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### Honors Capstone Paper:

#### *Global Stratification: What It Is, Why Does It Happen, and What Does It Affect*

### **Introduction: What Is It?**

What is global stratification? Global stratification “refers to the unequal distribution of wealth, power, prestige, resources, and influence among the world’s nations. Put more simply, there is an extreme difference between the richest and poorest nations” (University of Minnesota, 2010). According to the United Nations, 40% of the world’s population -or about two billion people- live on less than \$2 per day (United Nations Development Programme, 2005). If the world were one nation, its median annual income would only be about \$1,700; the richest fifth of the world’s population would have three-fourths of the world’s entire income while the poorest one fifth would only have about 1.5% of the total income. Based on this data and the following research that will be presented, the unequal distribution of wealth and resources around the globe becomes evident. In order to better understand global stratification and solutions to this unjustness, the bigger question must be addressed: *why* does this happen and what exactly does it affect?

To better understand global stratification it is crucial to also understand economic inequality. Economic inequality “refers to the gap between the richest and poorest segments of society. Economic inequality compares the large economic gap between the wealthy and poor nations of the world as well as also compares the degree of economic inequality found within

each nation” (Neckermann & Torche, 2010). Economic inequality is measured by the Gini Coefficient which is a scale from 0 to 1; 0 meaning that the income is the same for everyone (no economic inequality at all) and 1 meaning perfect inequality. Economic inequality is higher in the agricultural regions of Latin America and the Caribbean, in Africa, and South Asia than in the industrial region of Western Europe. In the developing world, the region of Latin America and the Caribbean has a more advanced agricultural economy than other regions, and it also has the highest degree of inequality, with a small group of elite owning a great amount of the land (Hoffman & Centeno, 2018). In relationship to this economic inequality, it is helpful to classify the world into three categories based on their economic development, degree of wealth or poverty, and their level of industrialization. Originally, the terms “First World”, “Second World”, and “Third World” were used to classify the world but as research developed and different typologies were applied, the terms “developed”, “developing”, and “undeveloped” are now put in place. In other words, we can categorize the world by saying “wealthy”, “middle-income”, and “poor” nations.

### **Wealthy Nations**

The wealthy nations are considered to be the most industrialized nations and consist of countries in mostly North America and Western Europe, and some from the Middle East. Many of these nations started to become industrialized as early as the nineteenth century during the Industrial Revolution. The Industrial Revolution created an unparalleled wealth in Western Europe and North America. Due to new means of production and technological inventions, citizens began working in factories. By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, industrial technology had gradually raised the standard of living for many people in the United States and Europe (Introduction to Sociology, 2015). Although the industrialized/wealthy nations

only make up about one sixth of the world's entire population, they actually hold four-fifths of the world's wealth. The wealthy nations lead in finance, industry, and technology as well as exert political, social, and cultural influence across the whole country. Although there is stratification to a certain degree within these nations, as a whole they live much more comfortably than the middle-income and poor places. Citizens living in wealthy nations tend to have longer life expectancy rates and better access to education. Regarding health, a child born in one of the countries with the worst health (Somalia) is 60-times more likely to die than a child born in a country with the best health (Iceland). In regards to education, the countries where people have the best access to education – in Europe and North America – children can expect 15 to 20 years of formal education. Finally, in regards to income, the richest country (Qatar) has a GDP per capita of almost \$117,000 while the poorest country, the Central African Republic, has a GDP per capita of just \$661. Although the wealthy nations lead in so many positive aspects, they also contribute to pollution and climate change to a much worse degree than middle-income and poor countries due to how industrialized they are.

### **Middle Income Nations**

Middle-income nations, such as; Central and South America, Eastern Europe, and certain parts of Africa and Asia, attest for one third of the world's entire population. Because their political leaders tend to sell most of their resources to wealthy nations and keep the money to themselves, middle-income nations tend to have a large amount of natural resources but also areas of extreme poverty. Within the middle-income nations themselves the stratification levels are high. For example, “the gross national income per capita in Chile, adjusted to U.S. dollars, is \$13,270, compared to only \$4,140 in Bolivia” (Population Reference Bureau, 2009). Because of this, it is more accurate to divide middle-income nations into its own sub-categories: upper and

lower. Those living in the lower middle-income nations live in worse circumstances than those in the upper middle income nations. In Bolivia, for example, 30% of the population lives on less than \$2 per day, compared to only 5% in Chile. This data proves that stratification occurs around the world but also within nations themselves.

