



The Place of an African Woman in a Globalized World: A Socio- cultural and Religious Perspective

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Abstract

Globalization is such a wide topic. Talking about women in a globalised world entails so many such as rights of women in education, health employment opportunities, economic and political contribution, social, religious contributions among many. The aim of this paper is to assess how far the African woman has come since globalization. It begins with a critical survey of the change globalization has brought to the African cultures, if any, and how far. It will argue that globalization has not made much change for the African woman. The approach of many scholars may have come from a secular perspective in the discussion on issues of women, but being persons of faith who have grown up in the church, our approach will rather be a socio – cultural and Religious.

Keywords: African, Woman, Globalization, Cultural, Religious.

Introduction and Background

Globalization carries with it elements of civilization, where civilization simply means having a highly developed society or culture according to world standards. Thus Globalization and Civilization cannot be separated. The backbone of globalization and civilization is education. In other words, one is said to be civilized according to the standards of the global world, which includes how much education one has and how many degrees one has acquired. In the process of acquiring education and becoming civilized, the globe opens its doors and avenues to a better life including employment opportunities and at least improved standards of living. Education therefore becomes a tool of empowerment. Therefore, when we talk about a globalized world, we realize that our way of life as Africans has been affected in one way or the other, positively or negatively. This way of life is what we can term as culture. One concern that must inform our thinking is whether globalization has changed the patriarchal societies that were designed from of old, perfected by our fathers, brothers, husbands and sons; or are they still alive and continue to be justified today in a globalized and civilized world? Whichever answer one gives to the

above question must therefore be followed by the concern of this article; How far has the African woman come in this globalized world?

However, globalization like any other phenomenon has advantages and disadvantages. The concept of globalization involves the breaking of frontiers that had hitherto hindered human beings from operating outside their national borders (Ciarunji, Chesaina- Wajibu) it has to a larger extent improved peoples' lives. For instance, there is advancement in transportation and telecommunications infrastructures, including the rise of telegraph and the internet. It has brought peace relations between countries, free trade, opened new markets, employment opportunities, environmental protection, created equality for all in terms of international criminal courts, unity in diversity and promoted international connectability with the use of internet, not forgetting external borrowing. These are just but a few of the benefits of globalizations, there are much. In a nutshell, globalization has made life extremely easier and comfortable. I remember when I was growing up, it used to take as long as a week for someone to know that there is death in the family if they lived far away. Today, before the dead is taken to the mortuary virtually all the relatives will have known because of internet and mobile phones. Sometimes people who live abroad may even get such news before those who are at home. That is just how easy life has become.

In the business world too women are winning year awards, given higher positions by their bosses because of the good work they have shown, they are directors, managers, CEOs and at the market centers they have given their whole lives to serve. They are strong, motivated with no blame, they just move on, have no fear of the future because they believe God is in control.

Disadvantages of globalization

'Globalization has given rise to more health risks and threats and challenges for epidemics, 'a good example is the spread of HIV and AIDS which has become a global disease' (Cianjuri). Because of easy communication and movement, and even migrations, HIV and AIDS has spread like bushfire. No country can boast of not being affected by the epidemic. There are many other diseases like Ebola and the bird flu, which have affected everyone globally. There is also uneven distribution of wealth where the rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer. Further, Globalization has resulted to environmental degradation and monopoly, a situation wherein only the seller has a say in a particular product or products.

Globalization has not left our culture without some impact. It is agreed that we all come from certain cultural backgrounds. Every society has its own cultural identity. In Africa particularly, each one of us is proud of their culture. 'Culture is a way of living in a particular community. In other words, the sum total of all those things that refers to

religion, roots of people, symbols, language, songs, stories, celebrations and all expressions of our way of life. It encompasses food production, technology, architecture, kinship, the way we relate to each other, political and economic systems and all the social relationships these entail' (Fridah Muyale- WCC 2012). In other words, culture is a phenomenon of inheritance adopted unconsciously by a person born within the given group. Globalization on the other hand is an economic interaction. With globalization, culture and cultural practices have been altered.

