

CHANGE IN STATUS OF WOMEN IN NIGERIA: A DIALECTICAL FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING

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ABSTRACT

The relationship between change in status of women and the existence of patriarchal structures and ideology is particularly difficult to assess in Africa. This paper examined the interface between the status of women in the traditional past and modern day in Nigeria, running from the contradictions inherent in Nigerian patriarchal social structures, to the issue of exogenous cultures like globalization, and its impact on women's status. While there are divergent views between the two sides, the paper argues that global interconnectedness has engendered the global upsurge and change in the status of women in several ways. The experience in Nigeria has been ambivalent. Thus the relationship between the two is examined within the dialectical frameworks of opposite poles. The paper concludes that Nigeria has much to gain in the global network, but has not done much to stimulate the realization of the hopes of women in Nigeria. The gender-biased ideology and male-dominated social structures are still intact, and perhaps, even reinforced. It is critically important for policy-makers to collaborate with women to improve their positions and thereby accelerate Nigeria's development.

Key words: *Change in status, Women in Nigeria, Traditional past, Modernity, Globalization, Colonization*

INTRODUCTION

Until recently, women were treated as second class citizens in most Countries. Consequently, they were under-represented in vital sectors and major decision making institutions. For example, women were not granted equal voting rights until the twentieth century in many countries, including the United States. Ironically, in many traditional monarchical systems, women emerged as queens but this was not the case in old liberal democracies. In traditional Nigeria, the heroic roles of Queens Amina (Zazzau/Zaria) Ida and Emotan (Edo/Benin), Inikpi (Idah/Kogi State) and Moremi (Ife) are well documented (Okonjo 1983). But since colonial rule, Nigerian women

have been denied opportunities to play such roles (Alemika and Agugua 2001).

However, it was shortly after the dawn of the millennium that women's status has been explicitly discussed at national levels by women's autonomous organizations (Pereira 2004). The various concepts through which the status of women have been examined include differential access to prestige, power and control of material resources, freedom to obtain knowledge, female autonomy, patriarchy, men's situational advantage, rigidity in sex stratification, class position and gender stratification. This is all the more paradoxical, given the heightened attention

paid to certain categories of rights for women under military rule in the 1990s, such as reproductive rights, political rights and at the eve of the millennium, the right to freedom from gender based violence (Pereira 2004). It would appear that women's marginalisation from the national state has been largely instrumental in the recourse made by various categories of women's organizations to international discourses and frameworks of human rights. The prospects of a return to civilian rule and deepening processes of democratization of the state and society have no doubt facilitated what appears to be a re-articulation of human rights for women with discourses of change in their status.

The argument now is not whether a woman enjoyed a better status in traditional past or not, rather, emphasis is on our understanding of gender inequality, and its persistence even in the face of national and international initiatives on the elimination of all forms of inequalities/discrimination against women. The questions posed therefore are: Were there areas of social relations where gender roles were balanced in the traditional past? To what extent are socio-cultural factors still affecting the opportunities open to women in Nigeria post- independence? What are the implications of the interplay of exogenous factors like colonialism, industrialism and capitalism/globalization for women's place in the Nigerian society? Has the lot of Nigerian women improved, since the return to civilian rule and deepening processes of democratization of the state and society, in any significant way and what are the visible changes in that regard, if any?

THEORETICAL POSITION

The African feminist position is used to explain women's exploitation and oppression in this paper. African feminism is an ideological force that poses fundamental challenges to patriarchal orthodoxies of all kinds. It

represents a critical stance against the mainstream of patriarchal power that is concerned with economic, social, cultural and political empowerment for women (Aniekwu 2006). It argues that the definition of Africaness (African identity) cannot be constructed outside of the personhood of African women. In reality African women are repressed not only by the patriarchal authority inherent in their cultures, but as a result of colonialism and north-south exploitation and dependency (Okome 1999; Nnaemeka 2005; Mama 2005). Not only is the continent firmly and deeply entrenched in patriarchal authority structure, but it is also entrenched within a religiously conservative, poverty-stricken, post-colonialist society.

African feminist epistemologies are questioning men's ideological perceptions of women as nurturing, acquiescent, subordinate and familial and not as people with equal capabilities and rights. It further suggests that this authenticity remains easily resistant in the face of misrepresentation or occlusion by dominant, foreign knowledge systems. More than ever, African women are challenging the inequitable relationships that exist in their societies, the cultural models or compacts that continue to influence their lives, and the deep social issues that are affected by ethnic, political, religious and economic crisis. Whilst reassessing their positions, they are nonetheless aware that a strong thread of cultural continuity connects their lives and the experiences of earlier generations.

