

WOMEN: AN ENIGMA IN A DEVELOPING PLURALISTIC SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

Everywhere there is a discussion on women, one thread is clearly noticed. Women are agents of development if not for the marginalization that they suffer in the hands of men. The cry of marginalization is heard from the religious, political and economic perspective. The suffering women encounter in Africa is traced to the advent of colonial masters. The effort of women to live above board is not paying off as they are highly discriminated against by the men in very society. She desires to be free, but is perpetually in chains. She may be wise, intelligent, but she cannot have the opportunity to make a decision publicly. Scholars have advanced cultural, religious reasons for the plight of women in the world, but this paper challenges these age-long factors. The paper argued that the problem women face in life is self-inflicted due to lack of self-acceptance. It is only women that can free themselves from the shackles of male harassment, intimidation and violent brutalization. This article concludes that women should desist from mere complaining of marginalization, domestic violence, rape and inequalities. Women must as a matter of necessity believe in themselves as women as a means of winning the war against them.

Keyword: Women, culture, marginalization, rights, freedom, emancipation, Nigeria, Africa

Introduction

The woman is the most precious creature on the face of the earth because without her it would be difficult for man to live successfully as human nature demands her presence. This gift of nature is highly discriminated against even by those who may find it extremely difficult to survive with the woman. She wants to be liberated from the shackles of life, but the road has remained perpetually crooked and blustery. The clergies that have been taught and mandated by the Holy Scriptures have exposed and explained these rights, freedoms and roles of women are their tormentors to say the least. Wherever the woman finds herself, she is at a disadvantage position because of the mentality of men.

In most places, women are to be seen and not to be heard. They are to be followers and not leaders. There is nothing more universal, philosophical, religious, economic, sociological and scientific than the suffering, discrimination and marginalization women are experiencing due to gender stereotypes. The efforts they have been making are not fruitful. Will they stop on the way without taking further steps? Can the world ever be a better place for the woman? Is the transformation of women to men in their words and acts the best solution to the challenges women are facing in contemporary societies? These many other posers are treated in this article with the hope that the problems of women will soon be over and forgotten.

Writing a chapter in the Festschrift in honour of Prof. Sr. Marie Pauline Eboh is a very challenging task, for it is doubtful the quantum of tolerance the editors would have concerning views that might appear antagonistic to the position of the Church regarding the place of women. However, I have decided to philosophize with her on matters regarding women, philosophy, freedom and development as reflected in most of her published works.¹ In my reflection efforts would be made on solving the problem of the women in a changing society like Nigeria. I have chosen the topic "Women: An Enigma in a Developing Pluralistic Society" as it speaks of a new way of thinking concerning the rights of women, their roles, suffering, discrimination regarding decision-making responsibilities. Global inequalities against women have variously been traced nothing other than on the basis of their gender stereotypes. This is a universal phenomenon with high degree of applicability in recent times in Africa.

This paper is divided into five sections. The first part introduces the challenge women face in the world in contemporary times and the outline of the work. The second defines who a woman is. The pre-colonial attitude of the African man towards women in Africa which is complementary is considered in the third section. The fourth section analyses the changing face of the African woman due to the impact European incursion that led to the transformation of Africa's most cherished moral values. The efforts needed to dispel these challenges are explained with regards to women in the church and in politics with special focus on the administration of the affirmative action policy. The fifth section contains the kind of things the 21st women who wants to prevailing on her journey to making a smooth society should do to effect the desired change. The fifth section draws an optimistic conclusion calling on the struggling women never to loss sight of their calling and struggles for there is light at the end of the tunnel even though it is a tortuous path to follow for peace, respectability of women and the development of the society.

Who is a Woman?

A woman is defined differently by different scholars. The definition no doubt is built on the sociocultural belief system that supports the practices in the society. More than define woman based on sex differentiation, it is the socially ascribed roles and functions that determine who a

woman is. A woman is that creature that is refined from the deficiencies that are found in man. She is made to be a mother and a viable reproductive channel. She is loving, caring, humble and deeply patient. This does not mean that the man does not have such qualities. If a man loves, the love of a woman surpasses that of a man as she loves unconditionally. It is sad to note that rather than appreciate her for these qualities, she is abused and tormented in all ramifications.

