people cannot express their independent thoughts and are voiceless. Hence, addressing poverty is not simply about the availability or affordability of food, healthcare, education, jobs, and security. It is about finding answers to inner and outward needs. It is about human dignity and empowering abilities.

## **Poverty – A Dilemma for the Young**

It is estimated that 88 to 115 million people will fall into extreme poverty (under US \$1.90/day) in 2020 as a result of COVID-19, depending on assumptions on the magnitude of the economic shock (Peer 2020). The global extreme poverty rate could rise by 0.3 to 0.7 percentage points, to around 9 percent in 2020 (worldbank.org 2020). The report adds that the 43 countries in the world with the highest poverty rates are in fragile or conflict-affected situations (FCS) and/or in Sub-Saharan Africa. In fact, twenty-seven of the world’s 28 poorest countries are in Sub-Saharan Africa. Each of these countries has a poverty rate of over 30 percent. It is also estimated that 256 million Africans are hungry, an increase of 44 million since 2014 (World Bank 2020). More than 416 million Africans still live in extreme poverty.

The UNDP alludes to the suggestion that “in Sub-Saharan Africa, 55 percent of the population (558 million people) is multidimensionally poor. Of these, 98 percent (547 million people) do not have access to clean cooking fuel, 84 percent (470 million people) lack access to electricity and 66 percent (366 million people) do not have access to clean drinking water” (HDRO 2020). Between 2000 and 2019, Sierra Leone made the fastest progress in reducing its global Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) value. Sierra Leone is one of seven Sub-Saharan African countries in the top ten fastest-moving countries, alongside Côte D’Ivoire, Guinea, Liberia, Mauritania, Rwanda, Sao Tome and Principe. The global Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) is a measure that looks beyond income to include access to improved drinking water, clean cooking fuel, electricity, nutrition, school attendance and five other indicators (HDRO 2020). This means that Ghana is not doing well in addressing the poverty situation of its people.

The above discussion proves that poverty is not a simple phenomenon to capture in a single definition or programme. It has various roots, various branches, and various fruits. Poverty includes various dimensions of discrimination, denial, inability to have access to so many things, and lack of exposure. Poverty dehumanizes and impacts a person’s self-worth. It prohibits a person from belonging to a community. It lies at the core of existence. It impacts all of a person’s basic needs and touches every aspect of his or her existence. Poverty changes everything about a person’s life experience.

## **The Case of two girls in Ghana**

The announcement of a two-week lockdown in Accra, Kasoa and parts of Kumasi on 28th March 2020 brought a lot of scare among the populace, especially young people. The lockdown was to take effect on 30th March 2020. The head potters who help carry the wares of traders and the purchases of shoppers in the market were not spared from this situation. Some of them migrated from the northern parts of the country. Some live on the streets in the cities while others live with relatives. The lockdown meant very few people would come to the market and the movement of head potters would be restricted. They would lose their job during the lockdown. They would no longer feel safe living in the city so most of them decided to travel to their hometowns before the lockdown came into force.



Schools were closed and children were asked to stay at home. Educational and entertaining programmes were aired on TV for children to learn and enjoy.

When the lockdown came into effect, about thirty-five women and girls, joined a cargo truck going to the northern part of the country to transport yam back to the city (YOUTUBE 2020). Most of the girls who joined the truck were between fifteen and thirty years and could not get transport to travel due to the number of people intending to stay outside the lockdown areas. The driver covered them with tarpaulin so that no one could see that human beings were in the truck. Unfortunately, they were arrested by the military patrol team in Ejisu about 20 miles to Kumasi and had to be transported back to Accra.

One of the travellers, Amina (real name withheld), was a 15-year-old girl who had been living with a relative in Accra for about two months. Amina had been working as a head potter and had earned some money. Since the lockdown would make her unable to keep working, the little savings she had made would be used up. She was therefore travelling to stay in her hometown till the lockdown was lifted. She had saved some money to support the family in the North and to use part of it for farming. Amina's attention was on her parents and someone who would support them to farm. Restricting her in Accra meant her parents could not manage their poor situation. She could not imagine living in an area where COVID-19 was prevalent. Amina thinks it is her responsibility to provide for the family since they are poor.