### **Poor Nations**

The poor nations are considered to be the least industrialized but the most agricultural among the world's nations. The poor nations, making up about half of the world's population, consist of places in Africa and parts of Asia. They have some of their own resources but similar to those of the middle-income nations, their leaders tend to sell to wealthy nations and keep the majority of the income for themselves. The poor nations highly depend on only one or two crops and if the weather conditions hurt their crops / their ability to farm, the whole nation becomes even hungrier. Similarly, if economic conditions reduce the price of their crops, the entire nations becomes even poorer. An example of this occurred in Vietnam, which is a leading exporter of coffee. "As coffee prices rose during the 1990s, Vietnam expanded its coffee production by greatly increasing the amount of acreage devoted to growing coffee beans. When the price of coffee plummeted in the early 2000s, Vietnam's coffee industry, including the farmers who grow coffee, suffered huge losses. Many farmers destroyed their coffee plants to be able to grow other crops they thought would be more profitable" (Huy, 2010). The citizens living in the poor nations live in by far the worst conditions possible. Diseases such as AIDS, malaria, starvation, and others are considered common. Many children die before reaching adolescence, and many adults die before reaching what in the richest nations would be considered their middle age. Many people in the poorest nations are illiterate, and a college education remains as foreign to them as their way of life would be to us.

## **Globally Poverty and What Exactly Does this Affect?**

Global stratification and global poverty affect the life chances of people around the world in extreme ways. In addition to classifying nations based on how industrialized they are, organizations also tend to determine the poverty levels of each nation. The measurement of global poverty is very important for many reasons. First and foremost, government officials will not recognize or try to do something about the problem of poverty unless there are statistics and data to motivate them to do so. As experts on international poverty have stated, “It is easy to ignore the poor if they are statistically invisible” (Haughton & Khandker, 2009). Another reason for determining poverty levels is to determine which specific regions of a nation are the poorest and if possible, which individuals are the poorest based on certain characteristics. Finally, it is important to measure global poverty to determine how well the efforts that are currently being made are helping, if they are at all. The United Nations Development Programme, the World Bank, and other international agencies measure global poverty in order to issue annual reports on human development indicators that show the impact of living in a poor nation.

## **Human Development**

Global poverty is considered to be a matter of life and death, and the status of a country’s health is one of the most important indicators of human development. Life expectancy rates differ from country to country, with some people dying younger while others die older. A nation’s poverty rate and other similar conditions affect a nation’s overall life expectancy to an extreme degree.

## **Child Mortality**

Another important contributor and crucial indicator of human development is child mortality. Child mortality is defined as the number of children who die before age five per one-thousand children. In wealthy nations, the child mortality is as low as seven per one thousand whereas in certain African nations, child mortality exceeds two hundred children per one thousand.

## **Sanitation and Clean Water**

Sanitation and clean water are two more indicators of human development and two more aspects of life poverty effects. “When people lack adequate sanitation and clean water, they are at much greater risk from life-threatening diarrhea, from serious infectious diseases such as cholera and typhoid, and from parasitic diseases such as schistosomiasis” (World Health Organization, 2010). Over two million people in the world suffer from inadequate sanitation and more than forty-million people worldwide suffer from infectious diseases. Wealthy nations have much easier and better access to sanitation and clean water than poor nations. “Adequate sanitation is virtually universal in wealthy nations but is available to only 38% of people in poor nations. Clean water is also nearly universal in wealthy nations but is available to only 67% of people in poor nations” (World Bank, 2010).

