

CULTURAL INFLUENCE ON THE DIGNITY OF WOMEN IN NIGERIA: THE WAY FORWARD

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Abstract

All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood. Most cultures marginalize women believing that they should be seen and not be heard. The freedom of women is the greatest revolution, not just of our own day, but of all time, since it breaks the fetters which are as old as the world (Louise Dittmar, 1884). Any oppressed class or group which tries to change its position within the social hierarchy has a chance to succeed only if its demands are radical and universal. It must not only criticize the actual pattern of dominance, it must go to the roots of all dominance of man over man and put up universal claims of freedom and equality, valid for everybody. The Plight for women emancipation in Nigeria could be traced to the Aba women riot of 1929 which exposed the women to their true positions as pilots, journalists, lawyers, doctors etc. It is time for people to understand that women should be given a voice. This paper will x-ray ill-treatments culture has on women and look for the way forward.

Introduction

There are gender inequalities and discrimination due to existing African oppressive cultural practices. Over the years women have been suffering various forms of oppression such as sexual harassment, early and forced marriage, rape, kidnap and so on. In Nigeria, women are more disadvantaged than men. They do most of menial jobs in the labour market. In terms of wealth, they are poorer.

Lucas (2009:13) in Utoh-Ezeajugh (2013) notes: "Time has come for the dismantling of old concepts and values, old mentality and principles and replaces them with pragmatic ones based on fairness and justice. If it happens in the creative arts world, then it is just a matter of time before it occurs in the real world". (p.2)

Ezeigbo (2001) suggests that "There is the need to adopt a more democratic and pluralist approach to gender issues in Nigeria, taking into consideration people's religious, ethnic, and cultural identities". (p. 400)

Epuchie (2013) states that "for one to understand the position of African women in general and Igbo women in particular, one needs to know what culture is all about" (p.1)

Culture Defined

Culture is the people's way of life. The way they do their own things which are peculiar to them. Enem (1990) states that:

Cultural policy for Nigeria (199:5) sees culture as the way of life evolved by a people in their attempts to meet the challenges of living in their environment, which gives order and meaning to their social, political, economic, aesthetic and religious norms and models of organization, thus distinguishing a people from their neighbours. (p. 72)

Culture is the totality of human efforts in life. It is an all-embracing concept that is capable of influencing everybody in the society. It could then be said that gender oppression and inequality which Nigerian women agitate for is their heritage. The socio-cultural realities of African societies to a large extent have entrenched male dominance over their female counterparts. That is why the issue of gender inequality has come to stay because it is culturally rooted.

It then means that the oppressive practices which women struggle against in Africa with particular reference to Nigerian people could be attributed to what obtains in the people's culture than to the making of African or Nigerian men.

Epuchie (2013) collaborates:

Since culture is marked by continuity, what African men are perpetuating is the culture that they inherited from their ancestors. Hence most African societies were organized by gender and tasks were divided and standards set according to patriarchal values. It is this situation that African women in general and Nigerian women in particular have aggressively attacked. (p.4)

Concept of The Girl Child

Within the context of the Nigerian environment, several definitions of the child exist. The national child welfare policy (1989) as cited by (Ada 2007 p. 314) defines the girl/female child as person below 14 years of age. Offorma (1999) defines the girl child as a biological female offspring from birth to 18 years of age. This period is made up of infancy, childhood, early and late adolescence stages of development. The girl child is seen as a young female person who would eventually grow into a woman and marry. She is conditioned to look after the young ones, the home and kitchen. She is taught to be obedient and to internalize the notion that she is someone's property and responsibility. She is her parent's property and responsibility at childhood and her husband's in adulthood. The gender apartheid places the girl child in a disadvantaged position. Her potentials are suppressed and self actualization is not achieved. She is never encouraged to see herself as an achiever. She is made to depend on her male counterpart.

