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Kenya, Factor 15: Human Rights (with a focus on Women's Rights)

Hello, my name is Mia Battani, and I am 15 years old. I live in Ankeny, Iowa, USA with my parents, younger sister, and two dogs. I am in 10th grade at Ankeny Centennial High School in Ankeny, where I am highly involved in student council, the girls' swim team, and show choir, among other things. Finally, every day I am thankful to wake up in the morning and know that I have the potential to make a positive change in the world!

Kenya: Ending Hunger, One Girl at a Time

Kenya is a country in dire need for change in food security. Much of the land is arid or semi-arid, and there is not an abundance of knowledge circulating about how to most efficiently grow and sustain crops in these areas. However, many people are unaware that human rights issues are the root of much of Africa's food problems. More specifically, a lack of respect for women and their personal rights has inhibited progress on this ever-pressing issue. Beatings, denial of citizenship, and sexist governments are just a few examples of the injustices brought upon women every day. Daily incidents and threats like these stop women from going out and following their dreams, joining the workforce, or (most importantly) being equipped to learn how to sustain their food supply for themselves and their families. Finally, women are being oppressed through education, federal issues, disease, and cultural stereotype-based violence standing in the way of proper nutrition and access to good food.

The Typical Kenyan Life

Kenyan families, though close knit, have many veins of struggle running through them, caused by women's rights issues that lead to hunger problems. The typical Kenyan family has a mother and an average of five children; whether the father is active in the family's life is purely situation-based. If the father is present, he often assumes the position of the "socialite" of the family and goes off to do the family trades or do other business (Yin and Kent). Growing old and gray together may seem like an everyday thing here in the United States; however, the average life expectancy in Kenya is only fifty-three years old as of 2007. This is a two year decrease since the 1980s, and it would not be wrong to assume that this could cause a lack of maternal support for older children or other families in the close-knit communities of rural Kenya (Yin and Kent). A 2008 survey reports that six in ten Kenyans say that within the last year, they have been unable to afford health care, clothing, or food... necessities to contemporary survival (Yin and Kent). Furthermore, for every five-thousand Kenyans, there is only one doctor available with the proper training and credentials to effectively treat and prevent harmful diseases

(World Bank Group).. This means that for the entire population of Kenya, there are less than 9,000 well-trained doctors at the aid of these poor people. Why so little health care? The answer may lead to a lack of childhood education, which is another all-too-common trend in typical Kenyan families. According to UNICEF, only seventy-five percent of Kenyan children regularly attend in primary school, revealing that only three in four Kenyans receive even an elementary level education- adding on to this, less than forty-five percent of Kenyan children attend secondary school. As for nutritional struggles, the average family eats a diet full of corn and other simple staple foods. It would be a gross overstatement to say that the diet of the average Kenyan is full of a variety of fruits and vegetables, and essential proteins. Staple dishes like *posho*, *irio*, *ugali*, *mboga*, and *matoke* are composed without meat; meat and other essential proteins are very expensive and are very rarely eaten by the average Kenyan household (Stanford). As it is clear to see, Kenyans face a wide variety of familial, health, educational, and diet-related issues that hit very close to home.

Rural Kenyan Farms

Farming is the most common job choice for Kenyans, especially women that live in rural towns. It is not uncommon for farms in Kenya to be carried out by small-scale producers with very limited access to technology. In fact, most farms are no larger than five acres, and these farms make up seventy-five percent of the Kenyan agricultural production (Advameg Inc.). Of all the land in Kenya, only twenty percent is suitable for farming and cultivation. The rest is too arid to farm on, with the soil being too dry and lacking essential nutrients for crop survival (Advameg Inc.). In the Kenyan farm scene, there is a wide variety of crops grown considering the limited space that farmers have. Popular crops grown in the past twenty years include sugarcane, corn, wheat, rice, tea, potatoes, coffee, and beans to only name a few (Advameg Inc.). Though planting a variety of crops may seem like a way to make Kenyan economies thrive, it limits the amount of a singular crop to be grown, precluding the chance for Kenya to become a powerhouse in any one crop industry like they might be capable of, or to feed their ever-growing population with nutrition-packed foods.

