

THE CHALLENGES OF GENDER RECONCILIATION IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

In every study, there must be an existing problem and in every existing problem, there should not be silence because human beings are not built in silence but in words, in works, actions and reflections. The rate of gender crises in the families, workplaces, social structures, religious expressions, political structuring and general system of justice delivery are high, and there should not be silence but dialogue that leads to reconciliation. In Nigeria, lack of gender equity is highly affecting both gender, though it is assumed that it is affecting only women, without considering men, that Nigerian culture is one sided. It is against this backdrop that brought the idea of gender reconciliation because to continue to empower one gender is to dis-empower the other which is the creation of another problem for posterity. The study employs analysis method to examine critically the conceptual involvements and

their implications for our subject. The study aimed at exposing the area that are still causing gender crises and how to reconcile them. The study therefore argues that gender complementarity should entail in real life to develop and sustain every sector in Nigeria.

Keywords: Gender, Gender equity, Gender equality, Gender Reconciliation

Introduction

Globally, the issue of gender crisis is at the center table, its changing nature is positively visible but still the gap between men and women remains wide. Findings discover that what is currently regarded as gender equity in gender relations can be seen in economic, political, religion and sociocultural practices. Taking a critical look on our society, one will see that some of Nigerian traditional practices have actually enslaved both gender to the extent that one begins to wonder whether these traditional practices were made to benefit the people in the society or to exploit and enslave them, especially women. Why does one gender allow their loved ones to be enslaved psychologically, socially, politically, economically and culturally in the name of traditions even at this age of modernity?

There is no doubt that exploitative traditionalism abounds in Nigerian society but the female folk seems to get buried in the practices. Women live in an oppressive situation justified by tradition and the custom of society in which they find themselves. These constraints to gender equity have extensively eroded our lives based on mutual respect and

agreement across gender lens. It is very important to note that gender relations in our communities have been affected by the shackles of these negative traditions and the new interpretations triggered by the external influences and aspirations. Therefore, to curb gender crises and reconcile both gender, changes should start from the rooted ancestral traditional norms with the spirit of love. With these, many of the problems of gender relations in Nigeria will be changed and both genders will be equally valued and respected.

Pithy Understanding of Gender Relations in Precolonial, Colonial and Postcolonial Period in Nigeria. Whenever the term 'gender' is mentioned, many readily attribute it to the womenfolk, who in many societies are challenged and often put in a disadvantaged position as against the men. As a result, many women empowerment programs are being championed to cushion the effects of this subjugation of women. It is important to understand what gender relations mean, how male and female relate with each other and what the roles of female and male are in Nigeria. There are specific roles to be played by both male and female in order to attain and sustain development. In Nigeria, male gender is responsible for productive work while the female gender performs dual work; the productive work and the reproductive work.

Realistically, in Nigeria, male and female genders have different roles, responsibilities and spaces in political, sociocultural, religious and economic sectors. Whatever one wants to do depends on one's gender not one's ability and capacity. However, basing roles, responsibilities and spaces on one's gender in this modern time cannot help Nigeria to attain

and sustain development, even if it worked then, it will be difficult to work in this global, civilized and modern world. Therefore, this calls for gender deconstruction, reconstruction and construction in order to reconcile both gender and achieve successful development and its sustainability.

In line with this, Efiritha discovers that, there is no separation between sex and gender, taking the two as synonyms, where being born male means being born a man and being born females means being born a woman.”¹ In the Western perspective, sex and gender are different, sex remains but in gender it can be changed. Similarly, Simone de Beauvoir affirms that there is nothing like a woman (female sexed identity) that predates gender. In her book *The Second Sex*, she affirms that one is not born but rather becomes, a woman. It is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine.”²

From this expression, it is observed that neither biological nor psychological characteristics could define one’s gender. One becomes a woman only after one goes through certain life experiences. Besides, femininity is neither a natural nor an innate entity, but rather a condition brought about by society, on the basis of certain physiological characteristics. Gender is a social and cultural construct and should not be seen as the same thing with sex, rather, gender should be separated from sex.