A dialectical framework for understanding change in status of women in Nigeria

In Nigeria today, there seems to be a status crisis for women as we perceive a disjuncture between the typical portrayal of women as weak and inconsequential in the scheme of things on one hand, due to the fact that Nigerian women live within a dominant male culture that oppresses and devalues them

(Okome 2000), and the current emergence of a new breed of women from all over the nation or society on the other hand. On the surface, when one looks at the high profile of certain female political actors, professionals and prominent women entrepreneurs, Nigeria appears to be a progressive nation. Moreover, Nigeria has ratified all the major international legal instruments on women, including CEDAW (1985) and the AU Protocol on Women (2004). However in practice, the real status of most Nigerian women is a picture of stark gender disparities in formal education, political representation, incomes, labour force participation, and access to healthcare etc. These disparities are derived from shared traditional and religious understandings of gender identity and roles and represent a kind of superstructure on top of an underlying structure of socio-cultural gender prejudice and discriminatory practice.

This section examined the two sides (traditional vs. modern) of what accounts for the apparent disjuncture between the lived experiences and the oppressive identities foisted upon women by dominant male cultures. The two sides of the arguments are briefly examined and simultaneously discussed in the areas of family and marriage relationship, education, production and labour force participation, and political participation.

Family and Marriage Relationship

Women and men in different societies of the world have been socially predisposed to undergo divergent experiences in development due to gender norms and ageless culture of patriarchy. Thus in many societies like Nigeria, women are taught to be submissive and manage to survive in a male dominated society (Ola-Aluko and Edewor 2002), while men learn to accept challenges and adapt to changing situations. Gender norms for males are built around power and control, independence, violence, risk taking,

early sexual activity and having multiple sexual partners, while gender norms for women include submissiveness, dependence, virginity until marriage and faithfulness during marriage (Aina 1998; Odejide 1998; Boender, Santana, and Santillan 2004).

Discriminatory socialization of women and men into unequal gender power relationship is therefore, the root cause of women's disadvantaged situations that inhibit their living standards and contributions to development (Aluko 2010). Cultural and traditional concepts play significant roles in the way women are perceived and treated in the society. Women are defined only as members of a community through their relationship with men. All through life, women are defined in relation to man either as daughters, wives or mothers, while simultaneously also, the woman either as a daughter or sister has more value, authority and even in many cases right to inheritance (Ogundipe-Leslie 1994). However, immediately she marries, she is treated as one of the possessions, voiceless, without rights, with constrained freedom and without her own identity (Aluko 2010).

In Nigeria, the family is extremely important. The rule of descent is patrilineal and gives men control over female sexuality. From the traditional past came notions of the physical control of women's body and its product (Ogundipe-Leslie 1994). Under this issue came purdah (Adamu 1997) genital mutilation, the lack of control over her body's biology or its products such as children who are viewed to belong to the man's family. Within marriage, women have the obligation to have children. Traditionally therefore, society blames the women for a marriage without children (Qualls 1994). Also is the general preference for a "male child". Thus, it is not unusual for marriages to break down on account of the lack of a male child, while the arrival of the first son strengthens the position

of the wife in the family. The reason for the preference of the male gender is found in the general societal belief that continuity of the family lineage is achieved through the male issues. The female issues will be married into other families.

Polygyny¹ is also a crucial component of many women's lives, though modern developments of mandatory education, urbanization, and capitalism are changing this practice in the society. Modern marriage institutions are imitating western models where indigenous cultures are often overlooked. However, at first glance, modern marriage in Nigeria would seem to offer women greater autonomy and equality. But studies (Smith 2007) have revealed that gender inequality persist in powerful ways, manifested perhaps most obviously and dangerously with regard to the risk of HIV infection, in a pronounced double standard for extramarital sexuality.

In contemporary Nigeria, married men are much more likely than married women to engage in extramarital sex. The expectations of men and women are vastly different when it comes to sexual relations. While for women to engage in extramarital relationship is taboo, men who do so are considered virile. To prove their virility and power Nigerian men engage in extramarital sex in the very face of HIV/AIDS. Data from around the world, including Nigeria, suggest that married women's greatest risk of contracting HIV is through sexual intercourse with their husbands (NDHS 2013). The implication is that men are acquiring HIV outside of marriage and infecting their wives.

