

Subordinated by Culture: Constraints of Women in a Rural Yoruba Community, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Women worldwide face discriminations and subordination in the society. This subordination of women is even more pronounced in the developing countries of Asia and Africa. Several scholars (Kenig 1996; Adeyeye 1988; Howard 1985; Kazi 1995; Kumar 1993) have asserted that rural women are discriminated against in terms of employment opportunities, access to social and productive resources, education, health status and family decisions, among others.

However, rural women in developing countries have been found to play an important role in agriculture and agricultural development (Kumak 1993). Indeed, Williams (1988), Mabawonku (1988) and Olawoye (1994) have all emphasized the paradox that the woman is the nutritional bedrock of human society who feeds and nurtures mankind and at the same time manages the home.

Despite these realizations, the Nigerian rural women continue to suffer subordination and the ability to fully realize their potential is greatly hampered. This paper therefore examined the constraints facing rural women in a rural Yoruba Community. The data was collected through focus-group discussions, in-depth interviews and observational methods. Specifically, fourteen focus-group discussions with different groups of women and men, and ten in-depth interviews were held.

Findings reveal that despite the increasing awareness of women's education, there is still a tacit preference for the education of the male-child. Again, perhaps the greatest pattern of subordination is in the area of 'who decides what'. Findings generally revealed that males enjoy a domineering position in this area. Other problems faced by Nigerian rural women are reflected in their small volume of economic activities, female circumcision, health and rights. The paper concludes by suggesting some intervention programmes including the mobilization of resources to prepare women for leadership roles, and awareness creation about the problem facing women and indeed rural women in South-Western Nigeria.

Keywords: Women, rural women, discrimination, patriarchy, society

INTRODUCTION

Women worldwide face discrimination in the society. This subordination of women is more pronounced in the developing countries of Asia and Africa, and even more in rural than in urban areas. Several scholars (Kenig 1996; Adeyeye 1988; Howard 1985; Kazi 1995; Kumar 1993) have asserted that women (and

especially rural women) are discriminated against in terms of employment opportunities, access to social and productive resources, education, health status, and family decisions, while being more often victims of domestic violence.

Cross-cultural studies indicate that at the societal level the discrimination of women is traceable to male authority and decision making in the home, rigid gender roles, definitions of masculinity that are linked to dominance or male honor, economic inequality between men and women, and the use of physical force for conflict resolution (Ezeh and Gage 1998; Morrow 1986). For instance, Coker and Richter (1998) in study of women in Freetown and the Northern Province of Sierra-Leone reported nearly 70% of women having ever been beaten up by their partners and 50.7% had been forced to have intercourse against their will.

Tuladhar (1997) correlated the issue of violence with women's health in Nepal. According to Tuladhar, in Nepal, patriarchy affords women little or no reproductive rights, requires that women give birth to a son, conditions female security on fertility, and offers men wide latitude in divorcing their wives. Because women's identity is grounded in motherhood, medical treatment is directed to maternity-related situations. Again, Nepalese belief that fate controls life also leads to dependency and lack of initiative, especially among rural women.

In Zimbabwe, Njovana and Watts (1996) explained why domestic violence is rampant in the society. To them, the low status suffered by women in Zimbabwe as well as rapid social change, which has weakened the extended family structures, contribute to the notion that male heads of households can do anything they wish to their wives and children. Men are expected to want and need sex regularly, but women are punished if they seem to enjoy sex too much or if they are thought to be unfaithful. Women are also expected to be fertile and to bear sons.

Other studies by Heise (1994), Heise et al. (1994), Osteria (1995) and Armstrong (1998) also made disturbing revelations regarding discriminatory treatment against women. As mentioned above, this discrimination is furthered in patriarchal societies where the men are regarded as heads of the households. Within this context, the needs and the well-being of women are relegated and often substituted with the needs of men (Udegbe 1995). According to the 1991 Nigerian Census (Federal Republic of Nigeria 1991), women make up 49.6% of the nation's total population; they are also responsible for producing over 70% of the nation's food supply.

In spite of this, about 13.3% of women were said to be employed in the formal sector until the 1980's. Even now, the percentage has not increased significantly. The majority of the female sector workers are also in low cadre occupations. Those in professional and marginal occupations constitute only 18% of that grade of employment (Federal Government of Nigeria 1988). Indeed, the four World Conferences on Women which were held in Mexico City

in 1975; in Copenhagen in 1980; in Nairobi in 1985 and in Beijing in 1995 all made allusions to the discriminatory practices against women all over the world and the need to end them. In addition to these focusing specifically on women, other more general conferences and conventions have also been held. These include the Vienna Conference on Human Rights of 1993, the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo, as well as the Copenhagen World Summit of Social Development held in 1995.