Women's Rights

Women's rights are the rights and entitlements claimed for women of many societies worldwide, and the degree in which they could become emancipated. Hosken (1981) states that:

In some countries, these rights are institutionalized or supported by law, local custom, and behaviour whereas in others they may be ignored or suppressed. They differ from broader notions of human rights through claims of an inherent historical and traditional bias against the exercise of rights by women and girls in favour of men and boys. (p.1)

Such rights are: freedom from sexual violence, freedom to hold public office, to enter into legal contracts, to have equal rights in family law, to work, to fair wages, to have reproductive rights, to own property, to education, to vote, to share in their father's inheritance and so on.

However, the bible presented the women rights thus:

Biblical Presentation of Women Rights

"If he marries another wife, he is not to reduce her food, clothing or marital rights" (Exodus 21:10) from the Complete Jewish Bible (CJB).

From ancient times women have had a right to sex, be clothed and fed by their husbands. Breach of these Old Testament rights by a polygamous man gave the woman grounds for divorce. (Exodus 21:11) states: "And if he do not these three unto her, then shall she go out free without money". (KJV)

The English church and culture in the middle ages regarded women as weak, irrational and vulnerable to temptation that was constantly needed to be kept in check. This was reflected on the Christian culture through the story of Adam and Eve where Eve fell to Satan's temptations and led Adam to eat the apple. It was belief based on St Paul, that the pain of child birth was a punishment for this deed that led mankind to be banished from the Garden of Eden. 1200AD theologian Jacques de Vitry in Jennifer (2006:3) emphasized for female obedience towards their men and expressed women as being slippery, weak, untrustworthy, devious, deceitful and stubborn. The church also promoted the Virgin Mary as a role model for women to emulate by being innocent in her sexuality, being married to a husband and eventually becoming a mother..

Religion and culture are instruments of women oppression in Nigeria. They constitute among others the ideology of the society, which is a superstructure on the socio-economic foundation of any class society.

Cultures and religion support the patriarchal society along with the private property and class society. The patriarchal society sets the parameters for women's structurally unequal position in families and markets by condoning gender-differential terms in inheritance rights and legal adulthood, by tacitly condoning domestic and sexual violence and sanctioning differential wages for equal or comparable work.

Culture and religion have dictated men and women relationship for centuries and entrenched male domination into the structure of social organization and institution at all levels of leadership. They justify capitalist's marginalization of women in education, labour market, politics, business, family domestic matters and inheritance.

Most Nigerian women live under stress because they are overwhelmed by the responsibilities in their lives, those created by the society and themselves. According to Ezeigbo (2001), Nigerian women are expected to perform their traditional roles efficiently, run their homes, be good wives and step mothers. They are also expected to contribute to the family income, cater for the extended family members and perform efficiently in their jobs or businesses.

Nigerian women are still relegating to the background as they lack the educational, economic and political power necessary to actualize their innate potentials.

Women Empowerment/Freedom

Women empowerment can be described as the provision of adequate opportunities to women to develop their potentials and contribute to the development of the nation in particular and to the world in general. Adewole (1997) described women empowerment as the provision of conducive environment or opportunities to women to contribute their quota to the social, political and economic development of a nation.

Problems Militating Against The Attainment of Women Empowerment/Freedom In Nigeria

1) **Illiteracy**

Culture and sub-cultures in Nigeria give preference to male children as they are usually regarded as the heirs or the pillars of the family. Female children are usually less privileged and consequently not given adequate opportunity to acquire education and formal training. Umar (1996) noted that the girl child is

valued not for who she is, her potentials or achievements but for her services, submissiveness and at best good looks. He stated further that in any traditional Nigerian Community, it is believed that the place of the girl child and subsequently women is in the kitchen or at home. He stressed further that women in Nigeria are socialized into accepting the traditional roles of bearing and rearing children and maintaining the welfare of the family. Thus, in most parts of Nigeria, particularly the rural setting, the education of the girl child does not go beyond what she needs to bear children and keep the home.