Traditional Attitude towards Women in Africa

African societies have remained patriarchal in nature; hence men are understood to be more privileged than women".ⁱⁱ The women did not challenge "men's domination"ⁱⁱⁱ that came with political independence of the African states. In fact, the traditional African woman was respected by the men within the village setting and by strangers who came to visit the land. The commonest thing about "both sexes was that they were complementary"^{iv} to each other with the objective facilitating the smooth society for all to live and be happy. Religiously, women were not separated from men as both were conjointly assigned the role of a priest to minister to the community. For instance, "the fon of the Republic of Benin is the earth goddess with a dual deity, Mawu-lisa. Mawu is female, while lisa is male".^v Culturally, the Tiv man was responsible for the clearing of farm lands, digging heaps and ridges for planting of yam seeds and maize, guinea corn, cassava and millet among other sustenance crops. The woman was responsible for the weeding, harvesting and storage of the farm produce. The women in Africa did not doubt the position of the men in the family.

This fact of equality between males and females in Africa was not hidden even to strangers who visited Africa as Ross Leith testifies, "culturally, African women were the transmitters of language, the history and the oral culture, the music, the dance, the habits and the artisanal knowledge. They were the teachers and were responsible for instilling traditional values and knowledge in children. Men were also essential in the transmission of knowledge to the youth because they had a different type of knowledge of the earth and environment, and also of ceremonies and traditions that were performed exclusively by men".^{vi} The rights of women and their freedoms gave women in Africa the audacity to make useful contributions to the growth, stability and development of the society. The women did not just felt belonged but they were able to put this feeling into practice. African women were activists and warriors. Recognition is given to "women like Dona Beatrice who led a rebellion against pre-Portuguese Congo leadership, Queen Amina of Zaria who was a prominent warrior, and the women in Eastern Nigeria who led the Aba revolt against British colonialists for inhuman taxation in the 1920s"^{vii} are some of the women whose lives do not have a place simply in the kitchen.

The Changing Face of the African Woman

The African moral value system which appreciated women were frowned at by Europeans who came to Africa. Apart from plying the trade of deceit, the colonizers created a gulf between men and women. It was the same mentality which these Christian exploiters brought to the shores of Africa. Staudt understood these destructive tendencies in the colonizers as it is captured thus: "When Europeans colonized Africa, they transplanted their ideas of male-dominated politics, and ignored African women's political and economic activities. This created the conditions for denying adulthood to women, defining them as wards of men".^{viii} This position finds sufficient support in the following assertion, "gender inequality was introduced alongside colonialism".^{ix} It is not wholly true to put the blame squarely on our colonial masters.

The idea that "men and women are never considered to be equal in status"^x is a universal phenomenon. The consequences are the "deeply unequal sharing of the burden of adversities between women and men. Gender inequality exists in most parts of the world, from Japan to Morocco, from Uzbekistan to the United State".^{xi} What makes it a point of discussion is the inherent copycat nature of some Africans who prefer to borrow from other cultures than sustain that which is original to them and their culture. The complementary role of the woman is thrown away. The man is more privileged, he is involved in decision making, while women are inferior, less rational and most often are allowed to hold "lower status positions"^{xii} as well as "lack support from other family members".^{xiii} The hatred on the woman begins at birth, "immediately a child is born, the question that will be posed will centre on sex. Not minding of health of the mother. If the baby is a female, the mother will be scolded and treated as a lazy, good for nothing woman. On the other hand, if the child is a male, praise will be showered on the mother, not considering the fact that biology has shown that it is the father who determines the sex of an offspring".^{xiv}

Wherever we find women missing in leadership positions or at the level of decision-making in Africa it is as a result of the deliberate policy of the colonial masters. Ester Boserup asserts succinctly that: "today, the complementary roles of women to men no longer exist in Africa, but Africa's women subordination to men and gender inequality in various forms".^{xv} In the village setting, women who were the custodian of moral values and positive behaviour have lost that sense of belonging. This has shifted their preference to facial make up and the likes. It was the wife that usually related the story of the happenings in the community to her children during moonlight story times.