Household Income

Right now, the biggest impact that sub-Saharan Africa is facing is the lack of means for families, namely women and mothers, to earn a sufficient income to purchase food. According to T. Olielo, a celebrated African food journalist, "Low incomes and poverty are the main cause of food insecurity in Kenya." Olielo also mentions that "it was found that the low income group [of citizens] could not purchase adequate food and amounts they consumed did not meet the FAO recommended levels for foods and nutrients." Upon doing more research, one stem of the problem is that women have been oppressed and discouraged from getting their own jobs for a long time. This is an imposing stressor in Kenyan life that is a major link in the issues relating to food accessibility in Kenya.

Issues

Lack of Job Opportunities

"A number of reasons are given for women's low participation in employment, and these include lack of equal education and skills training compared with men, cultural attitudes

about women working, or family obligations” (Mucai-Kattambo et al. 80). This means that men and their stereotypes of what a woman should be doing have kept women from getting paying jobs that could help to further sustain families in the country of Kenya. In fact, the first time that women were even considered to enter the workforce was in 1997, eighteen years ago (Otieno). Even if women were able to easier get past this stereotype by becoming employed, the “distance from farm to point of sale is a major constraint to the intensity of market participation” (Omiti et al. 1). This means that in the instance that women were to get a job, the combined pull of personal ties to families and turbulent relationships between women and their families require families to have their subsistence farms close to their home, away from markets and better nutrition. Those women that do have a steady job only earn a small fraction of the income that their male counterparts do. As a result, forty percent of the households that are run solely by women in Kenya are in moderate to severe poverty (Cannon). This means that almost half of the households that are run by women are at risk of starving to death due to a lack of sufficient income.

Lack of Education for Females

Another major topic that will affect women’s rights in the next few years is education. As of right now, the outlook on women’s rights in Kenya has taken a turn for the worst. Young girls, even in places outside of Kenya, are facing obstacles in their paths to learning. The findings of one researcher show that "Globally, 39 million girls between the age of 11 and 15 years are not in school, many of whom are in the poorest areas of the world. In Africa millions of children, particularly girls, are still denied the right to education and are unable to access knowledge and skills necessary for their empowerment" (Riria). So, even those courageous young girls that try to earn themselves a quality education are stopped by cultural norms, not to mention a lack of resources available to them to fight back with. According to Geraldine Nyambura Kamande, “women are poor because a lot of them don't have a good education.” Some girls drop out of school because their parents make them get jobs to pay for their brothers' school fees. Other girls don't go to high school because their parents can't afford it or they don't pass their exams to get in. This can be detrimental to any sort of bright future for girls, young and old alike. Also, traditional beliefs say that educating girls wastes money since they will get married and benefit their husband's family (Kamande). Finally, lack of education may be a contributing factor in the lack of knowledge about proper nutrition and food safety in Kenyan communities.

Traditional Familial and Cultural Statures

It is traditional for Kenyan women to be wives, mothers, caretakers, child bearers, and providers of food. Many girls are only prepared for a traditional education, which includes sewing, cooking, cleaning, manners, weeding, cultivating, harvesting, etc.... (Karani 1). Curiously, a professional life is not mentioned here. Men alone, especially in the typical household with five or more children, cannot sustain their families with their own incomes and still provide balanced, nutritious meals. Geraldine Kamande brings up a good point in saying that many women and children have to stay home and do all the work in the house, such as cooking, cleaning, and taking care of younger children. In many cases, women don’t get help from their family members. In most cases, students only help out around the house if it is absolutely necessary, and men don’t seem to help

out at all (“Kenya”). This creates a type of hierarchy in the home, one that upsets the role of financial and emotional stability, and therefore a family’s ability to obtain the food that they desperately need to survive.

Lack of Property Rights

Another factor that is affecting cultural productivity is the lack of women’s property rights. In an article sponsored by *Human Rights Watch*, it states that “millions of women in sub-Saharan Africa are robbed, beaten, raped, and evicted-often by their own in-laws-because women are deemed unworthy of equal property rights....Women in Kenya are often precluded from inheriting property, expelled from their homes when they divorce or their husbands die, stripped of their belongings, and forced into customary sexual behaviors (such as ‘wife inheritance’ and ritual ‘cleansing’) in order to keep their property” (“Women’s Property Rights...”). Because women are often not deemed worthy to property rights by their male counterparts, they often lack property to support themselves in the first place, leading to a very large reason why there is such a hunger crisis in Kenya. In addition, violence often accompanies the struggle for women to keep their property. On another note, a lack of property rights eliminates potentially single mothers or especially needy households from farming on their own ground, meaning that they could not make their own money or use some of their crops for their own families.