With migrations in and out of countries, culture has taken a backseat. People tend to adopt to the culture of the resident country, which has given rise to cultural conflicts. It has produced what we can term as pseudo culture that is common across boundaries. Particularly, the African culture has suffered under the pressure of development and globalization. One very good example is the disintegration of the traditional African family. Mbiti (1971, p.2, 108) when discussing African religions and philosophy notes that in African traditional society

... to be human is to belong to the whole community...the individual does not and cannot exist alone except corporately...whatever happens to the individual happens to the whole group, and whatever happens to the whole group happens to the individual. The individual can only say: 'I am, because we are, and since we are, therefore I am'.

This is how nit the traditional African family was. Each one was their brother's or sister's keeper. There were no boundaries as far as family ties were concerned. Kinship relationship stretched to what is known in modern terms as extended family. The absence of words for uncle (father's brother) and aunt (mother's sister) and for step sister or brother shows how the African peoples valued each individual in the clan and family.

Today, the African family is no longer a nit – together family. We have adopted the western style of life and hence 'each man for himself.' Just to mention one good example, in traditional African homes there were no fences. If there was, it was surrounding a whole village. Today, people put up homes, houses and erect a fence that cuts off the rest of the world from them. No one wants to know what is happening to the neighbor. No one cares to know who their neighbors are. This attitude for example has caused a lot of insecurity for Kenyans. It is a relief that the president has called for what is called the 'nyumba kumi initiative' meaning ten people living within a given region must know each other. There are many examples we would site but the space here is not enough. Conversely however, there are elements of African cultures that have not been affected by globalization.

The patriarchal system has remained the same, and thus the African society has remained a male dominated society. It is unfortunate that the "globalization theory" assumes that all players, men and women, rich and poor, will be affected equally (Muyale, 2012). While this assumption still holds the woman's position both in the family,

community and the society at large has remained a legend. As Georgia notes

The woman's movement is more than a struggle for "women's right" though it contains this element. It is essentially a struggle for the recognition of women as persons of equal worth and status with men and with equal opportunities according to their talents, training, and forms of ability.

There are many articles on whether globalization has worked for African women or not. Writing on women's rights, Wangari, W. Kamau and A. M. Kinyau (1998) observes that:

Globalization has not benefited majority of people in the Third World in spite of numerous development programs and international human rights instruments. The international human rights regime has mostly concentrated on civil and political rights while economic and social structures that limit women from means of production are cursorily addressed. Globalization has therefore impacted more negatively on women than men and in particular, women in none-white collar jobs in the Third World. We examine these effects within the context of the state and its role in the process of globalization with particular focus on Kenyan state and its intersection with national and international policies of economic development during colonial and postcolonial eras....

As Cianjuri notes, 'the Kenyan woman, regardless of her community of origin and her station in life, occupies a second-class position. This was manifested traditionally during the child birth in which the boy child was celebrated more than the girl child. When a boy child was born a drum was beat to celebrate his birth four times instead of three for a baby girl. More also, five ululations were made for a baby boy while only four were made a girl child'. This is an indication that since time immemorial till now our society has remained a male-dominated society. 'The patriarchal hierarchies designed by our great grandparents, implemented by our grandparents and perfected by our fathers are still alive and being justified by contemporary society (Cianjuri).

In social theory perspective that we learn some behaviors through modeling, the African culture through play and riddles has to some extent modeled negative aspects which paint a woman in a subordinate position. These aspects are passed from one generation to another and today are still being taken as a gospel truth. We need as individuals to come from such philosophies if really civilization will suffice. Harkness G. (...) quotes Mary Calderone the then director of Sex Education and Information Council of U.S (SEICUS) that men need to emerge from their age-old stereotyped grooves of earning, governing and fighting, and from their compulsively fixed patterns of masculinity in dressing, professionals, recreation and lifestyle because they work negatively on women. Many adjectives have been used by socialist on women as 'tender, gentle, empathetic, nurturing, artistic'. These prerogatives indeed demean a woman in many aspects of life including Education, Health, marriage and child birth. For instance, though marriage is expected to give woman respectability, going through the rite does not necessarily erase

the negative attitude towards women.