In another incident, Adoma (actual name withheld for the sake of anonymity), is a seventeen-year-old girl who lives at Odorkor Tipper in Accra with her parents and six siblings (YOUTUBE 2020). She was detained by the security personnel during the COVID-19 lockdown. She is the first among seven children. The family resides in a kiosk that is a wooden structure/container wherein traders ply their trade. The kiosk is a dilapidated structure measuring about 8 by 6 feet, and is situated on a big open drainage system along the street. The family had moved there to rent the kiosk because the parents could not afford to pay the two years advance payment for the room where they used to live in. The father is a young man in his forties who was a casual labourer at a construction site while the mother is a trader. Unfortunately, the father was accidentally shot by armed robbers while on his way home from work. Since then, he manages to work as a driver's mate to earn some money to take care of the family,

but has not been able to raise enough finances to pay for the surgery to remove the bullets from his body. As a result, he goes through constant pain and cannot do hard labour.

Adoma dropped out of school despite all the attempts of the parents and other neighbours to encourage her to pursue formal education. Although she was playing truancy all along, she decided to stop because she could not concentrate on her studies. Since she did not like to study, the parents sent her to a dressmaker to learn a trade. The dressmaker was ready to train her for free but she abandoned the idea after a few weeks. She has also refused to join the mother in carrying goods on her head for sale. In most cases, Adoma will be found in the company of peers roaming in the streets.

On 17 April 2020, Adoma left home and invited her two friends to accompany her to Madina, a town in Greater Accra which is about 15 miles from Odorkor. She had apparently told them that they should accompany her to the boyfriend and return later in the day. Adoma, however, had other plans. She had decided to go and live with her boyfriend until the lockdown was over because the boyfriend had a television. The two friends of Adoma who were also seventeen years of age do not live with their biological parents and did not know anyone at Madina, therefore, they saw it as an opportunity for a visit.

That afternoon, after eating with her parents and siblings, Adoma left home against all persuasion to stay at home. She quickly took her bath, dressed up, and told her mother that she was going out. The mother could not convince her to stay at home because they are poor. After a few hours, Adoma was escorted home by a UTV media reporter who was moved by the story of the girl. The Police had arrested the girls while on their way and made them sit by the side of the road. The TV reporter trying to find out why people had flouted the 'stay at home' order interviewed the three girls. Adoma told the truth that she was seventeen years old and was on her way to visit her boyfriend. Her main concern was that the parents did not have a Television but the boyfriend had one. She believed that her boyfriend had not been infected with the virus and staying with him would be the safest thing to do.

## **Sharing the Burden of the Girl-Child**

In almost every country in the world, children of poor parents are more likely than adults to feel the effects of poverty, and they become more vulnerable to its effects. For children, living in poverty is a denial of their fundamental social rights. Poverty diminishes life chances and abilities to realize potential. It inhibits their progress and makes them fight for life. Such lack of motivation has devastating, long-term consequences for future generations and societies. As discussed earlier, poverty has to do with the wellbeing of the body, soul, and spirit.

Musa Dube (2004) is right in alluding that because of these cultural gender roles, the girl-child of poor parents come under lots of psychological pressure. The girl-child feels burdened to work out her own salvation so that she can break the poverty cycle. Dube says that, “the school going girl-child also carries the burden of care should one of her parents or family members fall ill. This affects her school performance and sometimes leads to school drop-out as family funds are increasingly depleted by the management of opportunistic infections and as work hours of breadwinners are cut down” (2004:16). It needs to be noted that the burden is not exclusive to the girl-child. The boy-child also carries a similar burden. Aku, for instance, has become a victim of circumstances and is carrying the burden of her family. The situation hardly allows a girl-child, especially when she is the first-born of the siblings to concentrate on her studies. Such a girl would do all she can not to identify with poverty, but as a teenager, she does not know the appropriate way to go.