Other relevant International human rights documents that have been passed are the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against woman, African Charter on Human and People's Right and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights. All of these conferences and documents brought the problem facing the female gender to fore.

It is important to add that most African Countries, including Nigeria, were part of, and signatories to, most or all of these conferences and International instruments. In Nigeria, the family serves some vital functions for its members who to Murdock (1994) include providing a socially acceptable sexual partner, ensuring the continuation of society through reproduction, educating and socializing new members of society and co-operating as an economic unit.

Unfortunately, the family is also the basic unit of exploitation of women in Nigeria. A senior - junior relationship exists between the man and the woman in rural areas and this pattern of inequality among sexes has led to expectations regarding male and female behavior. The woman bears the children, performs household chores, cooks, cleans, caters for her man and children, while the man's supposed chief function is provision of finance for the running of the family. In rural Nigeria today many families are sustained financially by the women. Indeed the poorer the household, the more hours women work and more importantly, the more crucial their contribution to the sustenance of the family becomes.

Kumak (1993) and Arumugam (1993) have also observed that rural women in developing countries have been found to play an important role in agriculture. Furthermore, Williams (1988), Mabawonku (1988) and Olawoye (1994) have all emphasized the paradox that the woman is the nutritional bedrock of human society who feeds and nurtures mankind, while at the same time managing the home. However rural women in Nigeria, according to Fadason (1993), constitute three-quarters of 70% of farmers in Nigeria playing a clear and dominating role in agriculture are prevented from realizing their full potential in the economy.

In other words, men's control over productive resources is much greater than women's. Apart from discrimination in the productive resources of the society, the male child preference syndrome still constitutes a headache to womenfolk in most rural areas. Thus, if a woman does not have a male child after several issues, the man is likely to get another wife (Fapohunda and Todaro 1988).

In respect to education, women in the rural areas of Nigeria often received little or no western education (Olawoye 1994), essentially being restrained from attending it. Nevertheless, these women carry the bulk of the educational needs of children relying on what little proceeds they receive from their agrarian occupation. This financial incapacitation often make Nigerian rural women more favorably disposed to sending their children to learn a craft or trade immediately they are of age and make them accept their fate when their children are being given out in marriage since the burden ‘theoretically’ is being shifted from them to her husband. Many more discriminations are also witnessed in the political structure, religious structure and so on.

However, it is widely accepted that the rural sector, with agriculture as its main economic base, has to be the engine of socio-economic development in Nigeria. In agriculture, especially in its vital food sub-sector, women play the dominant role. Hence, woman should be an equal partner in Nigeria’s development process. In spite of these realizations, the Nigerian rural women continue to suffer subordination and their ability to fully realize their potential is greatly hampered.

This report focuses on the constraints facing rural women in a Yoruba Community. It seeks to understand the status-quo of the rural women, their self-conception and life aspiration and to identify positive and negative elements of their culture. Finally, the report offers solutions to rural women’s problems in South-Western Nigeria in general.

1. THE DATA

This paper is based on a one-stage study of a Yoruba Community. The design was strictly exploratory, and as such only qualitative data were collected. Essentially, fourteen focus-group discussions were held with different categories of women, adolescents and men as follows:

- Women with same occupation
- Old married women
- Young married women
- Educated women
- Female adolescents
- Married men
- Young single men

Men were included in the design in order to have a basis for comparison. Apart from the focus group discussions, in-depth interviews were carried out on ten purposively selected respondents. These respondents, consisting of six women and four men, were chosen on the basis of special characteristics, such as age

(they were all over fifty years old at the time of the study) and detailed knowledge of the culture of their people.

2.1. THE STUDY AREA

Ajaara is a village in the Olorunda area of the Lagelu Local Government area of Oyo State. Ajaara village is an extremely rural area located about thirty kilometers from Ibadan, capital of Oyo State. The village has no infrastructure whatsoever. It has no secondary school, no health centre, no electricity nor any pipe-borne water. Consequently, the inhabitants resort to the use of herbs when ill, attend educational institutions in neighbouring Ibadan, and adopt lanterns and stream water in place of electricity and pipe-borne water respectively. With a population of between 1,000-1,500 inhabitants, the village is headed by a *baale* and supported by an executive council of chiefs. The people are mainly Christians and Muslims with a small population of traditional religious practitioners.