Even with civilization and globalization, everyone in the developing world remains susceptible to poor health because of lack of services, or lack of access to services, and a lack of education and information about health issues but women have remained vulnerable because culturally domestic gender based violence has not ceased as women have no power and the rights to negotiate for issues that affect them as women. For example, today, in many households most women are 'raped' by their husbands simply because dowry has been paid. It is assumed that 'sex'¹ must be available whenever there is demand. The other thing is the woman does/cannot choose when, how and where to have sex. This is 'domesticated rape' in the sense that women are forced to have sex even without their consent. From this perspective women have been exposed to the dangers of contracting STs, cervical cancer and HIV and AIDS. In fact, statistics (USAID....) show that, there is increased HIV and AIDS among women. This is because culturally they are not allowed to negotiate for safe sex even when they know that their husbands are having extra-marital affairs and are sure they have contracted sexually transmitted diseases. Negotiating for safe sex would mean asking their husbands to use a condom whenever they have sex, or questioning their infidelity.

An unfortunate scenario presents itself with regard to the urban poor women. In most cases, the urban poor women and girls are uneducated, semi-skilled and unskilled, constantly in search of means of survival for themselves and their children. Owing to lack of job opportunities many of them have ended up selling the only wares at their disposal: their bodies. Hence they have become commodities and lost the human face that would enable them to access the global market as human beings. Subsequently the global market has ended up trading in them, either at home or as sex exports abroad (Ciarunji)

Globalized educated woman has not benefited either to some extent because this instead has seen men shelve their responsibilities. The supposed head of the household- a man- becomes the head only in figurative terms....woman not only pays the helper, but also often pays for children's education, electrical bills, telephone, water, food and for the man's upkeep while the men still holds on to their old traditions of being "men" a perspective...

As globalization try to unearth women's rights from the pit of traditions and to bring it to a lime light, there are still traces of such ideologies like those of John Calvin who described a woman as 'a kind of appendage² and a lesser helpmeet who by nature is born to obey'. On the same strength the Jewish men who were the custodian of God's word, thanked God daily that they had not been born 'a gentile, woman or a slave'(Sharley Lees, 1984). These arguments demean a woman's position not only in the church but also in the larger society.

¹ Sex, and the woman, it is assumed are one and the same thing. There is an example of a man who when drunk he would call upon his wife even a mile away to prepare for sex.

With all these, the ideals of a woman have remained in the periphery even among the men of pulpit. Georgia Harkness (1972) observes that women comprise well over half of the membership of the churches; yet the number chosen to represent the churches in governing denominational or ecumenical bodies is a small fraction of the male representation'. On the same strength, Prof. Mombo (2009) in her discussion on the type of leadership in Africa notes thus:

'...leadership has largely remained the domain of men. It follows the line of traditional chiefdoms that are now created with western cultural modes and justified by the so called "biblical principles...women...are relegated to the roles and responsibilities within the private sphere of the home, where their contributions are undervalued and largely unrecognized.

This paper would not be complete without an illustration of the handicaps faced by women in the international labour markets. For some decades now, the global labour market has been recruiting, not on the basis of citizenship but on the basis of qualifications, competence and suitability to the particular job. In this market, Kenyan women are victims of the gender discrimination experienced by their sisters elsewhere in the world. Though the global labour market purports to be gender-impartial, men are preferred even in cases where women may be equally or more qualified. The discrimination is very subtle, but commitments to their families are some of the consideration given to deny women job opportunities. Prospective employers are particularly wary of women in their reproductive and child-rearing stage. Yet the irony is that this is among the most energetic and creative stages of a woman's cycle.