The Church and Liberation of Women

The good news of the liberation of women came to Africa as the content of the story of the Sower. The women around the world have listened to the gospel message without hope. Those who claim to liberate them are the real oppressions of women. Liberation only comes when one is free to make a choice personally. This is not to be with the long years of the existence of the Church in the world. Little wonder that Wachege asserts that "History has it that the church too cannot be absolved from the evils of inflicting lamentable injustices on women this has been happening through its hierarchical structures which are predominantly and essentially male".^{xvi} It is very wrong that the Church in her hierarchical structure does not show that women also received the different gifts of the Holy Spirit.

The Church should stop acting like manufacturers of new cars. She should not perceive women as adorable ornaments that are useful for attracting buyers of their brands. The Church leadership must make conscious efforts to bring women to participate fully at the decision making levels. Sentiments set apart; can anyone give sufficient reasons as to why women are not admitted to the sacrament of Holy Orders in the Catholic Church in the 21st Century? It is true that other denominations have gone further against the wishes of some men who vested with policy making positions to ordain women pastors. The training such women receive before their ordination is not comparable to that which revered sisters receive in the Catholic Church. Does it mean that these reverend sisters are comfortable with their roles and contributions? What are the grounds for leading the world in area of preaching about equality of men and women without practical results? I think the answer that Christ did not appoint a woman as one of the twelve apostles is outdated and against new revelations.

The aspirations of women would be fulfilled the moment the Church hierarchy which is dominated by men is able to put into practice the words of St, Paul in Galatians 3:28 Paul asserts that "there is neither Jew nor Greek neither bonded nor free".^{xvii} It is only attitudes of men in the church concerning the discrimination of women would effectively change. Women will forever not be treated as slaves and servants in the Church. No longer would the the Karanga people of Zimbabwe think that "women are helpers and not leaders".^{xviii} But if women are still treated unfairly in the Church particularly the Catholic Church, what do we expect of them from the partisan politician?

Women in Politics

The status of the women is low globally. The best place to exhibit the quality of decision making is in politics. Women all over the world are struggling to belong to the corridors of power. They do not just want to be identified that woman that has supported Mr. John to be successful in office or at work. Although men were not openly consulting their wives in decision making, they could always return to them at a point of recess. In Tiv society, women were not permitted to sit

among men in the circle where decisions were made, but they were allowed to listen to the conversation of the elders in the *ate* (hut). A responsible man was always adjourning matters. This gave him to opportunity to get wise counsel from his wife. Seen that women in Africa will playing serious advisory roles there a radical shift in the venue of meetings. It is on this basis that Strobel's argues that "the shifting decision-making from community level to the colonial capital cities lessened women's opportunities to influence political decision-making, because women had relied on influencing their male kin informally"^{xxix} is most reliable. This strategy is "viewed as showing the strength of the legacy of single-sex politics that the British colonial masters left behind"^{xxx} in order to undo the woman and slow the pace of development.

Tatira L. opines that "women are believed to be physically weaker than male members so much so that women are encouraged to consult"^{xxxi} This assertion does not hold water in all cases. If some women are physically weak, it is wrong to generalize this as a yardstick for determining who makes influence in the society. Intellectually, the woman is not weak. She is able to memorize events to her children through story telling. These stories have moral, religious and above all, they are used for the formation of the character of children at a very tender age. This perspective is no longer emphasized by writers in our contemporary age. The uncouth feminists prefer to define the African woman as wholly care-giver, home-maker and breeding machine. Such manner of categorization conceives women as "the property of men, first of their fathers and then, when they get married, of their husbands"^{xxxii} No matter how hard a woman tries to work to augment the contributions of the man, nobody recognizes her.