Gender is a social construct advanced by male dominated patriarchal society with the intention to disfavour women and give superior position to men. It is a politically charged construct that is formulated within a field of power to oppress

women. Woman is only but a historical idea and to become a woman merely means to conform to this idea. In the same vein, Beauvoir claims that, woman itself is a term in process, a becoming, a constructing that cannot rightfully be said to originate or end. ”⁴ As an ongoing discursive practice says Beauvoir, it is open to intervention and re-signification.⁵ In relation between male and female, seeing sex as gender is the major problem. Once this confusion and misconception between sex and gender are understood and separated, solution would be achieved.

Fundamentally speaking, in Nigeria, the gender one is born seems to determine one’s luck, responsibility, right and space. If one is born male, he is privileged and will have all the power to subdue and dominate in the society. Males are seen as the head in Nigeria. Nigerian society from the beginning is patriarchal, and this has become a major setback to women’s liberation.

The society prefers male to female children. For instance, in Igbo society, male child is preferring to female child because of security or rather retaining of the family’s name. The father is sure that if God keeps the child alive, the child will inherit what the father has laboured for and will not be taken by any relatives after his death. In line with this, Okafor asserts that;

...the Igbo custom denies the female child her right of acquisition and ownership of her father’s immovable property. Particularly, Igbo girl do not have any share of land in her father’s house except the boys. This practice is also obtainable in the cultures of other African countries like South Africa.⁶

A male child makes a mother feel secure with the husband and grant her audacity to speak without fear. The mother's security depends on her male child, the male child brings the mother's security and makes her place in the husband's family assured. Female don't have right of inheritance in Nigerian society, her inheritance is established through the husband and depends on the male child. In other words, a woman without male child is invariably disinherited. On this, Anumudu confirms that:

...sometimes, the smallest male child of deceased men are allowed to say where their father is to be buried or any of the male relations of the man without taking into account what the wife or the grown-up daughter has said. The late man's house, barn and other properties are not shared unless a son or any of the male relation is there to say who gets what.⁷

In this perspective, Orabueze and Ogbazi observed that; ...”it is obvious that gender-discriminatory custom that disinherits women from acquisition and ownership of land in their father's families have not been whittled down by education, constitutional provisions and Christianity.”⁸

Briefly speaking, during precolonial period in Nigerian traditional settings, there were customs, cultures and traditions that were guiding both gender differently. For instance, there are some harmful and discriminatory cultural practices in Nigeria that were applied to women and men but were different, one side favour or disfavor men or women; such as a man being the head of the family, facing almost the whole responsibilities or burdens of the family while the women side are norms and regular harassment against widows in the

context of the household, community, state and marketplace. Once a woman's husband dies, her status reduces but when a man's wife dies, his status remains. Ezebuilo confirms that:

...both men and women experience widowhood/widowerhood but in different directions. Widows are expected to remain loyal and faithful to their late husbands and honour their memory whereas men are often pressured into a quick remarriage, regardless of their readiness or wish to remarry. If widows remarry, they rarely do so of their own free will. In some communities, widows may be forced into new conjugal relations with a male relative or forbidden to remarry, even if they wish otherwise.⁹

Another harmful and discriminatory cultural practices are early marriage, forced marriages, virginity testing and so on. There is need for reconciliation for a better Nigeria.

Furthermore, during precolonial period, there was existence of gender oppression between men and women but there was no agitation then, work was gendered, and each gender knows, they only learn their roles, responsibilities and adopt them. Due to the fact that each gender was born in his or her own responsibilities, spaces and works, their major vision and mission were how to achieve their roles and responsibilities.