The prevalence of men's participation in extramarital sex and the fact that women's sexuality is ironically, the target of popular

discourse about sexual immorality attest to the persistence of gender inequality (Hodgson and McCurdy 2001). Women cannot easily confront their husbands about infidelity or protect themselves from possible HIV infection. They are vulnerable to violence from their husbands (Isiramen 2003). Marital rape is suffered in silence (Aluko 2015a). Fear of beating and rape keeps many women from questioning their husbands' sexual escapades.

Education

Education is said to be a vehicle that break the shackles of poverty thereby leading to transformation, development and progress (Ikoni 2009). It also has the potentials to bring about important changes in the status of women by enhancing their productivity not only in the market work but also in the household work and childcare. With the 2005 and 2015 MDGs' first and second deadlines for attainment of gender parity in primary and secondary schools' enrolment already missed, the ability of women and girls to empower themselves economically and socially by going to school, or by engaging in productive and civic activities is still being constrained by their responsibility for everyday tasks in the household division of labour (CEC Report 2007; Makama 2013; NISER forthcoming).

In Nigeria, educational facilities are generally believed to be inadequate, and access, limited for many, especially girls and women. According to NDHS 2013, female adult literacy rate (ages 15 and above) for the country was 53% as against male that was 73%. This confirms why women are fewer than men in certain socio-economic activities. Gender inequality in education deprives girls with innate abilities similar to those of boys of opportunities to develop their human capital and participate in a series of growth-supporting economic activities. Aluko (2005a) in a study identified some social factors underlying persistent gender disparities in

¹ Polygyny is a type of Polygamy. It is a situation where a man marries more than one wife. The other type is Polyandry, which is a situation where a woman has more than one husband.

education. These include macro-societal factors like socio-cultural values, political-economic factors, religious and geographical factors.

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. As the impact of teenage pregnancy and early marriage makes abundantly clear, girls are at a double disadvantage in educational access, especially in the north, where these practices are most widespread (NDHS 2013).

Production and Labour force participation:

It has been argued that pre-colonial Nigeria had a gendered division of labour. However, the nature and implication of such a division of labour is often misinterpreted. While male dominance was built into the social system of some Nigerian ethnic groups, women played a significant and vital role in all aspects of the lives of their community (Mba 1982). Women worked outside the home in order to meet the responsibilities placed upon them in their roles as mothers, wives, sisters, daughters, members of guilds, chiefs, or citizens. In most traditional societies, farming was the major occupation with women taking a very active part. Other subsidiary occupations were trading, crafts, keeping of livestock, etc. The access of women to critical resources like land, labour and capital depended on their position in the family, lineage or community. Men, naturally gained access to land largely as lineage members, while most of the time women gained access to land as wives, and sometimes as daughters and such access are often limited.

The role of Nigerian women in the economic sphere is largely inhibited because of lack of access to family land and capital, and lack of control over their time and the products of their labour (Tucker 2006). Most of the time, husbands manage the family farm and keep the proceeds of export crops under their control, while wives use the earnings from food crops and trading to meet the family's daily needs (Ezumah 1997; Aina 1998). However, in traditional Yoruba setting, a woman can be fairly independent of her husband if she engages in trading (Aluko 2015b). Independent economic activity is an important component in the personality of a complete woman and this has a strong influence on the nature of the Yoruba family structure (Ola-Aluko & Edewor 2002). Aluko (2015b) and Odebode (2004) also noted that the degree of jealousy and envy that exists between Yoruba men and women is dependent on two factors, one of which is women's economic independence, and two, men find women's economic independence threatening to their dominant status. The men view women as an obvious threat to their traditional roles as head of the family and to their super-ordinate status.

In northern Nigeria and especially Hausa land, it is necessary to exercise caution on over-generalization of gender issues. On one hand, female seclusion has become a standard assessment for male economic success and independence. Seclusion implies that a man is sufficiently wealthy enough and able to meet his family and his wife's needs without her going out (Coles and Mack 1991: 8). Wealthy Muslim women in the early years of Islam often delegated responsibilities to males on economic matters that required extensive travels and absences from home and intimate interaction with other non-family male counterparts (Zakaria 2001). On the other hand, Hausa cultural ethics discourage idleness. Thus, "a woman in her child bearing

years without a trade is an anomaly, so too an old woman without her own financial resources is an object of pity" (Coles and Mack 1991: 125). Also in the traditional Igbo setting, women engage in various economic activities. In the area of trading, women dominate the market place where they sell agricultural products as well as handicraft and other manufactured goods but the men engage in long distance trading (Ikpeze 2000). According to Allen (1972), in Igbo society status that manifest in wealth, generosity and oratory is achieved and not ascribed to both men and women.