There are countries that are openly discriminative and will specify the gender preference in the advertisements. For instance, the oil-rich Arab countries have for decades opened their doors only to female nurses. This preference is natural because nursing has traditionally been a woman's career but it means that women in the traditionally male-dominated fields have not been so fortunate.

General gender-bias in the global labour market notwithstanding, there are culture-related hindrances peculiar to the Kenyan woman. Whereas a man is free to leave the country without seeking the consent of his wife or wives, it is expected that women confirm that their husbands have no objection to their taking up positions (including scholarships) abroad. In a male-dominated society such as ours, it is not unusual for an official to misuse his power to make certain that a fellowman's wife does not travel overseas.

The ethics of culture are pretty much static. And where Africa is concerned, the centrality of life-systems and functionality has always been at the roots of all African cultures.

There are some practices that have remained intact, and neither education nor religion can change them. For example, even with globalization, the position of the woman in

African society has seldom changed.

However, above all this, African women are exploited, intimidated, still looked down upon, some of them give up, lose their jobs probably because the manager wants to sexually abuse her, she writes a resignation letter, goes home and sits waiting for the future to come and go but as its said, where God closes a door, he somewhere opens a window; therefore, opportunities should never bypass you as an African Woman. That is just how easy life has become.

Globalization and the African woman

Examples from other genres of oral literature illustrate this. Who has never heard of the proverb “co-wives are like two pots of poison?” In oral narratives, who has never come across the cruel stepmother who buries her co-wife's child alive when her husband has travelled? And what about those lullabies we use to lull babies to sleep that convey the message that the mothers are mean to have gone to work leaving baby with the child-minder? And the beer-drinking songs that present women as promiscuous?

Thus the entry of women to labor force is not necessarily a road to an empowerment for most women in the Third World Kenyan women are generally handicapped when it comes to accessing the international market as business people. In order to engage in business at this level, one needs a significant amount of money as capital. However, women are financially handicapped for a number of reasons.

Alice Carloni found that more women in Kenya committed their income to family's daily subsistence and nutrition than their male counterparts.¹ In any case, as Judith Bruce observes: “though the specifics of women's consumption responsibilities vary in Africa and across the world, it is quite commonly found that gender ideologies support the notion that men have a right to personal spending money...which they are deemed to need or deserve, and that women's income is for collective purposes.”

This would mean that women have difficulties accumulating surplus funds that are needed as a capital base in business.

It was noted above how discriminatory customs and practices bar women from inheriting property and even deprive them of their personal assets after their husbands' demise. Lack of property means that a woman generally cannot use banks, not having something to offer as security.

Under canon law a woman's husband was both her sovereign and her guardian. In practical terms this meant that she could not legally own property or make contracts. Her property came under her husband's control upon marriage. She could not sue at common law without his consent, which meant that in particular she could not sue him for any wrong done to her. If she deliberately killed him she was guilty not merely of murder but, because of the feudal relationship, treason.

Unmarried women were also inferior beings, or as the Bible puts it weaker vessels (1 Peter 3:7). Fathers were free to treat them as their personal property and swap them for other goods or for political advantage, which is what arranged child marriages often amounted to. Unmarried adult women were not permitted many of the privileges allowed by law to men, nor thought capable of fulfilling the duties expected of men. Like married women, they were prohibited from practicing all professions and all but a few trades.

For the Kenyan woman, to take advantage of globalisation it is not enough for the climate to be right. It is imperative that she has access to the appropriate attire for the various weather conditions the global arena presents.

The Kenyan woman's condition is fraught with problems. In fact, it would be correct to give any of the following answers to the question as to who really is this entity called the Kenyan woman:

She is that female individual who, whether in the rural or urban areas, has to work some 16 hours a day for the survival of her family;

She is the person you see at the back of city council lorries crying as she clutches her baby, wondering what her children will eat if her wares are commandeered;

She is the woman in shabby clothes seated at street corners or moving, hand outstretched, from one motorist to the other, thoroughly ignored by the (possibly affluent) fathers of her children;

She is the person you hear rending the air with her wailing as a whip is applied on her back to teach her how to be a good woman;

She is that bent back you see cultivating in the field or the one bent under a load, on her way to the market;

She is the voice that struggles hard to be heard in high-level decision-making forums.