The Affirmative Action Policy

This policy was deliberately conceived as a means of enhancing the number women in position at decision making levels in a given nation. It was highly prioritized by all women in attendance. This implies that the problem of injustices, abuse and discrimination of women by men was not simply an African palaver. The idea was to see that "by the end of 1995, women were allocated 30 per cent of positions at decision making levels"^{xxxiii} 25 years after the policy, what level of success has it achieved around the world? There is no gain to condemn the policy as a tint of opium of the women. The day religion will solve the problem of the masses is the same day women will get the result of the advocacy for the 30 per cent Affirmative action and it will be on the same day that the youth who are leaders of tomorrow will take charge of leadership.

The place of women in a country like Nigeria is in the kitchen. In a university environment women should no longer demand for the 30 per cent affirmative action due to the high level of literacy, but this is not to be. A university with 17 departments has only three Head of Departments who are women. A state with 23 local government councils has only two women as Chairwomen. The courage of countries like Uganda and South Africa that have established

policies for women's political advancement should be commended. Apart from establishing such policies, they have made frantic efforts to maintain a minimum proportion of women in their legislative assemblies. Writing on the success stories of affirmative action policy in some parts of Africa, Sylvia Tamale opines that "Seychelles stands second at 27.3 per cent, followed by Mozambique, Namibia, Eritrea, and Uganda with 18.1 per cent. At the other end of the spectrum are countries such as Djibouti and the Comoros, where the assemblies are exclusively composed of men".^{xxiv} I make bold to say that the problem of women representation at the decision making level is not tied to lack of money, it is not tied to night meetings, it is not tied to the patriarchal nature of our societies. It is tied to the nature of the women who does not love, does not appreciate and does not recognize herself capable of serving humanity at the level of decision-making.

It is the women themselves that have failed to challenge the men at such contest. It is possible that the constant holding back of the men have negatively affected the attitude of the women. Plato's allegory of the cave is a relevant example of the situation women might find themselves in the mess. Women themselves are bound to commit the fallacy that they are capable of leadership only when a man is beside them. In order to win the battle against women discrimination, women must that "the sexual division of labour and accompanying gender relations as essentially unalterable conditions of human existence which are central to their oppression".^{xxv} They must see these as reasons for their failure to take over their leadership roles from male domination. To succeed with this strategy, there is great need for women around the world to think outside the box.

The idea is to think outside the box for fresher results. One way of doing so is to encourage women who are successful in their chosen careers to stand up tall. In fact, women who are activists should not paint the picture that their successes are possible because of the affirmative action policy. They got those positions because they took a courageous shot at them. It is a right to be at the table of decision making and not a privilege ordained by man. What is referred to as affirmative action policy is merely a political opportunity advance by women for the purpose of emancipating them. If women must win the battle against men, then, their struggle should not be focused on abolishing patriarchy. It is significant to know the identity of your enemy to be successful in the battle. The problem of women is not patriarchy. It is the practice of injustices against the girl-child and women. Women who understand this dimension to their struggle are close to winning their battle of life.

Politics is a game of number. The women must perpetually use their numbers to their advantage if the battle must be won. Women should build within them that silent but critical voice which is captured in the thought of a renowned feminist, Stuart Mill when he asks "Is it right and expedient that half of human race should pass through life in a state of forced subordination to

the other half".^{xxvi} It is only when this fight takes this dimension that the like of John Stuart Mill and their efforts will not be in vain. Feminism is not a password to abuse the position of a man in the house. It is a force that insists that the woman as a woman has dignity. Her dignity is not when a woman is married to a man. She is a complete human being as a woman alone. Therefore, all oppressive and discriminative forces against her should be eliminated without hesitation.

The affirmative action policy that is class centric will naturally not have positive effect on the struggle by women. No doubt in many societies, "the affirmative action policy has proved to be class-centric, largely benefitting an educated elite minority among Ugandan women".^{xxvii} In Nigeria, the women who found themselves in the elective posts are wives of highly placed men in the society. These women do not identify themselves with the majority of women who bear the brunt of oppression, marginalization and communal clashes. These classes of vulnerable women have remained silent as there is no one to speak for them.