Violence

Most unfortunately, women are being beaten and bloodied within the confines of their own home due to their propensity to try and express their rights. There exists a small anecdote about a young Kenyan woman who beat all odds to be the only employed person in her household. However, the story takes a disturbing turn when her husband started to beat her, bloodying one of her eyes and leaving bruises all over her body. The reason why? He didn’t like the way that she chose to spend her money one weekend. Unfortunately, things like this happen all the time in modern Kenyan households. Disputes between males and females are commonplace, and males still tend to win these arguments, leaving the females to fend for themselves or cower in fear. In some situations, women are forced to leave their husbands and take their children with them, even though they have no rights to own property to farm on and no time to get a job to help sustain the family. Needless to say, the present status of this factor is nearing the extremely severe stage of the spectrum. Abuse is an all-too common practice in Kenyan society, preventing harmony and hunger stability in these situations.

Biased Government and Laws

Governments have a lot of control over countries, which means that getting the Kenyan government on board with a change in human rights is essential in getting the rest of the country to follow through. The trends for this factor seem to be worsening. In the big picture, the majority of this data is measured by the representation of women in government. In a general sense, over fifty percent of all the laws in the world discriminate against women in the fight for equality with their husbands, and twenty percent discriminate against women in the fight for positive relations with their children (“About Equality Now”). This is no different in Kenya and the sub-Saharan section of Africa. In the country of Kenya, the amount of women in Parliament has gone up by twenty percent, only having an average of around seven members. Especially compared to border-

countries Uganda and Tanzania (both with averages of around thirty females in parliament), these numbers are abysmal. Finally, specifically within the confines of Kenya, the existing laws concerning FGM (Female Genital Mutilation) are poorly enforced by police and have resulted in many complications within the girls and women of young families. For example, "Sasiano, a 12-year-old Kenyan girl from the Maasai community, was subjected to FGM and bled to death. Although FGM is banned in Kenya, it has a prevalence rate of 73% among the Maasai community. The police in the area were not trained on the law and were not implementing it" ("Good Existing Laws"). Though the law against this is perfectly in check, the lack of enforcement results in tragedies all too often, also decreasing potential substantial money for food and supplies to cultivate food.

Overall, the situation for women (rural, especially), is getting worse rather than better. Fixing the human rights issue in Kenya is a fundamental solution to solving hunger problems in the world. Through more equal policies (and proper enforcement of said policies) concerning equal employment/pay, women who are currently struggling on their small subsistence farms could earn enough money to allow women to pay for more food and supplies to help their families and farms thrive. Through the equal and thorough education of women, more farmers could gain the skills and mental capacity to produce a quality crop while also sustaining the environment for years to come. Through the equal representation of women in Parliament, there could be many more economic opportunities for women to go out and seize their business opportunities, creating a growth in the economy that is conducive with the percentage of Kenyan farmers that are actually women. Finally, reducing the amount of violence and mutilation that is brought upon women in Kenya would create a burst in the overall health, well-being, and self-esteem of women and girls across the country, and maybe even influencing neighboring countries with similar problems.

Solutions

Legislature and Laws

There are many things that could be helping women in Kenya right now that are not yet implemented. To start, women need more representation in Parliament. To do this, campaigning and support from working-class men in Kenya is definitely in order. Encouraging and helping more women run for government positions may lift some of the animosity towards women throughout the country, especially if women help to solve some of the country's other problems. Also, there needs to be more laws supporting that women and girls get a good education, and more local governments need to support this. This way, girls could get an education without having to worry about being discriminated against or shut out, because it would be expected.

Education

Education is another big piece of the puzzle that is missing. To start, the Kenyan government could pass a bill to what is a similar system in America; all children (regardless of sex), would be required to attend school at least through a certain grade or age. This way, women and girls could at least get *some* education and get away from the stereotype of having to stay at home and do housework all day. There could even be

another stipulation, which is already being carried out in some countries: a reward for extending education into college, or for finishing all thirteen years of school. This may initially bring up some budget problems for the country, but the ability to have more educated, able people in the workforce would override the risks tenfold. In one of the links on the “Goal 3” Millennium Development Goal page, it describes a program in Bolivia that teaches fathers proper nutrition and child care. A practice like this could be extremely successful in Kenya, not only for fathers but for mothers and older children as well. It would provide some education, good parenting skills (for both parents), and promote healthy eating habits to solve the hunger crisis.