Furthermore, colonial stage is where the perception that women were marginalized, exploited, oppressed by men started. For instance, the Aba women's riot (1929) as a result of British rule that introduced taxation on women in South Eastern Nigeria, upon women were excluded in governmental field, that men

should hold all positions of power and opportunity in political, economic, cultural, religious and social aspects not by merit or ability but by their gender. This is where patriarchy was introduced, that men are better than women, therefore, men should have more power than women. This is the beginning of the white man's burden, such as civilization, Christianity and commerce. It is here that preexistence political organizations in suffered the imposition of the colonial system which introduced new demands and systematically excluded women. They discovered that the material and psychological basis on which their authority was constructed disappeared gradually. The colonialist knew that women were the pillars of Nigeria foundation that was why the first in the line of impositions was the introduction of the rigid concept of gender. In this line, women were only female and men only male. The idea of the domestication of women was the fruit of the sexual division of labour and the introduction of monetary system. The introduction of education was made but only men could go to school and occupy available job positions as women were often held back by a long chain of children and grandchildren. That was how the introduction of salary empowered men over women and made women subordinate and dependent on the men for the subsistence of the family, it was only after this introduction that the Nigerian man became the bread winner of the family before now, he was only a bread eater without knowing where it came from. The arrival of Christianity affected women's roles, figures and turned the general world to the male world. The traditional religion that involved both the masculine and feminine lost its ground and women were left behind. The notion of women as the weaker sex is foreign to traditional Nigerian; they only became weak or rather were

considered weak after men had been empowered to their detriment. From this explanation, the truth is that gender imbalance was baptized by the colonialists. Due to development, Christianity, globalization, socialization, education and other factors.

Fundamentally, women of the contemporary society are of the view that women should not be defined by their gender that a woman is more than a gender. From the brief historical illustration, the old Nigerian society did not see women as just gender or inferior rather the new Nigerian society understand them to be same. One of the things that fueled gender oppression is the coming of the colonial system of government that affected Nigerian traditional roots, though, it is like a double edged sword, one side is positive while other side is negative. No one can deny the positive or negative aspect of the coming of the Westerners, what is left and required from the present Nigerians are to recover their useful lost cultures, identities and values instead of destroying themselves.

Conclusively, causes and challenges of gender crises should be urgently attended to, what women are asking for is not women empowerment but gender reconciliation, gender development and that lost connection between men and women in order to build each other since both genders now have political, economic, social and religious capacities.

The Preference of Male Progeny

In Igbo society, it is not only the predicament of childlessness that women suffer but the gender of the child. A woman may have as many children as possible but if there is no male among

them, tradition treats her almost as if she is childless. The tradition holds only the woman responsible for not giving birth to a male gender while the man goes free simply because he is a man. Ignoring the fact that the biological constitution of the "XY" or "XX" chromosome in men are normally responsible for the sex of any child. It fails to acknowledge that it is now an established fact that the man's chromosome determines the sex of his child. It is what the man gives the woman that she brings forth into world. Science has proved this, but despite our acclaimed literacy and enlightenment, we prefer to stick to tradition rather than facing the fact.

In the words of, Pope Francis:

What is humanity without woman? What is man without woman? We have it on the first page of the bible: it is loneliness. A man without woman is alone. Humanity without woman is alone. A culture without woman is alone. Where there are no women, there is loneliness, arid loneliness that generates sadness and all kinds of harm to humanity. Where there is no woman there is loneliness. 10

From this quotation, there is urgent need for gender reconciliation in order to save humanity from losing the importance of each other. What is humanity without a man and a woman complementing each other? Both male and female child should be given equal rights and opportunities for the success of humanity.

Dual Responsibilities: Production and Reproduction

Women's search for equality of opportunity in the job market is hindered by the lack of an emotional support system in the family such as has traditionally been provided by the domestic wife. One function of the traditional family is to provide a 'haven in a heartless world'. The question has now become: who will maintain the haven when both husband and wife are working? The answer lies in the elimination of genderspecific roles and expectations. The family is important, and it needs to be maintained. Institutionalized support system for childcare and parental leave, combined with an elimination of the expectation that women must take primary responsibilities for the family by the virtue of their gender rather than individual aptitude or interest, will allow for equality of opportunity for both men and women while simultaneously providing for the continuation of the family. All that children need are love and care. The issue is not that women do not want to love and care for children; many women have fulfillment in childcare. The biological accident of one's sex, however, should not be the dominant factor in choosing a gender. Men's occupation should allow them and give them the opportunity to participate equally in child care. Appropriately valuing the work of childcare and child rearing will encourage more people who find fulfillment in such work to devote their time to it. The reality is that women are more willing to step into the traditionally male sphere of paid employment than men are to step into the sphere of domestic work.

