GENDER ROLE IN CONTEMPORARY NIGERIAN SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

Traditionally, Nigeria women are marginalized and subordinated to an inferior position as against men. In recent times, however due to some forces of change, the role of women in Nigeria have changed positively. However, despite the relative achievements that has been recorded in the enhancement of the status of women and the attendant significant role performance of women in Nigeria, the gender role gap between the male and female is still below global expectations. Relaying purely on secondary source, the paper, examines the traditional and the contemporary role of women in Nigeria as it seeks to answer the question: Does being a woman makes one a lesser being? The paper therefore recommended the need for a new mindset to enable members of the 21st century Nigerian society accept the changing role of Nigerian women and create an enabling environment through gender mainstreaming to give women equal footing with men.

Keywords: Women, Role, Community Development, Nigerian Society, Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

For so many years, the role and importance of women in the Nigerian society has been an issue of serious concern and debate. Historically, in the traditional African Society as prevalent in Nigeria, women are not only perceived as inferior to men but are also marginalized and denied equal opportunities. Women are seen and treated as the "weaker sex". The general belief is that the role of women starts and ends with running of the home, especially the kitchen and nothing more. Also, women constitute the group at the bottom of the ladder in many developing countries, especially in Africa, in respect of employment, poverty, education, training and status Chime (1998), Obioha (2009) and Ani (2004). African traditional societies, is said to have several observed role differentiations which are based on gender or sex. While sex roles are biologically determined, universal and unchangeable, gender based roles are often rooted in culture. The process of socialization in every culture inculcates the cultural expectations of male and female behaviours. Although these expectations vary from society to society and from time to time however, culture and society are the actual determinants of gender distinctions in society

(George, l996 as cited in Okorodudu, 2017). Women are subordinated and seen as being inferior to men everywhere in the world, the need to change this notion can be considered as urgent considering the important place of women in the contemporary. The contemporary Nigerian woman is far different from the traditional woman of old, therefore should be accorded some respect. The paper is divided into six sections. Section one, introduces the paper. Section two, deals with Cultural determinism as the framework of analysis. Section three, deals with the issue of Culture and Gender Role Perception Section four, looks at the traditional role of women in pre-colonial Nigerian. Section five emphasizes on the changing role of women in the contemporary Nigerian society and finally Section six, conclusion and recommendations.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Gender relations can, be analyzed from several theoretical perspectives such as, Marxist Feminism structural functionalism, biological determinism, social feminism, as well as cultural determinism. Cultural determinism argues that culture determines economic and political arrangements. The theory is postulated by social and cultural anthropologist, many concluded that culture is the most important factor accounting for its own evolution and that of society. Cultural theories emphasized human ability to innovate, accumulate, and diffuse culture. The idea of cultural determinism is extremely common: numerous societies have believed that their habits, ideas and customs were what determined the shape of their political and economic arrangements, and were the source of their uniqueness above all else. This can be seen in adherence to national epics, particular religious customs, and focus on the importance of language as the determiner of national identity. http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199568758.001.0001/acref-9780199568758-e-586

Cultural determinism is not limited to one part of the political spectrum or to any of the Social sciences, but is instead a paradigm used by a variety of writers and thinkers. Leading writers in this field include Thomas P. Hughes, Wiebe Bijker, Trevor Pinch and Bruno Latour. https://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/History_of_Technology/Cultural_Determinism .This theory is predicated on the male domination and assumed superiority of the male sex over the female in most human societies. In a nutshell, cultural determinism, as a theoretical perspective, implies that, cultural norms, values, beliefs and mores are the determinants of gender role perception in the society. It is pertinent to note that through the process of socialization, the culturally approved patterns of behavior for males and females are transmitted to every member of the society from generation to generation.