3. RESULTS

Discussions of the findings of the study will be presented under four headings: Education of Women, Decision-making, Women's human rights, and poverty alleviation.

3.1. EDUCATION OF WOMEN

There is general agreement among respondents that women should be given education. Across the focus group discussions, there is an agreement that giving education to female children is something that is good. Some of the respondents even thought it odd why the question of women/girl education should be a subject of debate. In one of the in-depth interviews, an old man queried: 'Are they too not humans, is it not good for women and female children to become important in society?'

Parents in the study general submitted that their female children have either gone to school, or are in school, or will go to school when they attain school age. Interestingly however, a male respondent in the adolescent focus group discussion session said that, 'I don't support giving female children much education.' This submission raises the question of the level of education that should be given to female children. The young, the old men and women are of the varied opinion that female should be educated to certain levels for various reasons. Amongst the young single men, the majority is of the opinion that females should be educated even if they would eventually get married or learn a

trade. As one of them puts it, 'An educated woman poses less burden to her husband, and also helps in whatever tasks she wants to undertake later'.

This submission by unmarried young men may have been informed by their generally liberal mind and the fact that the bad economic situation of the country now requires a joint effort on the part of husband and wife to maintain the family. Generally the consensus is that it is good to educate female children, but when faced with making a choice most would prefer the male to the female except when the parents have no choice.

The major reason for their preference is the fact that it is the male that remains behind in the home when the women eventually get married. In line with this, a male in Yoruba culture is generally regarded as *adekunle*, meaning 'one who fills the house', while *adetule*, meaning 'one who deserts the house', is the cultural label for the females. Other reasons are contained in the following expressions of two respondents: 'No matter the level of a woman's education, she will end up in her husband's kitchen' and 'educated women do not respect their husbands.'

3.2. WOMEN AND DECISION MAKING

The women generally agreed that the issue of decision making is not debatable, as it is un-African for woman to lead. Major decisions on the education of children, health care of the family, feeding etc., are taken by the father who is the head of the family. Indeed, the following responses of a female participant aptly summarize the general feeling on this issue. In her words: 'The husband's decision is final'.

Another confirmed, 'The husband is the head of the wife'. All female participants believe that they only give 'helping hands' after the men have made the decision. On politics, it is ironical to note that while some men are more open to women's participation in politics, the majority of the female respondents frowned at it. In respect to education, the decision is made by the father and when the preference of the father is for the male child, a sizeable proportion of the female participants said they usually will take up the training of their daughters.

There is also general agreement that there are no female activists, electoral candidates or chiefs as the position of the woman is subservient to that of her husband. In fact, most of the female respondents replied negatively to the question on whether they could vote for a female candidate. They hung their argument on the fact that a woman's position is not in the 'government house', but in her husband's house where she brings up her children properly.

3.3. WOMEN'S HUMAN RIGHTS

Although all the respondents generally claimed that the village is now predominantly composed of Christians and Moslems, a prominent leader in the village asserted, in an in-depth interview, that there are still some practices that involve making sacrifice to the ancestors. Some of these practices tend to, or totally, inhibit the rights of women. An example is the practice of widow inheritance. Under this practice, a woman who loses her husband is passed on to any of the deceased's younger brothers.

However, an educated respondent (female) claimed she can never allow herself to be inherited because 'the man can not do what my husband can do'. The response of this participant notwithstanding, an elderly man in the community retorted that 'a woman who can not agree to it has to leave the village'. The practice of female circumcision is widely accepted by the people of Ajaara village. Across all focus-group discussions, the practice was believed to prevent still-births and to create 'a passage for sexual intercourse'.

Paradoxically, however, the strongest supporters of the practice are the victims themselves. The study further showed that there is role differentiation between men and women in Ajaara village. Generally, the men are the leaders, decision-makers, and the traditional heads of homes and the village. They perform rituals, dig graves for the dead, climb palm trees, etc., while the women perform roles like making palm oil, cooking, taking care of the home etc. Indeed, according to a male participant 'women are generally seen as the property of the men'. The following account by a female respondent perfectly reveals the position of women vis-à-vis that of men in the community.

A woman is not only married to her husband, but also to his relations to the extent that she accords them the same respect she gives to her husband. When her husband is not around she has to contact her husband's male relation for important decisions like giving her daughter out in marriage, health or education of the children.

It is also important to note that women virtually have no reproductive right in rural settings. Men ask for sex when they need it and it is wrong for women to deny it to their husbands. Even if a woman is ill, she still can not say 'no' otherwise the man shows pity. Similarly, men determine the number of children to have and can marry as many wives as they desire.