Adoma’s parents always manage to put food on the table for the children and provide parental support but that does not provide answers to the lack of self-worth. She is not interested in acquiring money so that she could break free from economic poverty. She knows that education can help her break out of poverty and maximize her skills and knowledge but she has little willpower and mental strength to study. She is not concerned about her health, because she is in a state of severe deprivation. She longs to break from the family since their poverty erodes her foundations of life and existence. She cannot accept that her situation is hopeless because she has a boyfriend who can provide for her needs. She uses Television as an excuse to seek love and attention from her boyfriend. She is not comfortable living in her environment because it is a key factor to reveal her

poverty. She is always on the streets dressed very well to affirm her identity. The girl-child tries to make decisions to make herself happy but is not mentally capable of making responsible decisions. She is thus, mentally poor.

In some cases, teenagers living in poverty do not want to share their situation publicly for fear of stigmatization. According to Ennew and Swart-Kruger (2003:5), people tend to stigmatize street children as having no family or being members of dysfunctional families, whereas street children in Africa come from every conceivable family type. Children living with poor parents are more concerned about social love and friendship. They spend time building street networks and a culture that opens its doors for peers into the fold, to explore survival skills and that which would make them happy.

According to Turshen (2008:496), “child poverty is a reflection of family circumstances. In effect, the poverty of boys is not separate from the poverty of their sisters. Yet African women represent 70% of the poor, so the issue is to find ways to measure the impact of the discriminatory systems operating in childhood that lead girls to greater poverty in adulthood.” The family circumstance is a social factor that needs attention.

## **Social Policies against Poverty**

All countries and people have indeed been hit enormously by the social consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. Women and girls, however, are disproportionately impacted by the crisis. It has made so many young people more vulnerable to the pandemic. Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 1 is about “End poverty in all its forms everywhere.” Some of the targets are that by 2030, all nations must reduce at least by half the proportion of men, women and children of all ages living in poverty in all its dimensions according to national definitions, and that all men and women, in particular the poor and the vulnerable, have equal rights to all resources through the creation of sound policy frameworks based on pro-poor and gender-sensitive development strategies.

In Ghana, the President, H.E. Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo Addo directed the Ministry of Gender and Social Protection in March 2020 to provide food items and cooked meals for the poor and vulnerable in all the lockdown areas when he instituted the lockdown. Yet there were instances captured on TV broadcasts where the women and girls could not struggle

with their male counterparts who fought their way to take more than a package of the distribution. The crowds were always overwhelming and the security officers who were outnumbered found it difficult to control the queues. Considering the numbers that came out to struggle to get the food supplies during the lockdown arising from COVID-19, one can say that Ghana has a long way to go in terms of ending poverty by 2030. According to United Nations Secretary-General, António Guterres, in his foreword to the Sustainable Development Report 2017, "... the rate of progress in many areas is far slower than needed to meet the targets by 2030." The social protection system cannot adequately meet the needs of the poor. TV stations often broadcasted aged men and women who could not go out and were calling for the government to remember them in the distribution, especially when philanthropists visited homes and distributed food items. The Vice President of Ghana, H.E. Mahamadu Bawumia distributed GHC 500 (about US\$90) each to some poor and vulnerable people as part of his efforts to help the poor but many complained that they were left out.

Although a complete impact assessment of the interventions is beyond the scope of this study, it needs to be noted that no significant focus was placed on the psychological, moral and spiritual aspects of poverty on the part of the government. In fact, interventions for poverty reduction that are family-oriented can sometimes ignore the peculiar psychological, moral and spiritual needs of children. What can be said is that the government provided a free meal policy aimed at providing one hot meal to the poor, especially those who live on the streets. Also, packages of rice, canned foods, and cooking oil were distributed to the poor. In my view, supporting an adult with a single meal package without considering the number of children or dependents would not produce a holistic remedy. Planning for the children too can yield positive benefits. Since the foundation of a strong family, as well as the individual's health and well-being, depend largely on the experiences during childhood, the right time to break the cycle of poverty, or prevent it from the beginning, is during childhood. As such, child-related interventions must be at the forefront for policy-makers and governments. It is true that planning for the parent will eventually benefit the children but since the issues confronting the children are diverse, they must be given some attention.