CULTURE AND GENDER ROLE PERCEPTION

Culture

Culture is said to guide the entire way of life activities eg beliefs and customs of a people, group or society. According to Okorodudu (2017) The transformative power of culture also rests in how it touches people and communities, and comprises what we refer to as our "way of life" – traditions, festivals, food and social memories, passed down from generation to generation.   He further stressed that, Culture is said to grow deep into the bones and dissolves in the marrow of a man. One way or the other, our behaviour is mostly a reflection of our culture, irrespective of the level of education that we might have attained. A people can be identified through their culture based on the way they dress , peoples dressing easily portray their cultural identity.

The role culture plays in ensuring quality and inclusive education for future generations, building sustainable cities and communities and giving rise to economic growth through creative and cultural industries. The close integration of culture to development is to champion the role of culture in shaping our collective future (Okorodudu, 2017). It is argued that culture is what distinguishes a people from others. Nigeria for instance, has a track record of people from different cultural backgrounds, speaking different languages as well as practicing different beliefs traced to as far back as over 700 years ago. Nigerians multi-cultural identity and unity in the midst of diversity that has been formed through this long history is something we treasure and celebrate.

Scholars like, Murdock (1949) George (l996) and Ejukonemu (2015).are of the view that, Culture and society are the actual determinants of gender distinctions in society. The socialization processes in every society is based on gender division of labour as expected from males and females in such a society. Also, the socio -economic and socio- political opportunities enjoyed by women as prescribed   by cultural norms and values can not be equated to that enjoyed by men.

Conceptualizing Gender

Gender as a concept is generally seen as biological formation of a male and female. Gender is also considered as the relationship between men and women and the way this relationship has been socially constructed and institutionalized. According to Akpabio (2005), Gender refers to the socially and culturally defined and constructed roles that men and women play in societies; roles which are shaped by economic, historical and cultural determinants. In the same vein, Gender is socially constructed for the purpose of allocating power, duties, responsibilities, statuses and roles in any given society or organization Ogbuagu (2005). Gender is also conceptualized as an organizing concept which can be interpreted as neutral concept or an

imposed discriminatory practice against one group by another within a given setting (Nwosu, 2012). From the above view, therefore, it can be said that the role men and women perform in society, especially in the traditional society, is based on their biological formation and assumed skills and abilities as culturally perceived, constructed and determined by the society.

Gender Role Perception

A social role is often described as the pattern of behavior associated with a defined social position or a given status (Brown and Selznick, 1997; Mitchell, 1999; Igbo 2003). Similarly, gender roles are described as those roles· that are culturally determined by the society according to the biological categories of male and female and according to the functional needs of the society as well. Gender role perception in this paper agrees with the views of George (1996)and Ekong(2010) as those assumed patterns of behavior that are culturally determined by members of the society and which a society expects from a person or category of persons.

Women in the traditional African society have remained victims of gender discrimination. Women are marginalized, undervalued and oppressed. They are subordinated to the male folk and considered inferior. Women in Nigeria, as in most parts of Africa live in a male-dominated society where the male folks continuously and persistently relegate the female to the background because society has made it so. While the male child is encouraged to learn a trade or go to school, the female child is given out in marriage at an early age. The inferior and subordinate position which society assigns to women in developing countries and Nigeria in. 'particular can be explained from the often observed situation in which men are recognized based on their profession   for instance the "*President*"   while the woman is referred to as " *wife of the President*". In this regard, the woman's role is not only underrated but perceived as merely supportive to the man's role. The perception is that the woman does not have a life of her own. Furthermore, gender discriminations against women often find expressions not only in the attitude but also in the practices of most of the African societies Emihe (1996). These include the stereotypes and restrictions that are made against the women such as the following: Ascription of social status to the physiological and physical differences between men and women with the former, of course considered to be "superior" to the later. The common practices of patriarchy, by which the man is traditionally regarded to be not just the head of the family but also much more superior than the woman. In some parts of Nigeria, for example, the traditional widowhood practice may demand that the widow stays in-doors, in mournful mood, for months, without any makeup and sometimes subjected to some awful ordeals while a widower is exempted from such practices (Ejukonemu, 2015).