## **Malnutrition**

Another indicator of health development is malnutrition. Malnutrition is a problem stemming from the lack of availability to good food as well as infections and diseases that take away the body’s essential nutrients. About eight hundred million individuals are malnourished and about 150 million children are underweight; half of these children live in only three areas: Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan. Individuals and children who are malnourished are at a greater

risk of brain damage, fat and muscle loss, blindness, and death. Child malnutrition contributes heavily to the extremely high rates of child mortality and is estimated to be responsible for more than 5 million deaths of children annually (UNICEF, 2006; World Health Organization, 2010). As well as these physical issues, global stratification and poverty affect people living in poorer, nonindustrialized nations mentally as well. Adult literacy is the final indicator of human development and refers to the percentage of people fifteen and older who can read and write a simple sentence. In some of the poorer nations, only about 69% of adults can read and/or write a simple sentence. The increasingly high rates of illiteracy in the poor nations not only displays poverty but also contributes to it, as people who are not able to read or write have a huge disadvantage in many areas of life.

### **How Global Poverty Affects Women Specifically**

Because women are statistically proven to be poorer than men worldwide they tend to experience and suffer from the problems that poverty causes including disease and malnutrition, as well as additional issues. Some of these additional problems are due to the way that they are treated simply because they are women, and other problems stem from their role of childbearing. One of the worst ways that global poverty affects women is maternal mortality. Maternal mortality refers to the number of women who die during childbirth per one-hundred thousand live births; yearly over five-hundred thousand women died due to complications during childbirth. Maternal mortality, which is more common in poor nations than in wealthy nations, usually is a result from poor obstetrical care, disease, illness, or insufficient prenatal care. Women in poor nations are seventy-nine more times likely to die during childbirth or have problems during pregnancy; another reason for this being that in poor nations, child births are rarely overseen by a skilled medical professional.

As mentioned previously, women also have it a lot worse simply because of how they are treated for being female. About one-third of women globally have been raped or beaten, and although violence definitely occurs in wealthy nations as well, it is more common and frequent in poor nations. For example, more than half of women in Uganda have been physically or sexually abused (Amnesty International, 2010), and in India and Pakistan, thousands of women are killed every year in dowry deaths, in which a new wife is murdered by her husband and/or his relatives if she does not pay the groom money or goods (Kethineni & Srinivasan, 2009). Beyond violence and maternal mortality, women and girls suffer mentally as well. Women are less likely to get a higher education than their male counterparts, and girls are less likely to attend primary school than their boy counterparts. Women are less likely than men to hold a political position and less likely to find a job and/or get paid a decent salary. Girls and women are also less likely to receive sufficient medical care when they become sick, and girls are more likely to die before the age of five. It is within these ways that women and girls suffer due to global poverty, especially in poor nations.

### **Explaining Global Stratification: Modernization vs. Dependency**

There are currently two theories used to explain global stratification and why it happens; the modernization theory and the dependency theory. The modernization theory takes a more individualized approach, while the dependency theory is a more historical and structural approach.

The modernization theory states that early on, rich nations were able to become rich while poor nations remain poor because the wealthy places were able to develop the “correct” beliefs, values, and practices. These traits that allowed rapid economic growth to occur consist of; a willingness to work hard, to focus on the future orientation rather than the present, and to be

able to abandon tradition and adapt to new and better ways of doing things. According to the modernization theory, because the population of Western European nations adopted the “correct” beliefs and practices listed, they were able to gain economic power rapidly centuries ago. The modernization theory attributes the poverty of poor and non industrialized nations to their inability to adapt to the proper practices that will allow them to succeed. This theory provides direct implications of ways and strategies to reduce poverty globally. The modernization theory states that by not developing the proper steps to allow them to succeed, the poor nations are preventing themselves from being able to fully prosper.

On the other hand, the dependency theory challenges the beliefs of the modernization theory. According to the dependency theory, the poor nations never actually got the opportunity to grow economically because they were conquered so early on by European nations. It is believed that the European nations stole the poor nations’ resources and then either used their population for cheap labor or as slaves. Because these European nations implemented their own governments and prevented the conquered nations from receiving a good education, they were able to develop professionalism and businesses allowing them to further develop their own economies. The dependency theory also consists of direct strategies to try and reduce global poverty. Simply put, the dependency theory implies that corporations and wealthy nations should not exploit the resources of the poorer nations. If this exploitation continues to happen, poor nations will never be able to develop or be able to improve economically.