2) **Sex Stereotype**

During the period of socialization females are usually trained to believe that there are different roles for males and females as well as the superiority of males over the females. Generally, adults discourage competition between females groups are thus exposed to different roles. The females are encouraged to be obedient, kind and appreciative while males are rewarded when they display aggression, decisiveness and detachment (Rinehart and Kols, 1988). Some vocations or jobs are regarded as men's jobs, example; engineering, carpentry and bricklaying etc, while some others are designated as feminine example; music, nursing, teaching and trading.

Thank God, we have today (but few) female Lawyers, Magistrates, Builders, Engineers, Importers, and Exporters and so on

3) **Rivalry among Women**

The Nigerian society seems to encourage women to compete with one another in a subtle way. One may occasion, unhealthy rivalries among women usually lead to envy and jealousy. This prevents women from being team players and supporting one another during the periods of need. Consequently, most women perceive men's domination as acceptable and preferable to female domination. Shonekan (1992) proposed that:

Much as it is necessary for men to encourage women to get to management position, it is equally important for women to re-examine themselves and resolutely aim for prime seats in the organization. They must abandon the almost imaginary belief that women leadership is the exception rather than the rule of our society (Daily Times, November, 1999, p1.21)

4) **Insufficient need for Power**

Nigerian women are generally not "aggressive or assertive" enough to seize leadership mantle from their male counterparts. Steiner and Miner (1977) observed that individuals who seek power will have to strive hard to reach positions where they can exercise authority over others. Similarly, Okojie, (1990 p. 47) stressed that people who lack power drive will find it difficult to assume leadership position. This impediment may be attributed to low self-concept on the part of Nigerian women most of whom believe that the males are better (than them) in human endeavours.

The level of women participation in politics is still very low in Nigeria. Awe

(1990) asserted that most women in Nigeria do not usually contest elective posts but limit their activities to voting during elections. Although, this attitude may be related to their level of education and poor economic base, it has adverse effects on women's struggle for emancipation.

In general overview, the participation of women in the elections as regards vying for elective offices is still left much to be. Different reasons are adduced for the low level of the involvement of women in politics. For instance, some are of the opinion that, as nature would have it, women cannot master the required strength to wither the storm of politics. It should only be the tough that move along. As a matter of fact, success should be achieved through toil and not concession but the inability of women to attain such success is not because they are weaker sex, it is the society that has made it difficult. The view of our society is shaped by religion, culture, folklore and fables, which are unfair to women by relegating them to background. Most religions and culture tenaciously hold the belief that women must not occupy leadership position in the society but can only play the second fiddle, so, women hardly attempt to contest the leadership position within the parties or in the larger society. They are content with operating from the position of weakness rather than strength. They prefer to serve as supporters in their various parties for collaborators. They play vital roles in campaigning and mobilizing support for their parties.

Worse still, any woman who attempts to break the "rule" is seen as a non-conformist and treated with scorn even by fellow women. Therefore apart from the religion and other societal beliefs that restrict women participation in politics, the socio-economic arrangement called capitalism is the worse fetter.

5. **Religious beliefs**

The leadership of different religions in Nigeria has different views as regards the position of women in worldly affairs. Some religious leaders and their adherents strongly believe that women should only be seen but not heard. Some view men as superior to women while few others see them as equals. The difference in beliefs adversely affects the way women are treated and the opportunities provided to them

6. **Discriminatory attitudes of males**The Nigerian men have been in control of political, economic as well as social spheres of life for many years. They have been able to utilize the opportunity to their advantage and this does not give women equal opportunities. For instance, some provisions in the Federal Constitution do not favour women. Olawoye (1985 p. 18) observed that many provisions on inheritance and domestic violence have been described as most favourable to male gender than the female. Consequently, women experience series of violence in the hands of men, some of which manifested in the form of wife battering assault, acid-attack, sexual harassment, rape, genital mutilation, girl child abuse, ritual murder and unfavourable widowhood practices.