Again, in some Nigerian traditional societies, women are forbidden from climbing trees and engaging in hunting activities. In these typical traditional societies, it amounts to a taboo, and a

mark of waywardness for a young lady to wear trousers and smoke in the public. Similarly, while young girls may be favored for such perceived "soft" and generalist courses as nursing, secretarial studies and teaching, such professions as medicine, engineering, law, military and paramilitary services are recognized by the society as the exclusive preserve of men (Egbucha, 2006). A man grows up expecting to be the head of a household, to be the one who earns the money and has the power. While women are socialized or educated to fill roles calling for skills in child rearing or homemaking, even if a man has the skills, he may perceive that devoting a great deal of time and emotional energy to domestic activities will attract negative reactions from friends and relatives.

THE ROLE OF WOMAN IN PRE-COLONIAL NIGERIA

The traditions and culture of a society especially in developing countries such as Nigeria are known to have dominant influences on gender role differentiations and discriminations. Egbucha (2006) had explained that in Igboland, female children in the family were not given the privilege of education, since they were then regarded as "birds of passage". Otite and Ogionwo (2006) have similarly explained that there are variations in the economic duties such as trading, farming or cultivation of certain types of crops and in religious and ritual positions in relation to the sexes. The law and customs in most parts of Nigeria, in several instances, have tended to perpetuate gender discriminations in society by denying women such fundamental rights as inheritance of property. Equal employment opportunities, equal access to credit facilities, rights to procure bail and right to speak out in public. Public opinion is another factor that has not only deepened role differentiation between men and women in society but have militated against the active advancement of women in Africa. According to Emihe (1996), the notion' of where the woman should go to, how she should behave, what type of work she should do, have immensely affected and hampered the adventure instinct in the Nigerian woman.

From precolonial times to contemporary times, the role and status of women in Nigeria have continuously changed, however, the image of a helpless, oppressed, and marginalized group is a picture that many are finding difficult to erase from their mind. Little recognition has been granted to the various integral functions that Nigerian women have performed throughout history.

Socio- economic activities. In the precolonial period, women played a major role in social and economic activities. Division of labour was along gender lines, and women controlled such occupations as food processing, mat weaving, pottery making, and cooking. Moreover, land was communally owned, and women had access to land through their husbands or parents to be precise father. Although a man was always the head of the household in a patrilineal system, older women had control of the labour of younger family members. Women were also involved

in trade. They were the major figures in long-distance trade, with enormous opportunities for accumulating wealth and acquiring titles. The most successful among them rose to the prestigious chieftaincy title such as the iyalode among the Yoruba's, a position of great privilege and power (Falola T, Mahadi A, Uhomoibhi M, Anyanwu U ,1991)

Political activities. In politics, women were not as docile or powerless as contemporary literature tends to portray them. The basic unit of political organization was the family, and the platform which allows women to gain considerable authority over their children. A woman and her offspring could form a major click in the household. Power and privileges in a household were also based on age and gender, meaning elderly women were given a chance to participate in decision making. Because the private and public arenas were intertwined, a woman's ability to control resources and people in a household was at the same time an exercise in public power. She could use food production to gain respect. She could control her children and influence men through this power. She could evoke the power of the spirit or gods in her favour. She also could simply withdraw and use the kitchen as her own personal domicile for interaction with her colleagues, friends, and children (Falola, 1996)

Beyond the household level, power was generally dominated by men, but in many areas specific titles were given to women. The queen mother, a powerful title among the Edo and Yoruba people could be bestowed upon the king's mother or a free woman of considerable stature. In her own palace, the queen mother presided over meetings, with subordinate titleholders in her support. Yoruba and Hausa legends describe periods when women were either the actual kings or heroines. Such women as Moremi of Ile-Ife and Amina of Zaria are notable legendary figures, as are the powerful queens in the Ondo and Daura histories. Pre-history Nigeria had women as active family and community participants until the era of colonialism and all its attendants' issues, Falola T, Mahadi A, Uhomoibhi M, Anyanwu U (1991).