In contemporary Nigeria, by virtue of the population of Nigeria, the potential female labour force is 56% but the actual value is 38.9% (World Bank, 2013). Despite this, their contribution is not commensurate monetarily. The women's unpaid labour is twice that of men, and its economic value is estimated to be up to 30% of the nation's Gross National Product. Women's self-advancement has been curtailed by the burden of reproduction, particularly in Nigeria as a result of the cultural roles associated to women-role of child bearing, child raising and home making.

Although the number and types of women who work have changed dramatically, numerous other aspects of women's work have remained impervious to change. Like the clustering of women into sex-typed jobs, the disproportionate number of women in low-ranking positions and their comparatively low earnings relative to men, as well as the overall under-utilization (unemployment and underemployment) of women works. The explosive growth in the female workforce has not been accompanied by true socio-economic empowerment for women (Aluko 2005b). This is because, despite their increased economic activity rates, women are still concentrated in low-paid service sector or agricultural work. Their work in unprotected and low remunerated informal sector has increased,

and their share of unpaid labour in the home has also increased.

Political participation

The Nigerian society clearly manifests the social categorization of women implicit in femininity, as being inferior to men and, therefore, not capable of, or suitable for political leadership. This was the situation even before the incursion of colonialism, when women had token representation in the Oba's council in Yorubaland, with the Erelu or Iyalode representing women's interests in council comprising mainly of male titled chiefs. Although the Onu and Ada as women groups in Igbo land wield some political and religious influence (Williams 1992; Olaitan 1998), unfortunately the western influences restricted women's participation. Cultural discourses on power run counter to colonial representations of women's access to power and suggest that structuring African democracies after the Western patterns may in fact continue to curtail female representation in governance and decision making. There is enough support for the thesis that women's sphere of influence and power before colonization were eroded in restructuring the state (Wright 1993; Tamale 1999; Becker 2000).

Nevertheless, in nearly all African societies, women occupy a position, which belies their often critical role in the crystallization of political and social order. This reality is doubly so in the case of Nigeria where women have played significant roles in the pre-colonial kingdoms of Kanuri, Oyo, Kano, Benin, etc. Women also played visible roles in the nationalism, struggles, which culminated in the attainment of independence by Nigeria in 1960. The most frequently cited examples in this regard remain the Aba women's riot of 1929 in which women protested against the imposition of taxes and warrant chiefs (Dike 1995); and the important

milestone reached in 1944 with the formation of the Women's party by Oyinkan Abayomi. Later day pro-women's societies and organizations like the Nigerian Women's society formed in 1963 and led by Mrs., Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, and the National Council of Women's Societies (NCWS) formed in 1958, certainly drew some inspiration from these pioneering efforts (Sesay and Obadare 1998).

However, the present status of Nigerian women negates this heroic antecedent, as women continue to receive a short shrift in political matters. Although many women in the country are today active in politics, their number is still "tokenish." The past 16 years of democracy in Nigeria can only boast of few women in politics. Since the inception of the current democratic governance in Nigeria in 1999, concerted efforts have been made by women's groups, women advocates and activists, civil society organizations, Nigerian government and International agencies and donor communities to increase women's participation in both political and public life. However, statistics reveal a very low and disproportionate representation of women in governance (see Table 1 below). The recently concluded 2015 elections are not much better for women: Statistics from observation and other unpublished sources reveal that no woman was elected President/Vice or Governor (there are (4) women Deputy Governors). Only (19) women made it to the House of Representatives; (7) to the Senate. This situation falls way below the recommended 30 percent of the Beijing Platform of Action and 35 percent recommendation of National Policy on Women adopted in July 2000 due to political, socio-economic, and ideological and psychological (or socio-cultural) constraints.

The marginal increase of women in the National Assembly since 1999 as the table depict is very insignificant and with attendant

implications for governance. Quadri (2015) rightly observes that if the women overcome the many barriers of a very un-level playing field and succeed in being elected, they face the new challenges of life in a well-established "gentlemen's" club that shuts the door on equal participation in parliament and its decision-making. Different reasons have been given for these negligible visibility and leadership opportunities of women politics, which developed out of a gender-biased ideology and male dominated social structures that globalization has left intact, and perhaps even reinforced. Women seeking election have been hampered by a national political culture dominated by money, corruption and power wielded by local political barons and overlords (Mama, 2004). This explains why the prevailing social barrier facing women in Nigeria and elsewhere, are yet to collapse in spite of the monumental changes at the global systemic level.

