

A Comparative Cultural Approach in the Social Status of Women in African Societies

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Abstract

Women in African society have been greatly valued and respected, especially in traditional communities, where they are involved in many aspects of life. Modernization is having an impact on the social lives of African women. Through a comparative perspective, this study investigates the shifting patterns in the social standing of women in African society who were hitherto the bridge-builders in psychosocial activities. However, as a result of modernity, the social standing of African women is changing. Data were collected using oral interviews, self-observations, and library-based primary and secondary sources. The study reveals the exceptional moral, ethical, and potential traits that African women are known for, as well as the state of womanhood in African society. The paper advocates for the need to increase African women's capacity for social development and governance by recognizing their potential and capabilities to engender freedom of participation and inclusiveness.

Keywords: African society, social-status, tradition, womanhood

Introduction

Women in African society are highly regarded, valued, and respected. Traditionally, some of them are placed in the priesthood institution as special advisers to the kings. They are the producers of the African offsprings, from one generation to another. The female offspring constitute the great grandmothers, mothers, wives, daughters, and girls born in both traditional and modern societies (Opara 4). This study examines the essential roles African women play in their societies and assesses the social status of women in African society, from traditional to modern culture from a comparative perspective.

In some African countries, women are regarded very lowly and sometimes women even regard themselves as pleasure tools for men and accept the perception of being inferior to men without

being bothered (Chikezie and Njoku 22), yet we cannot undermine the vital roles women play daily in some African societies nor consign them to being hopeless as they want the world to believe (22). From time immemorial, women have cared so much about their families. They contribute to artwork and woven fabrics (Hunti 33). Women are industrious in domestic and agricultural fields. Women have been able to establish close, intimate relationships in their marriage as well as independence to do what is important to them (Swidler 306). Indeed, women are the hallmark of African societies for the vital duties they perform in various spheres of life. In modern society however, women are faced with the challenges of modernity. In line with global demands, African women are shifting from traditional ways of performing things to modern ways. The culture clash and the consequent

ambivalent lifestyles are of concern. The worthiness of African women need not be diluted; rather, it should be refined, modernized and maintained to ensure the dignity and integrity of the African woman.

Women in African Traditional Society

Within the context of African traditional communities, it is imperative to acknowledge the pivotal role that women occupy and examine the social status they hold in African societies. Women are highly placed and given much recognition in African traditional worship. Their primary responsibility entails the maintenance of shrines, ensuring their cleanliness, and providing regular offerings of sacred water to specific deities. Frequently, individuals engage in active participation in the ritualistic proceedings. During various cultural festivities, it is customary for individuals to engage in vocal performances, wherein they partake in the act of singing. Additionally, a significant number of these individuals possess the esteemed role of leading and participating in percussion ensembles, thereby showcasing their proficiency in the art of rhythmical instrumentation. The onus of meal preparation during festive occasions rests on their shoulders. It is evident that priestesses hold a significant role within the context of their religious rituals. Primarily, in instances where it becomes paramount for women to engage in religious seclusion, they demonstrate their compliance with the collective by dutifully adhering to directives. The widespread belief that any act of disobedience will have negative effects on the entire community serves to highlight the significance of obedience as a sacred duty (Kayode 6).

Women are highly recognized for performing their traditional roles in matters of divine worship. In African

society, women play prominent roles in traditional worship activities. The beach women, when conceiving, cook food and take it to the forest to offer a portion of it to God to eat as a sign of gratitude to God, who made the conception of the baby possible (Mbiti 60). Sometimes priestesses, female priests, are in charge of directing the worship style (Kayode 6). They conduct prayer and sacrifices of different types and rituals. Women serve as cult mothers and mentors in Yoruba traditional worship (Idowu 212). As women priestesses, they serve Oduduwa Igbo Ora (96). Women perform ritual dancing, singing, beating drums, and clapping hands. Women priestesses in African traditional religion are allowed to play a prominent role in performing rituals in society. They equally officiate at domestic and ancestral shrines (Quarcoopome 74).