Organizations and Corporations

When it comes to these problems, big corporations and other organizations, such as the UN, could help. One of the most beneficial things for Kenyans would be to send doctors, agriculture experts, and other fundamental community leaders to live and work in Kenya. Organizations like the UN or the World Bank could help support and encourage this, and if the thought of helping people gain rights and proper nutrition wasn't enough, they could be paid by the government for doing so... almost as if they were a part of the military. This could be especially helpful if it is implemented by the organizations with international ties, so that there could be experts from a variety of places who have diverse experiences, speak different languages, and have fresh ideas to share with one another. In fact, these organizations can team up with one another to form a type of “super-organization.” This would give each individual organization more of an impact, and a greater and more diverse opinion of how to end this crisis effectively, without accidentally contradicting one another. For example, a group of doctors could work to end FGM, a group of agricultural experts could work on increasing crop yields and property ownership, and other community leaders could act as go-betweens from the large organizations and the local organizations. To add in some more local ties to this mix, a great example of a Kenyan organization to help would be the Kenyan Section of the International Commission of Jurists. Though this is not exactly a large, internationally active group, they have a lot of interrelated sponsors of other groups, so that they form a sort of “net” of human rights activists. In other words, many different groups are teaming up in the fight against discrimination, making them stronger than one alone (“Human Rights Protection”).

Women-Led Groups

Just as there are small, local support groups in the United States, there is a necessity for support groups in Kenya that need to be encouraged and run by women, supplementing the work to be done by big corporations. One of the most tragic feelings is to feel alone in actions or circumstances. An open community group would encourage women to speak out, pinpointing specific problems in certain communities and give women the resources to help themselves and their family. By being open and honest, women could work out schedules, plan community meals, or even have a refuge shelter when a woman goes into “crisis mode.” Not only would this give women an edge in their personal safety, but it would give women the confidence to go out and fight for their rights to a greater education, better jobs, better pay, better access to land, and therefore better crops and food availability. A great example of an organization like this is the Kasarani Self-Help Group. This group of people is a by women, for women group that not just encourages

people to get their rights, but also actively participates in obtaining these rights and giving women the tools that they've needed all along to help themselves (Osoo). Mainly, this group is successful because of their ability to look past cultural "norms" and politics and focus on the well-being and emotional issues of the women in need of support. Another great example of a support group in Kenya is Women in Law and Development in Africa (WiLDAF) Kenya. Their major goal is to "promote women's human and legal rights and the active participation of women in development at all levels" (Women in Law). Groups like this should definitely be scaled up in prevalence because they are not passive but rather active in their fight against women's oppression. Not only do support groups work to support women in all their goals and promote a sense of community, they also are a key factor in helping women receive the rights and abilities to keep themselves and their families nourished.

Communication Skills

Finally, families need to be involved in the lives of their women and girls. Though these powerhouses in revolution are essential to making big changes, rural farmers and urban families alike are also needed to be involved. Cooperation with these big companies and organizations would be necessary for any real change to happen. For example, if a representative needed to do some work on the field, families could take in these people and board them for a time while they needed to work. Or, families and local communities could set up a sort-of neighborhood watch system where there would be safe places to go for women that are being abused or discriminated against. In coordination with new laws concerning land rights, relationship laws, and stronger anti-violence movements, this system would balance capital powers with the action of the people. In turn, a lot of the hunger crisis would be eliminated and families would be healthier and happier.

To sum this up, women's rights issues are one of the underlying reasons why hunger in Kenyan families is such a big issue. Denying women access to proper education, land ownership rights, and safe marriage laws has sent women on a downward spiral. Not only that, but a lack of representation in government, sexual and physical abuse problems, and unequal pay have made women's rights a crisis. The act of any of these events occurring and oppressing women have somehow affected the amount, quality, or availability of nutritious food to women and their families. To fix this problem, confidence needs to be instilled in women within the confines of Kenya. Women should be able to support each other or speak out against the wrongs that have been done against them. Outside of the borders of Kenya, organizations need to team up to become a stronger force for change in Kenya. Alone, organizations are passive or are stuck in a "rut" when it comes to providing fresh ideas and taking action on Kenyan land. Together, organizations would have a bigger cumulative budget, more power, and more new ideas on how to end the human rights crisis in Kenya. After all, farm families across that nation would reap the benefits (quite literally) of these programs for years to come.

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