The so called 30 percent Affirmative Action only treats the cause of women in isolation of the struggle for liberation of the society (poverty). The women advocates make a fetish of this affirmative action. In most occasions, when vital issues bothering on the state of the nation are discussed, instead of women to make resourceful contribution in the line of discussion and proffer far reaching solution, they would go straight to 30 percent affirmative action (Salaam 2003). The affirmative action like every other bourgeois feminist agitation treats the cause of women in isolation of the struggle for liberation of the society. Having these few women in public offices does not imply automatic improvement in the status of women in the society and their standard of living. The question of women and politics is about more than numbers. The argument is that few women in political decision-making authority will not be able to influence policy especially those that have gender implications. The few women in most

cases are unwilling to challenge patriarchal structure of authority and domination. According to Guzman (2004) this explains why women access to positions of authority, when they are in a minority, is not necessarily a recipe for greater co-ordination of the

interests of women as a whole, and it also explains why they run the risk of having their true needs subsumed into the interests associated with their membership of a particular

Table 1: Women elected to Public Office in Nigeria 1999-2011

Office	1999		2003		2007		2011		2015	
	Seat Available	Women	Seat Available	Women	Seat Available	Women	Seat Available	Women	Seat Available	Women
President	1	0	1	0	1	0	1	0	1	0
Senate	109	3 (2.8)	109	4 (3.7)	109	9 (8.3)	109	7 (6.4)	109	7 (6.4)
House of Reps.	360	7 (1.9)	360	21 (5.8)	360	27 (7.5)	360	25 (6.9)	360	19 (5.2)
Governor	36	0	36	0	36	0	36	0	36	0
State House of Assembly (SHA)	990	24 (2.4)	990	40 (3.9)	990	57 (5.8)	990	68 (6.9)	990	-
SHA Committees Chairpersons	829	18 (2.2)	829	32 (3.6)	829	52 (5.9)	829	-	829	-
LGA Chairpersons	710	13 (1.8)	710	15 (1.9)	710	27 (3.6)	710	-	710	-
Councillors	6368	69(1.1)	6368	267(42)	6368	235(3.7)	6368	-	6368	-

Notes: The numbers in bracket represent elected candidates

Source: *1999-2011 Elections: British Council Report (2012) "Gender in Nigeria Report 2012; Improving Lives of Girls and Women in Nigeria" [Online] Available: <http://www.britishcouncil.org/Africa-ng-gender-report-2012> *2015 Election: www.inecnigeria.org

class, ethnic group, or culture. Moreover, the establishment of arbitrary quotas for women serves as a vehicle for a minority of careerists, which gives the impression that something, is being done while leaving the basic problems untouched.

CONCLUSIONS

From the foregoing, it can be established that the wind of change that has been blowing over time (globalization) offers women unprecedented opportunities, but equally new and unique challenges. Gender inequality springs from many sources, and it is often difficult to determine which forms of inequality are being eliminated by the effects of globalization, and which are exacerbated. Progress toward eliminating gender inequality in the future depends on finding and embracing the occasions, mostly in the political and legal realm, where the global approach strengthens women's security and welfare, and

fighting the issues, mostly in the economic realm, where women are made worse off by the new global system. By empowering them economically through easy access to financial assistance.

Also at the local level, societal obstacles of religion, tradition and obnoxious beliefs from the traditional past must be broken, women should not be domesticated, they have to enjoy right to work and associated benefits as men. They along with men have to have access to free and functional education system, electoral process and contest must not be a preserve of the rich. As a result of this, a fundamental change of attitude more than the affirmative action in so far as women are concerned should be incorporated in public politics and enforced by the Nigerian State. In achieving this, there is the need to change men's perceptions about the true worth of their women folks. So long as women's roles are still viewed by

man as limited to the home-front; or that they do not have any business competing with them for limited socio-economic and political resources, very little, if anything, will be achieved by women in their struggle for empowerment.

To achieve this requires a consciously tailored educational and enlightenment package that will target and sensitize men to the significant contributions women have made, and will continue to make, to national development. For women, on the other hand, according to Sesay and Ukeje (1998) empowerment is a “multidimensional process involving the transformation of the economic, social, psychological, political and legal circumstances of the powerless”. This transformation can only be realized when women concertedly go beyond the

current rhetoric about their legitimate grievance. Women have for long, limited themselves mainly to the manifestations of their marginalization rather than its root causes. They should realize that issues such as government’s neglect of their reproductive, productive and other social roles are all linked to women’s lack of “access to power, prime responsibilities, and decision-making” (Baffoun 1994). Consequently, they should consciously, collectively and deliberately support each other in resisting the pervasive conformity to social gender stereotypes. It is high time we exposed the so-called women liberators that are making fortune out of women oppression or peddling illusion or wrong ideas.

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