Women perform inevitable functions in traditional African societies. The bulk of building a home, not a house, is in their hands. Once a woman is married to a family and community, she learns the traditional culture of the new family and quickly adjusts to her new home. She becomes the mother of the children and the wife of the husband. In some African countries, for example, Ghana, women are espoused to a suitor from childhood. The Akan parent might decide to give their toddler in marriage to a young man due to his handsomeness, resourcefulness, courage, and wealth. The contract might be abrogated when the child grows up (Quarcoopome 121). This tradition implies that women's parents choose the bridegroom for their daughters. The parents of the young woman would establish a close relationship with the young man and other women within the young man's household. The primary duty of women in African tradition is marriage.

An ethnographic study of women in traditional settings indicates the assertion

of women in a high-profile position. In traditional society, women render assistance in the governance of the kingdoms. Politics in Igbo traditional society is not secular but sacred. The women official, Umuada in society, regulates the moral conduct of other women in the community. They sanction offenders and reprimand wrongdoing in society, especially among the female folk.

In the majority of instances, women are engaged in roles that are distinct from those of men, yet it is crucial to note that these roles are mutually reinforcing and interdependent. In the context of the pre-colonial Kanem Bornu Empire, it is worth noting that women were actively engaged in the administration of their respective states. Individuals of great significance held prominent positions within the royal lineages, such as Megara's position as the Queen's mother and Gumsu's prestigious position as the king's first wife (Dele 12). The active participation of women significantly influenced the political history of ancient Zaria. The establishment of the contemporary urban center known as Zaria can be attributed to the notable historical figure, Queen Bakwa Turunku, who assumed a prominent role in the city's foundation during the initial decades of the sixteenth century. Bakwa possessed a notable progeny by the name of Amina, who, during the sixteenth century, undertook conquests on behalf of Zaria, resulting in the acquisition of numerous towns and territories within the Hausa region. These acquired regions have endured the test of time, as they continue to bear Amina's name in contemporary times (Bazza 181).

Historically, women have been actively involved in the political management of their tribes and communities. Generally, women seemed to be overlooked in governance, but not in an African setting. They are carried along with the male folk

in community decisions. Bazza added that, in Wanzarba, near Tera, there was a matrilineal succession of chieftaincy. The same applies to some parts of Yoruba where women are given chieftaincy titles. The Obas rule with distinguished women referred to as ladies of the palace (181). The Olori Queen has her administrative authority to gather the female folk in the empire and to give valuable advice to the King, the Oba. The same notion applies to Ibo traditional society, where the Queen, Ugoeze, takes precedence in gathering women together to discuss the affairs of the society that concern the female folk in the traditional society. Women are the spice of life in any traditional society. The government of the Umuada, the first daughters of the land, is well organized. Although they were married out of the land, their authority was adequately felt and recognized by the male folk, especially during the burial of any married males. It is pertinent to acknowledge the fact that, in Igbo traditional society, women are forbidden to break kola nuts in any gathering, even within their cycle. They are not to be handed the dowry at the marriage ceremony. These are peculiarly preserved for male folk, despite their ages. However, the absence of women often creates a vacuum for the smooth running of any progressive governance in a society. Without women, traditional society ceases.

In traditional society, women are required to be modest and humble. Because of the prestige that traditional society ascribes to womanhood, women are expected to behave modestly, meekly, and submissively in order to conform to established standards. Humility is the act of proving to someone else how valuable and selfless one is. It is required of women in traditional African society to submit to men and carry out their commands. They have to do what they are told and not fight. This stage of life is assigned to women in

traditional communities worldwide. According to Kesselman, McNair, and Schniedewind (13), traditional Japanese society values family honor over individual desires and encourages women to remain obedient in the home. It is expected of traditional women to talk properly, dress modestly, and not criticize their husbands, elders, or authorities. Women must maintain silence, sobriety, and submission in order to transcend their emotions; this is regarded as "the appropriate speech" (Hooks 15). As a result, women are perceived as having less influence over social issues in African society. From an early age, a girl child is typically taught about the various ways she should behave in accordance with the established norms and ethical standards of the community to which she belongs. According to Omorogbe (6), women are expected to act submissively and complacently in the face of social norms and regulations. The fundamental tenet of the argument is freedom of expression, which is highly valued in contemporary culture. Women need to be free in order for womanhood to become more relevant and contribute significantly to the growth of society. In order to progress African society, women should be encouraged to realize their full potential.