Over a decade now, numerous cases of women's rights violation such as acid baths, murder of women, rape, widow abuse, and physical assaults, have occurred in Nigeria. Unfortunately, it is only extreme cases of women's rights violation

such as acid baths, murder of women, rape, widow abuse, and physical assaults, have occurred in Nigeria. Unfortunately, it is only extreme cases of women's rights violation which results to death or permanent disability that earns the media attention and the police interests.

Critical cases like female circumcision or genital mutilation, wife battery, marital rape, sexual harassment, verbal and emotional abuse, incest, termination of employment as a result of pregnancy etc are not considered problematic enough to be highlighted in the media as well to be taken seriously by the police. There is no record of prevalence of violence against women especially within the home. This is because women hardly report violence to the police for fear of reprisal from both the husband and wider family. In addition, the law enforcement agents do not readily entertain complaints of domestic violence. They treat such complaint as a minor offence of two people fighting or laugh it off as husband and wife problem.

In Nigeria, laws to protect women from violence are inadequate. For example, marital rape is generally not recognized as an offence in any system of law in Nigeria, even when the wife is wounded in the course of forced sexual intercourse. Formal mechanism to seek redress in cases of domestic violence or rape, through police investigation followed by a court proceeding are often ineffective.

Since independence, hundreds of thousands of women have been sold into slavery as wives or prostitutes after being kidnapped or tricked into going with traffickers. The trafficking of women is not a purely local phenomenon, within Nigeria's borders. It has a significant regional and international dimension too. Criminal rings are involved in the smuggling of women across International Frontiers, mainly for menial work in the heavily immigration, dependent economy of Gabon, plantation work in Cameroon and commercial sex in Europe.

7) **Poor Economic base**

Most Nigerian women are poor. This situation is related to their low level of educational attainment. Poverty is reflected in almost all aspects of an average Nigeria woman's life.

The proportion of women in the federal sector is very minimal. Women are mostly found in the junior categories. Women are mainly involved in petty trading, selling wares in the market and street hawking in urban areas.

Nigerian women, like their counterparts around the world face a lot of discrimination that limit their opportunities to develop their full potential on the basis of equality with men. Nevertheless, the reality is that Nigerian women are far from enjoying equal rights in the labour market, due mainly to their domestic burden, low level of education attainment, biases against women's employment in certain branches of the economy or types of work and discriminatory salary practices.

In some establishments women are not allowed to get married or pregnant because it is thought that it will reduce their productivity and in course profit.

Women are usually involved in arduous manual task in farming and food processing.

They do not have access to land but can only use the land at the benevolence of their husbands and brothers. Women also have limited access to agricultural inputs.

Way Forward

The problem of women humiliation has to be confronted transitionally and ultimately. Transitionally under capitalism, we have to agitate for equal opportunity for men and women, free functional health care and education, provision of gainful employment etc. Ultimately there is need for socialist reconstruction of the society as the total solution to women's oppression and to allow some temporary gains that can be achieved under capitalism as a result of mass struggles of the oppressed masses to be permanent.

The foregoing constraints notwithstanding, full actualization of the potentials of Nigerian women is not beyond achievement in the next millennium. In recent times, some gains have been made. For instance, there are now women in low and middle management level jobs than it used to be. This gives a prospect for more positions for women at top levels in the future. Also, the enrolment of the girl child at the different levels of education seems to be increasing. Parents in some parts of Nigeria are now gradually embracing the idea of providing educational opportunities to the female child but the need to reach other parents who are still hostile to the idea of girl child education cannot be overstressed.

Dantiye and Garbe (1991 p. 13) identified the common features of Nigerian women as

- tolerance and endurance
- high need for association
- frankness in matter they considered serious
- persuasiveness
- consideration and fairness
- stubbornness to a belief
- emotional stability and
- forgiveness

Most of these characteristics of Nigerian women are needed to bail Nigeria out of its present predicament.