COVID-19 has heightened the challenge to address poverty among young people and children. According to a World Bank in Africa report (2020),

the COVID-19 outbreak has set off the first recession in the Sub-Saharan Africa region in twenty-five years, with growth forecast between -2.1 and -5.1 in 2020, from a modest 2.4% in 2019. It further states:

Volatility in the global environment due to COVID-19 pandemic, which is taking a heavy toll on human life and placing excessive pressure on health systems, continues to negatively impact Sub-Saharan Africa. Economic and social impacts are immense, costing the region between \$37 and \$79 billion in estimated output losses in 2020, reducing agricultural productivity, weakening supply chains, increasing trade tensions, limiting job prospects, and exacerbating political and regulatory uncertainty (World Bank 2020).

It needs to be noted that the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the African Agenda 2063 emphasize attention on all – children, youth, and adults. In fact, it seeks to (a) Prioritize child poverty in national development strategies and plans, and (b) Expand child-sensitive social protection programmes. The five key principles for inclusiveness are:

- 1) Include all in the opportunities for development. This can be achieved through enhancing opportunities for education and employment; access to publicly-provided civic amenities such as infrastructure for water, energy, transport, health and safety; and safety nets for those who cannot access these opportunities;
- 2) Include the knowledge of all in development processes (e.g. inclusive knowledge, indigenous and community knowledge, and scholarly knowledge focused on inclusive development);
- 3) Engage all in the politics of development (in political, economic, social, environmental, and cultural- governance processes);
- 4) Build targeted capacity building to help the most vulnerable benefit from opportunities and engagement processes; and
- 5) Enhance the level of protection for the most marginalized communities.

In all, addressing poverty must be holistic, but bearing in mind that the girl-child is also vulnerable can increase the attention given to her. Providing money alone cannot solve social, mental, psychological, and spiritual poverty. The social protection systems should be motivated by love for neighbours. The girl-child does need affirmation, love, and respect. They want to contribute to the needs of their parents but they are spiritually and psychologically poor.

## Addressing Poverty from the Christian Perspective

During the lockdown in Ghana, most of the churches started distributing food items like bags of rice, cooking oil, canned fish, yams, etc to the church members as well as the general populace. An interview with 20 elders of various churches in Accra revealed that the emphasis was on all who were in need. However, most of the people they reached were adults. The teenagers did not avail themselves to take the packages. Almost all the elders interviewed were of the view that as long as the adults received a package, the children would benefit. The attention of the churches was on those who could not have enough to feed on and not those who were psychologically or spiritually poor.

The Bible presents a broad view of the concept of poverty. The Old Testament uses nouns such as *dâl* (poor), *râš* (poor), *ăbîon* (needy), and *ănî* (the afflicted or oppressed of the land), *tsadîq* (innocent/righteous) to identify the poor. The poor include the widow and the orphan (e.g. Job 24:3-4; 31:16-19; Jer 5:28), fatherless, stranger, and alien. The New Testament uses two Greek words: *penes* to represent the poor labourer, and *ptochos* to represent those who are dependent on others. A critical look will indicate, except *ptochos*, the vocabularies do not focus on children.