Womanhood in the Society

Women are endowed with a great deal of sensibilities. Their ability to sense objects in their surroundings is great. They can feel and grasp society's moral and ethical difficulties, allowing them to scold their children and other family members. Haring emphasized that "authenticity is a keyword whenever morality, ethics, and virtue are concerned" (17). Women are wise enough to dictate their families' spiritual, moral, and material demands. Women have traditionally used sign languages to transmit important messages,

provide information, and chastise and caution their children in public. The axiom is that a woman's womanhood makes her a woman in the eyes of her husband and children.

A woman's womanhood drives her to be both human and celestial. In a woman, the school notion of being human drives her to act and behave overtly as if she were inherently human. She expresses her anxieties and expectations for life's uncertainty. Anger can arise as a result of life's disappointments and catastrophes. A woman's ugly human side is what makes her human. Similarly, a woman's angelic face represents the positive qualities she possesses. The perfect woman possesses both human and celestial qualities. Human nature remains unchanged. Bible characters are timeless because the human family has always been similar. We can now see the angelic and human in ladies from classical literature (Andelin 20).

Social Status of Women in African Modern Society

Women's social status is a reflection of their prominence and position in society. It illustrates the way in which women are seen in modern society. This illustrates how society perceives them, as well as their attempts to overcome societal injustice and become free of all tyranny. In pre-modern culture, women's social position had reached its lowest point. They received inadequate treatment and were exploited. Their social standing in the community was a denial of their rights. Women are committed to sexual exploitation and housework. Women are not allowed to speak in public, especially during communal events. Men are supposed to keep women informed about neighborhood issues in Igbo culture. It is expected of the women to be silent, say less, and depend only on the men to enlighten them about significant local

issues. Women's vulnerability has led to a deterioration of their position. The social and cultural norms that the girl's neighborhood has established for her to adhere to shape her education from the beginning, which is at home. Certain customary African societies prohibit females from acquiring their fathers' assets, like land. They live on their parents' land and get guidance and support from them, even if they are still unmarried. Given their social nature, women are required to act politely in order to foster good relationships with other members of society (Kiura 6). In many African countries, women have a very high social status. The birth of a girl has been a blessing for the family. In Igbo tradition, a woman announces the birth of a girl infant by raising an unusually happy voice.

Social status clarifies job prospects, workforces, organizations, and women's rights and responsibilities in a society. Women are needed in society to actively participate in the education of children at all levels. They must demonstrate their ability in economic and job contributions, as equal freedom fighters, and in the sphere of sports.

Women are more likely than men to obtain work opportunities in today's culture. Women's emancipation is driving many women to seek compensated employment rather than feel disregarded and relegated by men. Although some rural women prefer to stay at home and focus on domestic activities, the family is the primary location where children acquire intimate interactions with their family and community. The mother tirelessly trains kids on societal language, culture, and customs, as well as healthy behaviors and ideal attitudes and norms. Mothers have the authority to interact with their children. In some societies, women are expected to do both housework and work. Job opportunities will allow women

to contribute to the family's economic well-being. Women in advanced societies desire to be fully employed in a variety of work options. Simultaneously, women in a variety of countries are far more likely than men to desire women to have paid jobs, whether they are entirely working or can also care for their homes and children (Rimfat 74).

The outpouring of women's empowerment has prompted many women, both literate and illiterate, to appreciate the significance of finding work in their rural and urban communities. This boosts their standing in the society to which they belong. Job options allow women to explore their surroundings and discover a variety of job opportunities in which they can engage. Job opportunities allow women to be employable in the workplace.

Moving from temporary or part-time occupations to full-time, paid jobs where they can gain permanent employment brings women delight and fulfillment. Women who work full-time for a company prefer jobs that allow them to balance work and family or home duties. Nearly half of all women working full-time for an employer globally say they would prefer to work and care for their families and homes (47 percent). A slightly smaller proportion (38%) would like to work only in paid employment (22). Women's labor force participation empowers them to be economic drivers. In the company, workplace, and institutions where they work together, they tend to earn the same income and wage as their male counterparts. Some men are concerned about the fact that women are outnumbering them in the labor force (Kuan and Yazdanifard). In positions such as therapists, dieticians, and health technicians, women earn more than men. Women do better in jobs in education, health, government, and administration.