One of the ways out of women oppression is through education.

Education is the process of providing information to a person to help him or her develop mentally, socially, emotionally spiritually, politically and economically (Offorma, 1999). Education is a vital tool for empowerment that allows meaningful contributions to society. Many girls do not have access to basic education.

Lack of education has been a strong visible barrier to female participation in the formal sector. The social pressures on females such as early marriages, and other extraneous factors as well as consideration of female education as secondary to that of boys and certain inhibitive religious practices in some parts of Nigeria are the major causes of the high illiteracy rate amongst women.

Education is the process through which individuals are made functional members of the society (Ocho, 2005 p. 24). It is a process through which the young acquires knowledge and realizes her potentialities and uses them for self-actualization (Offorma, 1999). Education has been described as the most important aspect of human development, a key to a successful living, especially girl child education (Michael, 2011p. 31). Denying the girl child access to education implies making her a dysfunctional member of the society.

Okeke, Nzewi and Njoku (2008 p. 13) identified child labour, poverty and lack of sponsorship, quest for wealth, bereavement, truancy, broken home and engagement of children as house helps and hawking as factors inhibiting children especially girls' access

to education in Nigeria. One of the most prevalent impediments to the girl child education is **child labour**. Many families often send their daughters out to work at a young age to get additional income needed to exist beyond subsistence level and finance the education of male children.

In the traditional Nigerian society, there exists the degenerate belief that women are second class citizens. (Enejere, 1991 p. 44). A woman is considered as a man's property or pleasure object. She is also considered as a "machine" meant for producing children. This situation has resulted in unfair treatment of women especially with regards to education. The average rural Nigerian parent would rather invest in the education of the son rather than the daughter (Ada, 1992p. 48). Enejere (1991 p. 42) further avers that gender inequality in Nigeria is promoted by religious and communal customs. Young girls particularly in Northern Nigeria are denied the benefit of education. This has grave consequences for both the individual and the society at large.

There is an adage that says: "Train a woman and you will train a nation" women should be educated to enable our nation grow better.

Conclusion

The need to empower Nigerian women cannot be over-emphasized particularly in a democratic society which recognizes the need for individuals to develop their potentials and contribute to the overall development of the nation. It is therefore imperative that counselors create awareness on the benefits that could be derived from women empowerment as well as assist Nigerian women to assert their rights and contribute meaningfully to the development of the nation.

Various feminist movements, international treaties and conventions on women, and the reformulation of self identities and reconstruction of cultural values have all improved the fortunes of women thereby increasing their level of political participation.

Improving capacities in education and skills acquisition is key to women consolidating gains.

Government must encourage women by institutionalizing affirmative actions against women's political marginalization and inequality. Such measures should include quota systems in political party manifestos, and in the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria.

It is not out of place to state that Nigerian women should be empowered to utilize their potentials and contribute their quota to the transformation of the country. Adefarasin (1987) observed that in order to change a country's vision and its sense of direction, the people's orientation has to change. According to her, to reach all the people, women should be reached first since they influence the children, the family and the nation.

In order to improve the socio-political status of women in Nigeria, there should be: (a) soften the ground for female contestants by agitating for some concession. This is called affirmative action. It is aimed at increasing women representation in politics. (b) Social obstacles of religion, culture and other obnoxious beliefs must be broken, (c) Women should not be domesticated, and they have to enjoy rights to work and associated benefits as men. (d) They along with men have to have access to free functional education and health care. (e) Electoral process and contest must not be a preserve of the rich. Thus the saying "Train a woman, train a nation".

Considering the population of women in Nigeria, a conscious or an unconscious under representation of Nigerian women in educational, economic, social and political programmes could lead to a serious set-back and thus the need for women empowerment cannot be over-emphasized.

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