### **What Sociology Suggests**

Throughout years of international aid to the poor these nations still remain in dire need of help. “International aid experts acknowledge that efforts to achieve economic growth in poor nations have largely failed, but they disagree why this is so and what alternative strategies may

prove more successful” (Cohen & Easterly, 2009). One suggestion is to switch from “macro” efforts, meaning focusing on infrastructure problems and on social institutions, to “micro” efforts, meaning providing cash payments or small loans directly to poor people in poor nations. Sociology also suggests that because of the large role that class, gender, and ethnic inequality play in prolonging global poverty, that in order to actually reduce poverty these factors need to be addressed and reduced as well. Writers Kristof and WuDunn address the need to reduce the global poverty of women specifically; this is crucial in improving economic and humanitarian conditions. When women in poor nations acquire extra money -although extremely rare- they tend to spend it on their families, food, clothing, medicine and other essentials. In contrast, when men acquire extra money they tend to spend it on drugs, alcohol, and gambling. Although this information sounds like a stereotype, it also indicates that providing aid to women could help in many ways while providing extra aid to men could actually be harmful.

### **Is Change Possible?**

Two centuries ago, Finland had one of the highest infant mortality rates and one of the lowest GDPs- it was as poor a place as today’s poorest countries with a child mortality rate much worse than any place in the world today. Currently, Finland has one of the lowest infant mortality rates and one of the highest GDPs, indicating that change is in fact possible. The inequality that we see in the world today is the consequence of unequal progress. Our generation especially has the resources, opportunity, and responsibility to allow every part of the world to develop and transform into a place where health, access to education, and prosperity is a reality; Author William Gibson writes “The future is already here, it is just unevenly distributed” and Mahatma Gandhi quotes “The difference between what we do and what we are capable of doing would suffice to solve most of the world’s problems.” A question that comes to mind is it a duty

or a right to help those in need? My response to this is that it is the duty of the more fortunate / wealthy nations to ensure that the less fortunate / poor nations are not stripped of their basic rights.

All in all, poverty is rooted in the social and economic problems of the larger society rather than in the lack of willpower, laziness, or other moral failings of poor individuals themselves. Efforts to reduce poverty must address first and foremost the structural basis for poverty but also should not ignore certain beliefs and practices of the poor that also make a difference. To assist in reducing *global* poverty the following actions can be taken:

- Invest in education
- Governments can intervene to assist in promoting equality through the tax and benefits system. This means employing a progressive tax and benefits system which takes proportionately more tax from those on higher levels of income, and redistributes welfare benefits to those on lower incomes.
- Enforce a living wage.
- Stop labor abuses and promote more jobs.

Global poverty will take years to reduce and to vanish, if possible at all, but efforts must not be stopped and every action we can take to make a step in the right direction should be done. In the United States specifically, the following actions can and should be taken, as they are not nearly impossible:

- A national “full employment” policy for the poor, involving federally funded job training and public works programs.

- Increase federal aid for the working poor. Include earned income credits and child care subsidies for those with children.
- Have more well-funded early-childhood intervention programs, including home visitation by trained professionals, for poor families. Improve the schools/school systems that poor children attend as well as expand early childhood education programs for poor children.
- Provide better nutrition and health services for poor families with young children.

There are also many organizations that can be donated to, such as; Oxfam International, The Organization for Poverty Alleviation and Development (OPAD), and Concern Worldwide, which intervene with the world's poorest nations and have provided immediate relief in times of crisis to over millions of people. Although these may seem like little steps being taken, no action is too small and they may start a chain reaction.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the nations of the world differ dramatically in wealth, power, and prestige where the poorest nations are found in areas such as Africa and Asia. Global stratification is present due to structural, social, and independent issues impacting many factors consisting of; health and human development, education, income, child and maternal mortality rates, violence, and more. In order to reduce poverty rates, the problems need to first be addressed and all countries need to be made aware. By addressing the situation head-on, gender and ethnic inequality may also be reduced and the exploitation of the poor nations by wealthy nations can be stopped leading to more opportunity for growth and improvement. Looking at today's world, Covid-19 had a great impact on all nation's, causing both poor and wealthy places to struggle. As the wealthy nations improve their own situation, aid to the poor nations needs to be put in place.

This is a perfect opportunity to begin acting on the measures that need to be taken to reduce global stratification. This is the perfect opportunity to make a more equal world.

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