Women and Men in Employment

According to Plato:

There is no pursuit of the administrators of a state that belongs to a woman because she is a woman or to a man because he is a man. But the natural capacities are distributed alike among both creatures, and women naturally share in all pursuits and men in all 11.

Through history, women in all cultures have been considered the inferior sex. Ubiquitous cultural ideals have sharply delineated appropriate gender roles and separate spheres of ambition for men and women - while men have both controlled and enjoyed access to the opportunities of the world at large, the acceptable realm of experience for women has traditionally been confined to the home.

Cultural norms work strongly to tie women to the home. There is an inherent value placed on the mother-child bond in our society. Women are socialized to be nurturing and caring, while men are socialized to be ambitious and career-oriented. Women are then for 'better' at children and organizing the home because society has prepared them for such a role. Women are to say that it does not matter. If a man chooses to stay at home with his children rather than work outside the home, and therefore chooses to place a greater importance on his wife's career than on his own, that family is looked upon as not quite normal. Even in homes where both parents work and arrangements have been made for paid help to assist with childcare and housework, it is still the woman who directs and supervises domestic maintenance. When men and women

speaking of performing household duties, the usual description of men's participation is that he 'helps' with 'her' housework; she hires and instructs the cleaning woman and the baby-sitter.

Factors Militating against Gender Reconciliation in Nigeria

Social Cultural Factors

One of the major problems of gender relations in Nigeria is sociocultural factor. Gender relations are largely influenced by society and family. For instance, family as the smallest unit of the society is the institution which is an important concept in explaining gender inequality. Literarily, it means 'the rule of the father', more broadly, it refers to a society ruled and dominated by men over women. This is inherent in most Nigerian societies; giving men a higher social status over females has crept into public life, which reflects in state activities. The family plays an important role in maintaining this patriarchal order across generations. The socialization of children to expect and accept different roles in life has created a social mechanism for the development of value that engender the several forms of discrimination against the female gender.

Political Factor

Political factor is another problem in Nigerian gender relations. Men's and women's conception of politics is a great hindrance in political sector. Nigerian politics is based on high political virility, those who have all it takes to compete in the turbulent environment; those who possess the wherewithal to take it by force when force is required; those that can march violence with violence.

For women without supportive spouses, it is difficult to juggle conventional roles with an interest in politics. Some women in politics pay a costly price for their careers. Politics is time consuming and demands a great deal of attention. There are caucus meetings, primaries, campaign stumps and fund raising. Participation often requires attending evening meetings. In Nigeria basically, women who try to engage in politics are sometimes women whose husband are late or divorced. This is because, it is a general believe in Nigeria that women are not meant for public life but only good in sex and childbearing.

Economic Factor.

In Nigeria, poverty wears a woman's face, women have less access to education, credit information, skills, loans, and health care, all crucial to attaining financial independence which is vital to women's participation in politics. The combination of all these factors added to the burdens of child rearing and housekeeping; conspire to keep women off the social and political scenes. In some cultures, women have no property or right of inheritance. Nigerian women are said to own just one percent of the continent's assets. This makes it difficult for them to access loans, as they do not have collateral. However, economic factor has become a major obstacle and stumbling block for most Nigerian women to be financially independent. This becomes a serious challenge to women especially when it comes to politics, the huge amount of money that is needed to run politics hinders them in involving in politics due to lack of financial support.

Customary and religious practices.

Customary and religious practices of many Nigerian societies are biased by subjugating women to men and undermining their self-esteem and dignity. The overall impact of gender bias, discrimination, cultural norms and practices has entrenched a feeling of inferiority in women and place them at a disadvantage vis-a-vis their male counterparts in the sociopolitical scene even in urban centers. These socially constructed norms and stereotype roles make women overplay their 'feminists' by accepting that they are 'weaker sexes', overemphasizing the dainty nature of their sex and regarding exceptional achievement as masculine. Some religious doctrines militate against the active participation of women in politics and position of authority. It held that the origin of gender discrimination began from their sins. Islamic doctrines strictly bar women from some political endeavour, such as public speaking, appearing in some social gathering that can facilitate their political ambitions.