The most serious threat to the influence and privileges of women occurred during the 20th century, when patriarchy combined with colonialism altered gender relations. When the economy production of cash crops became for export, Nigerian men and European firms dominated the distribution of rubber, cocoa, groundnuts (peanuts), and palm oil. Women were forced to shift to the production of subsistence crops. Those with money gained from the sale of cash crop had access to landed properties. Western-style education also favored boys over girls and thus largely excluded women from many of the new occupations introduced by colonialism. (Falola T, Mahadi A, Uhomoibhi M, Anyanwu U ,1991 and Ejukonemu 2015)

THE CHANGING ROLE OF WOMEN IN CONTEMPORARY NIGERIAN SOCIETY

There have been some significant changes in the traditional role of women, globally and in contemporary Nigerian society in particular. The social barriers of tradition and culture are

gradually giving way to new ideas, new values and practices. Today, women are making giant strides and breaking new grounds in almost every field of human endeavour, including those occupation and professions that were once considered exclusively for men. As a result, some countries in the world, including Nigeria, can today boast of women doctors, pharmacists, engineers, politicians, lawyers, bankers, vice chancellors, military officers, pilots, wrestlers and even commercial car drivers, among others. According to Ekong (2010). There are some identifiable forces or factors which have facilitated changes or transformations in the traditional role of women in Africa and Nigeria in particular. These include the influence of western civilization, urbanization and industrialization, as well as legal reforms, human rights activities and globalization. With its powerful tools of education, urbanization and industrialization, western civilization is believed to have seriously influenced the traditional social institutions particularly the traditional family institution.

The implication is that since women fundamental roles are traditionally located within the family, many or some of these roles and values which they held must have undergone some drastic changes. Since African societies came into contact with western civilization about four centuries ago, some of their cultural values and roles have undergone drastic restructuring, and new roles have also emerged at the same time Nwosu (2012) The changing waves of globalization, which has taken economic activities from the subsistence level to the commercial level did not only affect men but also women. Women, like their male counterparts, are increasingly migrating to urban centres to take advantage of economic opportunities in government establishments, commercial outfits and in the private/industrial sector.

The changing role of women in the society according to Ogunlade (1990) must be appreciated. First, it has led to the democratization of gender roles in society by enabling the women to explore and exploit their potentials and to contribute to national development. Western education has also facilitated and enhanced women's social status; equipping them with knowledge, new skills and competences. This trend is against the situation in some societies in the past, in which women were barred from performing certain roles for reasons of being female and not for lack of skill or ability to execute such roles. On the other hand, the new trend, even at the social and psychological levels, is said to have deepened the latent mutual suspicion between the male and female folk, be it at family level, in government establishments or in the industry. In the traditional Nigerian society, the man is not only seen as the head of the family but also the 'sole director' of the affairs taking place in the family but today that has changed.

This change can be ascribed to so many factors, for instance the family in Nigeria is under harsh economic situation, and the struggle for survival is the order of the day, meaning the income of the man may not be enough to take care of the entire household. The role of man in the society as a bread-winner and the woman as the bread eater has changed, the trend is that both gender will

have to put in equal efforts in order to sustain the family. Men no more feel obligated to provide for their wives and children and women no more wait for men to pay their bills. Alternatively the women are forced into the workplace to assist in the economic situation of the family. Aside from the threat of losing the role of a husband and father, the role of the man as a professional also is being threatened as recorded in the high cases of unemployment being experienced in Nigeria today (*Zdravomyslova, 1996).*

Most organizations in Nigeria today employ young women to market their products. They put these young ladies under undue pressure to deliver their products. These organizations have long working hours, thereby inflicting more strain on the family units. Today wives rarely get back home before 5 to 10p.m daily, in pursuit of their professions and careers leaving the children at the mercy of nannies. If the children are not properly trained and brought up in a stable environment, in the company of both parents, their future may be affected. The children will definitely not be properly socialized. There is hardly any female friendly organization in Nigeria so the roles expectations must change.