Though indeed marriage is expected to give a woman respectability, going through the rite does not necessarily erase the negative attitude towards women. Examples from other genres of oral literature illustrate this. Who has never heard of the proverb “co-wives are like two pots of poison?” In oral narratives, who has never come across the cruel stepmother who buries her co-wife's child alive when her husband has travelled? And what about those lullabies we use to lull babies to sleep that convey the message that the mothers are mean to have gone to work leaving baby with the child-minder? And the beer-drinking songs that present women as promiscuous?

The tragic position is that, in spite of their tremendous contributions, women are regarded as mere helpers who have no jurisdiction to lay claim to ownership of property. In most cases, it is assumed that family property should naturally be in the name of the man,

thus barring the woman from ownership. The many hurdles a widow has to go through in the battles for inheritance on the death of her husband prove this abundantly.

Why do you think our female cabinet ministers are having such a hard time convincing the public that the projects they are engaged in are strategies to improve the plight of the masses? The negative image of Kenyan women has deep roots in our African cultures. How many times have we heard attempts to support women being termed, “unAfrican” or “against the African culture?” If there is a tree that needs pruning of irrelevant twigs, it is the African culture. Whenever it is convenient, there is a tendency to justify discrimination and other forms oppression against women using African traditional culture. This will be seen, for instance with regard to access to education.

In Africa for example, civilization and Urbanization has changed people's world view and ways of living. People have inherited western customs, lifestyles and ideas. It is actually said that people have become westernized a lot.

It should however, be noted that a woman's entry to the formal employment sector does not relieve her from household maintenance and production even though part of her household work is taken over by a domestic worker.

As globalization try to unearth women's rights from the pit of traditions and to bring it to a lime light, there are still traces of such ideologies like those of John Calvin who described a woman as 'a kind of appendage and a lesser helpmeet who by nature is born to obey'. On the same strength the Jewish men who were the custodian of God's word, thanked God daily that they had not been born 'a gentile, woman or a slave' (Sharley Lees, 1984). These arguments demean a woman's position not only in the church but also in the larger society.

With all this, the ideals of a women have remained in the periphery even among the men of pulpit. Georgia Harkness (1972) observes that women comprise well over half of the membership of the churches; yet the number chosen to represent the churches in governing denominational or ecumenical bodies is a small fraction of the male representation'. On the same strength, Prof. Mombo (2009) in her discussion on the type of leadership in Africa notes thus:

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The African culture (s) has, but in a society that is still male dominated, one would ask, has civilization helped to elevate the position of an African woman or she is still described in the same old ways of 'whose daughter, whose sister, whose wife and whose mother is she?

As Ngugi (1994) points out: Kenya inherited the British legal system whose

underlying socio-cultural values are alien to Kenya's peoples. The norms of the legal system hence cannot be said to have been generated by the Kenyan society itself.

Another very good example is naming. In Christian perspective God created both male and female in his own image. In Genesis 1:27 male and female he created them and he saw it was really good. This is an indication that God did not create a woman to be a lesser being than man. God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground." (NRSV, Genesis 2:27-28). Conversely however, in Genesis 2:18 God said 'it is not good for man to be alone I will make him a helper suitable for him'. Helper" here does not imply that the woman was inferior or subject to the man. This verse has been misinterpreted and quoted by many to discredit women as inferior to men. Some mean them saying 'you are just but a rib' indicating that women are weak and minor before men. The question we are asking is if the vice is true then why did God in Exodus (20:12) commanded the children of Israelites to honour their father and mother so that their days may be prolonged in the land which God was to give them. This is a good evidence that women and men are equal before God.

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