Conclusively, hooks encourage that;

We need to affirm one another, support one another, help, enable, equip, and empower one another to deal with the present crisis, but it can't be uncritical, because if it's uncritical then we are again refusing to acknowledge other people's humanity. If we are serious about acknowledging and affirming other people's humanity, then we are committed to trusting and believing that they are forever in process. Growth, development, maturation happen in stages. People

grow, develop, and mature along the lines in which they are taught.

From hooks encouragement, men and women need to support and encourage each other. Envy and jealousy create conflict in the society and this must be jettisoned because it brings division. Both genders must see one another as humans and not slaves. They must relate well with each other for stability and sustainability.

Nigeria needs to jettison those norms and traditional practices that subjugate women and make the men rulers, if not, gender crisis will never end in Nigeria and this will continue to lead to more sufferings, domestic violence, sexual harassment and humiliation as seen today in some societies.

i. Awaiting Mothers In traditional African society and in Nigeria particularly, Aghamelu observes that "...procreation is almost seen as the primary aim of marriage and the woman is usually blamed if this fails."¹³ Mbuy-Beya informs that "...fertility is so much insisted upon that the woman who has not born a child does not have a role in the society."¹⁴ Tradition has always made the woman a ready culprit whenever infertility is mentioned. Tradition made it that a man's sterility must never be made public; the woman must be blamed. She is accused of having lived a reckless life and many have had series of abortions in their younger days.

Sometimes the husband who is supposed to protect his wife from attacks from his family and stand by her is either scared or is lily-livered or he is not man enough to stand his ground for his wife. He does not want to offend his loving mother as

believes his dear wife would understand, she knows that is how mother-in-laws are. He is playing safe. In spite of the fact that every man wants a child, the physical, psychological and emotional wellbeing of his wife should be of importance to him. In a society where love and truth exist such culture and tradition cannot exist even if it does, it will not be allowed to transfer to the next younger generation unless there are no scholars in such society. What use is an old and harmful culture in the midst of the scholars?

Repugnant Widowhood Practices

Widowhood is the state of a woman whose husband is dead and she does not marry again. It is one of the most dreaded and unenviable status in which a woman may find herself in most societies. The status of a widow is so horrendous that the mere thought of it chills the blood of any woman. Widows are generally given unjust, inhuman, degrading and dehumanizing treatment. The widowhood practices are so many, and may differ from one place to the other in terms of intensity and duration of the treatment. However, the common thread that runs through them is that of the obnoxious nature of the practices which usually leads to hardship, misery and secluded living.

The most dreadful practices seem to have taken place in the olden days, the story has not really changed in these modern times. Generally, a widow is deliberately made to suffer as if she killed her husband. She may be isolated not only from her children, but from the entire community as she is confined to a part of the husband's house or just a corner of it until the mourning period is over. She is under a taboo, so, no one comes

close to her except of course her close relations. She is thus left in a state of misery as if she committed a crime.

Unfortunately, in Igbo land, the people that are mostly guilty of this uncivilized, wicked and inhuman behaviour are women called Umuada. They are known for their hardheartedness and impossible demands. They generally ensure that the widow is miserable. She dares not smile or laugh when hilarious jokes are cracked before her. She must shout and cry every morning until her husband is buried. If she does not wail loudly enough, the umuada would beat her up. The widow must sit on the bare hard floor and must not take any food or drink procured for the burial ceremonies. She will have the hair on her head and pubic area shaved with a blunt razor blade, scissors or piece of glass.

Other harmful mourning practices include: drinking of the water used in washing the dead husband's corpse, sleeping with the corpse, having sexual relations with the family members of the deceased to cleanse her of evil spirits.