Furthermore, women who work will have less time to spend with their families. Women will focus more on their professions and postpone their ambitions to have children. This would have an impact on society if the country's birth rate fell dramatically. Another aspect that may have an impact on women's workforce in society is the drop in reproduction, the emphasis on technology, the shift in male gender preference, government policies, and social protection (Pimkina and Flor 11). The female worker serves two functions. It can significantly contribute to family economics and increase the social status of women in society by rating them based on their qualifications and paid occupations. It can lead to a neglect of family domestic responsibilities and raising children in excellent manners, as well as a decrease in fertility and childbirth. The workforce is beneficial to women because it eliminates idle minds, clique formation, and gossip. It raises women's prestige in society. Women who work in diverse occupations join the bodies of organizations that make up the numerous workforces.

Shell, Microsoft, Toyota, and McDonald's are examples of firms with a female workforce. Dangote Company, construction companies, schools, business centers, malls, pottery, small consulting firms, and restaurants are among the other locally based organizations (Sims, Gabriel, Holt, and Fineman 1). As more individuals get educated in various aspects of life, particularly science and technology, new organizations pop up on a regular basis. Women's empowerment is extremely important for exposing women to various groups. Women take advantage of their independence to study various groups and contribute to their growth. The axiom is that some women take the initiative to start groups.

Women in various organizations who have proven themselves capable and trustworthy enough to be in positions of leadership are making strides in society. Some managers strive to maintain efficiency, initiate new ideas, and motivate employees. It is important to recognize the natural virtues that women exhibit in society, such as honesty, enthusiasm, and dedication. Women can devote themselves to any task and demonstrate their professional skills (Kiura 39). The fact that several groups of women are organizing organizations in various fields is highlighted.

Changing Trends in the Social Status of Women in African Society

In post-Nigerian independence, prominent women have surfaced to give credit to women's social status. While men are regarded as the pillars of decision-making and the sole maintainers of women, the female folk are to remain faithful and submissive to their husbands. Women from the dancing association have traditionally entertained audiences at community gatherings and festivals. At the time, women from many communities competed in dancing competitions in order to maintain their culture in the community. They are known for writing music for a variety of occasions and situations. The songwriters' firm receives wider respect in society, which raises their social standing. The Federation of Muslim Women in Nigeria (FOMWAN) is a single organization that brings together all Muslims in Nigeria (Opara 68). They speak in unison to express their wishes to the ruling body and to support the less fortunate members of society. Aisha Lemu, the organization's creator, is well known throughout the country. Women in Christianity have an organization known as the Christian Women Wing of the Christian Association of Nigeria

(WOWICAN), which is a wing of the Christian Association of Nigeria (76). It is a faith-based organization that provides humanitarian assistance to the community. This group has given many Nigerian women of all ethnic backgrounds the opportunity to organize themselves and take on various leadership roles.

Women's involvement in leadership and governance in Nigeria during the pre- and post-colonial eras clearly demonstrates women's social position. Moremi is notable among them in the Yoruba nation. Her wise deed in restoring peace to the Ife Kingdom was a heroic effort that will live on in Yoruba history and life (Bassa 182). Women's social standing was formally acknowledged. In the former Kanem Bornu Empire, the Queen's mother, Megara, and King Gumsu's wife are outstanding characters. The biography of Queen Amina of Zaria will never be green for her valor in conquering various regions (183). According to Bassa, "Iyabo Idia's visage is the most widely known face of an African royal woman after the Egyptian queen, Nefertiti" (183). Inipki of Igala will be remembered for her brave self-sacrifice to end the destructive Jukun war with Igala. Fumilayo Kuti was the first female politician to drive an automobile. Chinyere Kanu was the first female pilot, and Mariama Babangida was the founder of Better Life for Rural Women (Ihenacho 141). Women's skills were developed in every nook and cranny of the land. Numerous Nigerian women bravely announced their interest in politics. They joined various political parties. Some ran for President of Nigeria, while others served as Deputy Governors or Ministers, such as Ngozi Iwuala, Minister of Finance and presently President of WATO in the United States (Cimino-Isaacs 1). These women elevated women's social status in such prestigious ways.