The various Hebrew and Greek words used in the Bible portray different categories of poverty. One category is the one who is under oppression and helpless (Prov. 28:15; Ps 109:16). When Solomon and Jeroboam became kings of Israel, they instituted many policies that impoverished the people (1 Kgs 4-11; 1 Kgs 12-14 cf 1 Chron 13:1-20). Christopher Wright makes the point that “the Old Testament asserts, as all modern analyses demonstrate, that only a tiny fraction of poverty is ‘accidental’. Mostly, people are made poor by the actions of others – directly or indirectly. Poverty is caused” (Wright 2004:170). Another category is one who suffers misfortune (Job 1:12-19; Lam 5:2-3). Another category is the lazy (Prov 6:9-11; 10:4; 13:4; 19:15; 20:13), those who disregard discipline (13:18), and the drunkards and glutton (23:21). This category could be seen as self-inflicted. Another category is social poverty which is caused by prevailing social structures and policies. Proverbs 10:15 says, “The ruin of the poor is their poverty.” Social poverty is structural, systemic and cyclical. It creates a complex situation where the poor cannot break free. In the view of Christine Yoder (2009:124), whereas wealth gives social protection and

connections, poverty “renders people defenceless, exposed to the elements, and bereft of means and support.”

The Bible does not condone ill-treatment of the poor. Justice should not be denied them (Exod 23:3,6; 30:15; Lev 19:15; Deut 24:10-11). The king has the responsibility to provide justice for the poor (2 Sam 12:1-4; Prov 31:5b, 8-9). The people were not to be hardhearted towards the poor but open-handed and lend freely to them (Deut 15:7-8). The Sabbatical year and Jubilee were some additional provisions instituted as a way of bringing relief to the poor (Deut 15:1ff). Moreover, the poor must enjoy some privileges. They were not to be charged interest (Exod 22:25; Lev 25:35-38). They were to be given free access to gather the gleanings after the harvest so that they could get something to live on (Lev 19:9-10; 23:22; Deut 24:19-22). Deuteronomy 15:4, 7, 9 anticipated an ideal society where none will be poor. As long as the Lord will richly bless the Promised Land and the Israelites, there will be no poor among them. However, Jesus made it clear that the poor will always be in our midst (Matt 19:16-21; Mk 14:1-9).

Abusing the poor is contrary to God’s expectation (Amos 5:12; 4:1; 8:4, 6; cf Isa 32:7; Ezek 22:29). Amos 3:9-10 and 4:1 alludes to extortion, exploitation, oppression, and attack from the powerful in Israel, against the poor and needy. The poor were to be specially treated because God was concerned about them. “Whoever oppresses the poor insults their maker” (Prov 14:31). God is the Creator of the rich and poor. If some people and certain factors contribute to poverty so that the poor are despised or reproached, God will intervene and bring judgment. God listens to the cry of the needy and assures them of being there for them as their God (Exod 22:27; Lev 23:22). Hannah’s prayer reveals the plight of the poor along with their dependence upon the Lord (1 Sam 2:5-8).

In the New Testament, Jesus identified with the poor by saying that he did not have a place to lay his head (Matt 8:20; Lk 9:50). Jesus always taught on the need to help the poor. He always had compassion for them, and Peter attests to the fact that everywhere Jesus went he was doing good (Acts 10:38). To Jesus, those who would inherit the kingdom of heaven were the ones who fed the hungry, invited strangers to their homes, clothed the naked, and visited the sick or imprisoned (Matt 25:37-40).

From the Old Testament’s perspective, poverty in itself is not a moral problem. The moral issue surrounding poverty is how poverty is caused



by oppression, abuse, and exploitation. Another moral issue is that poverty distorts human relationships, causing family and friends to abandon the poor (Prov 19:7). Poverty is a misfortune that leads to the loss of status and shame. As such, the church must explore ethical dimensions to address structural and social poverty.

From the biblical background, some recommendations are proposed for the church to pay attention to if it has to play its role in addressing poverty holistically. However, it needs to be noted at the outset that “any effective solution to the problem of poverty must involve not only economic remedies but also spiritual and moral solutions” (Kunhiyop 2008:162).