The rules of inheritance under customary law in Nigeria vary from one ethnic group to another. However, there seems to be unanimity in the area of intestate succession where the widow has no place. A woman who is married under the Marriage Act is well protected and can inherit her late husband's property, but the right of a woman married under customary law to inherit is severely restricted; she cannot inherit her husband's property. The widow here is in a weak and defenseless position. In Igbo area, her male children can inherit but not her. If the widow is childless or has only female children, then neither she nor the children can inherit anything at all. In the Yoruba area, male

and female children do inherit the property of their father, but the widow is not allowed to inherit.

Evidences have shown that nothing happens if one says "no" to them. Orjiakor affirms that during the funeral of her cousin, she was able to restrain the "umuada" from carrying out all the rituals on her cousin's wife "I stood my ground and refused vehemently. I reminded them that since I am one of them, I cannot permit such inhuman punishment, after much argument, they gave in."¹⁵ It is only a little determination that is needed to reconcile these practices that are meted on the women folk in the name of tradition.

II. Divorce

Divorce is the dissolution of a properly constituted marriage. African societies frown at divorce and tries to prevent any form that could cause divorce. A divorcee is treated worse than a recluse; nobody wants to associate with her. Remarriage for her is a problem because no prospective suitor will be in a hurry to marry her. The reason usually advanced is that they do not know what actually 'chased' her out of her former husband's house. More so, there is no guarantee that such things will not repeat themselves if she is remarried. In other words, she is perceived as a bad angel and treated like a pariah. Any person who weathers the storm and marries a divorced is treated with contempt.

Way forward

Education as Tool for Gender Reconciliation

Education is the first step in the liberation of any group long oppressed, it brings change of culture, create lovable culture that will benefit both genders and make one useful to his or herself and the entire society. Funny enough, equal education for men and women widened the rivalry, enmity and competitive spirit between both gender instead of emancipating them but this is not to deny the positive impart education has played in gender studies. Education is to learn positive culture and to unlearn negative culture.

There is a prevailing misconception that women should be relegated or confined to domestic life only. However, what is important is to advocate mutual contributions of both sexes, towards the achievement of a just society as well as a progressive one. Worthy of mention is the fact that by virtue of being humans, both men and women are entitled to the fundamental human rights, of which right to education is one. In advanced countries therefore, it has become a rule that women should have access to education including all the rights, which are available to all human.

In contemporary society, women are not only educated, but also render great assistance in educating other people, even males. It is on this note that Pope John Paul II, in appreciating the contribution of women towards the development of the society, asserts thus:

I would like to express particular appreciation to those women who are involved in the various areas of education extending well beyond the family: nurseries, schools, universities, social agencies ...whatever the work of education is called for. We can note that women are ever ready and willing to give themselves ...in serving the weakest and most defenseless.¹⁶

He further observed that women's participation and contribution in the area of education is so commendable; so many are the records of their impact in educational programme in families and even the entire society. ¹⁷ Therefore, one would give credence to the efforts of the advocates for women education. Let us help them to bring out the best in them for the betterment of the society. Education is for all and should be for all. Education is connected with love, when there is love in a society, there will be no injustice. Education is not only the foundation upon which quick and sustainable development of the economic, political, psychological, sociological and human resources of any country is based, it is also the greatest instrument for the full promotion of the rights and privileges of genders as well as for the improvement of their statuses.

Conclusion

Having exposed the various aspects of challenges to gender reconciliation, the study advises and suggests change of culture since culture and tradition are dynamic in nature, this implies that culture never remains the same for long. New culture emerges to replace the old one and when it is not replaced, the production of new one becomes problematic and this hinders

development. Therefore, it is time to change the culture of domination, oppression, abuse from any part of the gender and replace with the culture of truth, love and reconciliation.

It also suggests human development, for the most neglected part of development in Nigeria is human development, human being is an agent of development and needs to be developed in order to develop material aspects. It is lack of human development that thwarts some people from knowing the importance of each other and fail to recognize the values of love, justice, truth, fairness, dialogue and reconciliation.

It concludes that presently women also dominate, abuse, oppress men, revenge, compete, and rivalry which was not the purpose of women empowerment and development, therefore challenges to gender reconciliation should be urgently attended to in order not to create the system of matriarchy for the future posterity.

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