Aside from the changing roles in the family, the competition between men and women in the larger society as relate to the power to dominate in their fields have become more tensed. The family being the microcosm of the larger society, this kind of competition is not avoidable. Nigerian women need to balance work and family in order to meet up with this challenge. This is one task that is not too easy to achieve, because it is not easy to find an employer who recognizes the importance of such a balance, so women have to look inward for the strength and courage to be that 21st century superwoman. What makes a superwoman is the ability to balance the home and career. Everywoman has two visible hands and four invisible hands that is why, a woman can be cooking, at the same time helping the children with their homework as well as watching her regular program on TV, while getting water ready to bath the children and also getting the rooms ready for the night. The saying that what a man can do a woman can do even better should not be interpreted as meaning that, women are looking down on men or undermining their equal ability but rather, that a woman can stand straight and tall to pilot the affairs of the family as well as excel in her chosen career in such a way that all will see and applaud.

I will state here that, the traditional jobs earmarked for men like the banks, teaching, engineering and public service have been overtaken by women. The current school enrolment statistics show that there are more females in school than their male counterparts. In fact the women are gradually taking over all the known professions from Medicine to Law except and Politics as can be seen from the table below.

TABLE 1: ELECTIVE POSITIONS HELD BY WOMEN FROM 1999-2015 IN NIGERIA.

Position	No of Seat	No of Women 1999	2003	2007	2011	2015
President	1	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Vice President	1	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Senators	109	3 (2.75%)	4 (3.67%)	8 (7.34%)	7 (6.43%)	8 (7.34%)
Governors	36	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Deputy Governors	36	1 (2.3.33%)	2 (5.56%)	6 (16.67%)	3 (8.33%)	4 (11.11%)
House of Members	360	12 (3.33%)	23 (6.39%)	26 (7.22%)	26 (7.22%)	8 (2.22%)
36 State House of Assembly Members	990	12 (1.21%)	38.84%)	54 (5.45%)	62 (6.26%)	
Total	1533	28	67	94	98	26

Source: Ejukonemu (2015)

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The disadvantages suffered by women in a patriarchal society like Nigeria have already been explicated and said to be tired on the subordinate position ascribed to women. The most powerful agency of change for the modern woman has been Nigeria's formal education system, from which a large number of elite women have emerged. Intelligent, educated, and confident women, who can be found in all leading occupations; they now challenge many aspects of patriarchy and are gradually organizing to ensure that the political arena expands sufficiently to accommodate them. In those days educated women were said to be bad wives "Acada" woman who cannot cook or carter for the home but times have changed now, it is said that educated women are more organized and better wives. Another barrier was in the workplace with its discriminatory

employment and advancement practices, with the changing role of women in contemporary, the struggle is now in the home, necessitated by redistribution of responsibility for domestic work.

To this end, the paper recommends that, more women should be encouraged to acquire education. Also basic school curriculum should include culture and civic education eradication of bad cultural practices. Government should also make arts, culture and other related subjects compulsory as part of our school curriculum, and cultural co-curricular activities in all schools, both public and private Cultural day activities organized by schools should not be seen as an activity to entertain people but a tool for cultural and national development.

Gender mainstreaming is highly recommended as the way to bring about equal representation in governance as well as an end to all other gender disparity issues. Gender mainstreaming will give women a level playing ground. This is in line with the argument of (Ejukonemu 2015) that, gender mainstreaming, be used as a good strategy to ensure male and female are given equal footings in in the society. Government should put strategies in place to guide against discriminatory practices. Perpetrators of obnoxious cultural practices should be punished. African culture is that of respect, chastisement and purity, decent dressing and life style commands respects. The woman is a creative being reason being why God choose her to bring forth and nurture the next generation. Let every woman help to lift other female up and together Nigeria will be a better place for all "*no woman no nation"*

Globally on the 9th of March 2018, World woman day was celebrated in Nigeria with the theme" *press for progresss"* encourage women to keep pressing forward for more progress. The slogan for this year is" *please leave our daughters alone"* this is a plea for the abducted Dapchi girls being held captive by the Boko Haram Insurgency group in Nigeria. Now is the time for the contemporary Nigerian woman to press for progress.

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