The experiences of the girls in our stories means that it is very important to listen to the worldview of children who are caught in the poverty web. The head potters were not simply looking for accommodation or food for themselves. Preventing them from being with their parents predisposes them to social and spiritual poverty although it was a move to stop the spread of the virus to other parts of the country. Some teenagers are concerned more about their parents than keeping themselves safe. Others are concerned about social dignity. James Cone (1975:102-3) gives food for thought when he says:

Every person has a story to tell, something to say to themselves, their children, and to the world about how they think and live, as they determine their reason for being... When people can no longer listen to other people's stories, they become enclosed within their own social context... And then they feel they must destroy other people's stories.

Understanding the nuances of how these victims feel in times of crisis can have implications for the way the church can minister to the children as well as their parents.

The church needs to be a parent figure for the girl-child suffering from poverty. They must have parents to nurture and guide them in their life-choices and especially attend to their spiritual needs. Social ministry to poor children ought to be shaped by a theology of compassion, which motivates members to demonstrate the love of Christ in obedience to a divine commission. Hence, the kinship/family structure of the Christian church, which is also a key principle of the African society, should serve as a key factor in preventing poverty and restoring people from it (Wright 2004:173). In the words of D.A. Brueggemann (2008:528), “protective actions can be described figuratively as those of a ‘father’ (Job 29:16; Psa

68:5; 89:26) or of a ‘mother’ at whose breast children find not only nourishment but also protection (Psa 22:9b; Lam 4:3).” When the poor are ignored and overlooked, their inalienable and inviolable human dignity is obscured, violated, and threatened.

A pastoral and shepherding approach to the poor makes the girl-child not be in want (1 Sam 25:16; Ps 23:1-6; 28:9). Such an approach must provide a hedge around the poor to protect them against any adverse attack (Psa 80:12; Job 1:10). If poverty is caused by injustice and oppression, then the church has a moral duty to speak prophetically against the perpetrators. The church must not only speak out but empower the poor to manage their lives in an unjust world order. Musa Dube (2004: 23) declares that, “even where the oppressed take control of their lives, it demands the willingness of the powerful to relinquish power. The powerful must be willing to feel power going out of them and accept it. They must share power with the powerless. It is not an easy thing.”

The church needs to insist on social structures that do not make the poor unable to access health and social amenities. It should stand for the poor and take a preferential option to be in solidarity with them. In the view of Mercy Oduyoye (1990:43), “Solidarity with a human face is mutual and reciprocal. It involves elements of cooperation, rapport and sharing. It develops among people who are bonded in harmony. Solidarity is walking hand in hand, developing strength through unity so that common interests are protected and common aims are achieved.” Musa Dube (2004:21-22) further observes that the poor can be likened to the woman who bled for 10 years and had been impoverished by many healers. She adds that, “we are confronted by a model of abuse of power, embodied by the physicians. They are powerful people with knowledge of healing. But when the bleeding woman comes to them, they do not heal her. Instead, they worsen her situation by adding poverty to her illness. This is a good example of the exploitation of the poor by the powerful.”

The church also ought to have a pro-poor policy as part of its social responsibility. Such a policy must consider the girl-child desperation in searching for an identity. It should consider what makes her feel burdened to help the parents out of poverty. It should give them an assurance of life in its fullness and self-dignity. It may take a cue from the third tithe that was to be collected every three years and distributed to the poor and needy (Deut 14:28-29; 26:12). This was God’s way of making sure that the widows, orphans and strangers in the land were provided for. The church

can always set aside a portion of the tithe for the poor and design a policy where it can periodically attend to the needs of the poor. In the New Testament, Paul admonished the church to set aside monies to help meet the needs of the poor (1 Cor 16:1-4). To withhold sharing with the poor will make a person poor: “A person gives freely, yet gains more; another withholds unduly, and comes to poverty” (Prov 11:24). Christian giving must be generous to distribute the resources to others compassionately (2 Cor. 9:7; 1 Tim. 5:9-10; 6:18; Jas 1:27).