The 21st Century Woman, Decision-making and Development

Everywhere there is a congregation, the topic of discussion is on equal rights and respect for the dignity of the woman. It appears that it is through the hands of the woman that development will be actualized and sustained in the 21st century. Already there are changes being experienced in the world due to the involvement of women. The churches are enjoying their biggest wins with the presence of women at decision making levels. The church leaders are not unaware of their unfairness to women with regards to the kind of roles they assigned to women in the church. The change the world is experiencing is as a result of the hammering women around the world are involved in. the feminists and the equality of female gender advocators are speaking with a new voice which is compelling. They are in their words and actions saying that women are an integral and significant part of humanity. It is no longer the thinking that the woman is subordinate to the man. More than blaming governments for their refusal to put their commitment to gender equality into action, the contemporary woman should train herself to be self-assertive. The struggle female inheritance in Igbo culture has been on for a very long time. Today, the efforts of one woman, Gladys Ada Ukeje have changed the face of the Igbo legal system in favour of the girl-child and womanhood. With the victory at the Supreme Court, an enthusiastic and optimistic woman has made a name for herself. It worthy to state the grounds upon which the Igbo customary laws was invalidated as follows: "no matter the circumstances of the birth of a female child, such a child is entitled to an inheritance from her later father's estate. Consequently, the Igbo Customary Law, which disentitles a female child from partaking in the sharing of her deceased father's estate, is in breach of Section 42 (1) and (2) of the Constitution, a fundamental rights provision guaranteed to every Nigerian".^{xxviii} it is ruling whose decision confirmed the decisions of two lower courts that had found unconstitutional an Igbo customary law of

succession excluding female offspring from eligibility to inherit the property of their fathers is a clear demonstration that the struggle of women on equality and discrimination is successful.

The population of women compared to the men has been shown that women are more than the population of women in the world. Politics has never ceased being a game of numbers, so the partisan political woman should be able to use this to her advantage. Women should mobilize themselves to get their voters' card, to go to campaign rallies not for the salt, cubes of condiments, oil, or cup of rice that are usually shared as a means of vote buying, but to understand who has the right agenda that touches on their welfare. They should fully participate at all the electoral processes. More than cry foul for lack of money to fund their campaigns, women should use their personal identity and experience and above everything else they should use their commitment to gender equality to further their struggle for the liberation of women. This way of thinking should serve as a motivating factor for the on-going struggle by women around the globe.

The greatest undoing of the woman is the refusal of the woman and women to accept herself or themselves as a woman or women. Lack of self-acceptance has propelled many women to think as if they are men. They want to be addressed as Mr. (in the case of Judges) or Chairman instead of Chairwoman. These attitudes are different ways in which women have disguised themselves "to look like a man he insists therefore that women must appear as women and enjoy freedom as women".^{xxix} However, behind the scenes they are women who cry when their pride is injured by a man who is employed by them as a driver or gardener.

Conclusion

All hope is not lost on the struggle for the rights of women. The best weapon women need to take to end discrimination against them is unity. United women would take over the position of leadership and have opportunities at the decision making levels. The women should endeavour to be focused on their target which liberation of self. Self-acceptance is what it takes to get to the peak of any career. You are you and not another person. A woman is a woman and not a man. Her gift of intelligence must be put to use at all times. Money is very important in politics, but it is not everything. Self-esteem and strong spirit of will power are the tools of progress. Women activists need them to make the desired change in life for themselves and their societies to grow and develop.

The increasing number of women philosophers in Nigeria should be indicative of the quantum of women who have chosen to change the face of leadership in Africa. The African women status is none negotiable. Her fundamental human rights are freedoms are in their hands. They can decide to give them out to be marginalized or hold strong to them and be free indeed from possible

discrimination, domestic violence, maltreatment by their male counterparts. Nobody understands a woman better than herself. The way forward for women is unity. They must have one voice which is to deliver themselves from the shackles of men in all areas of endeavour.

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