The rights and duties of women in society depict the numerous tasks that women must fulfill for the advancement of society. Women are expected to be meek and to follow their husbands' instructions and directives. Their sole responsibility is to train the children and keep up with housework. The arrival of civilization and women's independence resulted in a profound shift in the standing of women in society. Women were inspired to seek freedom from men's dominance and misogyny. Women found the power and aptitude to compete with men in any situation under their control. Some women join the feminist movements to work tirelessly to liberate women in all aspects of society. Women's major rights include freedom from domestic violence, the right to vote and be voted for in political involvement, and freedom from slavery or discrimination in any form. More importantly, the rights of women are human rights. In 1947, Article 68 of the UN Charter mandated the establishment of a human rights committee (Kurtz 6). In accordance with the UN Charter, women vigorously pursue more honorable and distinguished positions in all walks of life. Women's social standing has been elevated as demonstrated in the lives of some Nigerian women such as Oby Ezekwesili and Yusuf who worked tirelessly to free the Chibok girls, who have been Boko Haram hostages since 2014.

Education is the foundation of all human progress and the marker of one's social standing in society. The accumulation of knowledge, intellectual power, wisdom, skills, and sound attitudes is referred to as education. Education results in a certain level of economic empowerment. In the last two decades, women's interest in education has skyrocketed. Many women have pursued specializations in various educational courses. Many women have advanced to

the levels of professors, associate professors, and doctor of philosophy (Ph.D) holders (Ajayi 4). These rankings can be found at a variety of universities and colleges. Medical doctors, lawyers, chief judges, engineers, teachers, lecturers, principals, headmistress, managers, directors, administrators, chief executives, pharmacists, business tycoons, vice-chancellors, rectors, deans, bishops, general overseers, superiors, and reverend mothers are among the other professional bodies attained by women. An educated woman can freely express herself and contribute effectively to the community's social growth. These jobs and positions provide fulfillment for women who reach this high level in society and the church. It is an honor, respect, and distinction for women to hold such a high social status in society.

Women enjoy contributing to the nation's economic prosperity, especially when their ideas are approved. They attend professional conferences, seminars, and workshops on a national and international scale. They include consultants, specialists, advisors, and directors. Ambassadors, deputy governors, ministers and commissioners, senators, and honorables are among the ladies. The job seeker approaches them about a position. Some of them are involved in charitable work for the less fortunate members of society. They assist the underprivileged through philanthropy.

Women's social standing can rise faster if they participate in sports. Gone are the days when sports were only for men. Women enjoy sports and are enthusiasts of sports (Day, Fink, Gordon, n. p.). They join sports clubs, train, and play football, lawn tennis, table tennis, volleyball, and basketball. Other sports that young women participate in include bicycle riding, vehicle riding, and motorcycling. They compete professionally in their sports and

win trophies for their clubs, communities, states, and nations. Some have achieved international acclaim. Women's social advancement has enabled them to participate fully in various aspects of life, particularly in politics.

Conclusion

African women are remarkable role models who embody the essence of what it is to be a woman. Their submission and acquiescence improve their ability to adapt to the shifting social patterns in modern societies. African ladies have boundless values. In order for women to actively engage in the governance of the populace and to be able to propose proactive ideas that will guarantee the smooth operation of the community in which they live, it is crucial to recognise the significant presence of women and extend invitations to them to important community meetings. Civilization and the consequent advancement of women have led to a significant shift in the status of women in modern society. Many women in a variety of geographical circumstances experienced significant self-realisation as a result of the feminist movement. Women now recognise and utilise their innate ability and capacity to participate in competitive activities with men in all fields that were hitherto male-dominated. The main rights that women seek to achieve are freedom from abuse at home, political participation and freedom from all forms of discrimination or slavery and increase access to western education for the enhancement and empowerment of African women to increase their social standing which will impact on their positive roles in their communities.

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