The fact that all human beings are created in God’s image makes it imperative that everyone must be treated with respect and worth, no matter the social, economic, or political status. Prejudices against women and girls who are poor would not help in understanding their situation and adequately empowering them. Stigmatization against the poor such that they cannot contribute meaningfully to the church must be eschewed. The negative effects of African culture on women’s roles are to be exposed and eliminated. Musimbi Kanyoro (2001:159) observes the conditions of African women by saying that:

African women are the custodian of cultural practices, for generations, African women have guarded cultural prescriptions that are strictly governed by the fear of breaking taboos. Many aspects that diminish women continue to be practiced to various degrees, often making women objects of cultural preservation. Harmful traditional practices are passed on as “cultural values” and therefore are not to be discussed, challenged or changed. In the guise of culture, harmful practices and traditions are perpetuated. Practices such as female genital mutilation, early betrothals and marriages, and stigmatization of single women and widows, [polygamy, domestic violence] hinder the liberation of women.

The girl-child does not want to live a life on the streets. She needs an identity. The church should stand in solidarity with women and girls who are worst affected by poverty in the era of COVID-19. Mercy Oduyoye’s words are apt in this light:

A church in solidarity with women will not only join in eliminating dehumanizing elements in cultural practices both indigenous and imported. It will also seek justice in the world economy and the end of the use of power-nuclear and otherwise-for death-dealing purposes. It will pursue peace and ensure the contribution of all and the honoring of diversity. It will inculcate an attitude and a behavior that ensures that the sacredness inherent

in creation is not eroded. The violence that women endure will be eliminated if the future church will disown all structures and practices that deny the equality of women and men (1996:500).

Christians should gently but firmly admonish those whose poverty is as a result of poor work habits to begin taking responsibility for their own lives. The church needs to admonish people who are lazy and indulge in habits that lead to poverty to make decisions. As Christopher Wright (2004:148) avers, “it is our responsibility and right to be engaged in productive economic work with the material resources of the world. This means not only that we ourselves have the moral duty to work, such that voluntary, deliberate idleness is a sin (cf. 2 Thess 3:6-13), but it surely also means that we have a responsibility to enable or allow others to work.” The lazy will be unable to help themselves. They lack the interest and skills to progress in life. Therefore, preparing their minds through prayer, pastoral care, and counselling can help them to be ready to work with their hands.

The church also needs to assist victims in developing coping mechanisms that can help them in times of stress. An example is the case of Amina and others like her. Madipoane Masenya (2004:58) avers that “In our world which idolizes marriage (cf. also the one which produced the Naomi-Ruth story), a world in which married women are not expected to have control over their bodies, it is common place to find women availing their bodies, whether willingly or not, as a coping mechanism to survive through marriage.” A similar incident was the case of Adoma who wanted to spend the lockdown with her boyfriend.

## Conclusion

This paper has exposed the way poverty has been addressed in the midst of COVID-19. It discussed the different theories used to categorize poverty and argued that all categorizations must pay attention to the individual and not only the social dynamics. It has revealed that the most vulnerable group which includes the girl-child needs attention. Various interventions have been put in place by the state and church during the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak. To analyse the effectiveness of the policy of inclusiveness, there is the need to determine the obstacles related to the implementation of this policy, to become aware of the extent of the situation of the girl-child. African women and the girl-child are fighting for survival for

life, and they have to do so struggling with men. COVID-19 has come to expose the identity of the girl-child in the midst of poverty. It has revealed that poverty is not only about economic stability or the provision of basic amenities. Poverty is a very complex phenomenon that must be addressed holistically, and every person affirmed. Yet, the girl-child is most vulnerable. An all-inclusive policy should not only target the educational needs of the girl-child but also the individual psychological and spiritual burdens. The Bible calls the people of God to address poverty through compassion, social action and practical developmental policies. There is the need for the church and society to stretch out their hands and take the hands of the girl-child and call them back to life saying, “Talitha Cum”, or “little girl, get up.” Society must constantly redefine its commitment to the stigmatization, family-oriented policies, as well as problems associated with gender-roles. The church must be a parent who listens and provides for their needs, a shepherd who is in solidarity with the vulnerable and affirms their dignity.

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