3.4. POVERTY ALLEVIATION

Most respondents could not estimate the volume of their economic activities as they claimed to be mainly subsistence farmers. They farm only to feed their families; and it is only when there is surplus that they sell. Some of the respondents (educated women) asserted that they get as little as N100.00 daily from their small-scale business. The current exchange value is N110 to 1 US

Dollar. This means the women earn less than 1 US Dollar a day. The only access they have to credit facilities is through Ajo/Esusu. This is the traditional banking system whereby a money collector goes round contributors daily or weekly, and the total is given back at the end of the month. There is no bank, no co-operative societies - all these make it difficult for them to live beyond subsistence level.

They also have no access to large scale farming implements; therefore they use the traditional implements such as hoes and cutlasses, which can only do little due to their manual nature. In the bid to make a living, all the women covered in the study listed several problems in addition to the ones raised by farming itself: absence of a good network to link them with major markets; lack of infra-structural facilities, like hospitals, schools, banks, pipe-borne water and electricity; lack of, or poor, credit facilities; absence of gainful employment for the youth. On their being women, they all claimed to be enjoying their families and suffering no unjust treatment

3.5. IMPLICATIONS OF FINDINGS

Although, the majority of the women covered in the study expressed no manifest signs of exploitation, a lot of issues agitate the mind. On the education of the girl-child, despite the increasing awareness of the women's education, there is still the tacit preference for the education of the male-child. Being a patriarchal society, a male-child is frantically sought especially when there have been successive female children. This is reflected in such expression of a male-child as 'one who holds forth' and 'one who fills the house'.

In other words, the status of women and that of their female children is very low. Perhaps, the greatest pattern of household subordination is in the area of who decides what. Findings generally revealed that males enjoy a domineering position in this area. Again, although the women see nothing wrong in this, the implications for their health behaviour and other issues are very grave. What this means is that the men decide even on issues that directly affect the lives of women. Furthermore the traditional sex-role prescriptions are still greatly upheld in Ajaara village and indeed in all rural Yoruba communities.

The latent consequence of this is that society places limit on the extent to which women can aspire. Concomitantly, the women do not think they are being 'oppressed' by the social structure. It seems to them that whatever roles they perform in the society are naturally ordained. Indeed, it is ironical to note that those who are perpetuating the practice of some traditional harmful practices, like female circumcision, are the victims themselves. Finally, the small volume of their economic activities further makes them (the women) totally dependent on their husbands for all their needs. This also has an effect on the family, especially when the man does not have sufficient money with which to meet the needs and expectations of family members.

The consequence of this for the education of the children, feeding, clothing, etc. is very worrisome. As revealed in the study, when funds are scarce the man tends to prefer upbringing of the male children to that of the female ones. Improvement of family income has indeed been the major focus of past and present government in Nigeria. For example, the Better life for Rural women Programme (BLP) of Babangida's government, the Family Support Programme (FSP) of Abacha's government, the Family Economic Advancement Programme (FEAP) pursued by the Abubakar's government and Obasanjo's current Poverty Alleviation Programme (PAP) all have women and especially rural women as central to their realization.

Arising from the findings of this study, the following intervention programmes are suggested: Firstly, the study has revealed that the women do not feel that they are being oppressed in any form. As such, there must be awareness creation about the magnitude of the problem confronting rural women in South-West Nigeria. Secondly, there should be intense mobilization of resources to prepare women for leadership roles and for improving their self-image, full participation in policy-making decisions, and economic self-reliance.

Thirdly, there should be provision of resources and counselling services for women. The counselling services will provide resources, information and advice on financial support. Furthermore, schools and credit facilities should also be provided to enhance productive capabilities of women. Essentially, there should be establishment of social services for maximum benefit for the general populace and particularly to meet the needs of the rural women. Finally, priority interventions should take the form of attitudinal changes, particularly in practices affecting adversely members of the community, particularly women. Men and women and the youth, as well as grassroots mobilizers, should be educated about the need to retain positive traditional practices and to eradicate adverse ones such as widowhood practices and female circumcision. Women themselves should be encouraged to form a virile force in eliminating adverse socio-cultural practices in the community.

In conclusion, this study has mainly highlighted a few strategic intervention measures, which could address the multiplicity of constraints identified. However, any marked changes in the social, economic and political position of rural women can only be achieved if the numerous existing programmes, projects and other actions are implemented in a targeted way enabling socio-cultural and policy environment.

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