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Curriculum as an Intervention in Discriminations and Prejudices Against Women in Benue State of Nigeria

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Abstract

Discriminations and prejudices against women are a product of values, customs and traditions held by many African Societies. The need to change the perception and status of women has been indicated, and the strategies for the change is the focus of this paper. The authors are of the opinion that delegating the struggle for women empowerment to the media: electronic and print, conferences, workshops, seminars and communiqués are cosmetic. A more enduring approach is to reduce gender issues and particularly discriminations and prejudices against women in school curriculum. If young people are re-oriented through the curriculum, it is most likely that discrimination and prejudices against women may not continue with upcoming generations.

Background

Women constitute a significant percentage of the world's total population. In Nigeria, the population of women is put at 44 million out of a total of 88.5 million people (Onekutu, 2003). Nigerian women like their counterparts in other parts of the

world have been making their contributions in the production of goods and services for human sustenance. In most traditional societies in Nigeria, women are highly indispensable in the process of development. In most cases, they are the most instrumental in the societal process of development (Doki, 2003). Dennis cited in Doki (2003) opined that, in most traditional African economies, nearly all production is carried out within the household unit in which the women bear the brunt of the demand for productive and reproductive labour. Women constitute the nerve centre of the family unit, the main custodians of social, rural and fundamental values of the society. Paramount change is through them. Girls are mothers of the next generation (Oputa-Imala 2009). It is now clear that the crucial goal of development will forever remain a mirage if more than half of the country's population is contrarily isolated and/or neglected from the path of the development process. The all-round development of our country depends on the entire labour force of Nigeria (both male and female) and given the potentialities of the Nigerian woman, they could (and infact are) fundamental facilitators of progress in whatever form (Okpeh, 1999:41).

The Problem

Inspite of this glaring contribution to national development, the Nigerian woman remains essentially invisible. This is reflected in their growing impoverishment, inferior status in the family and society and unequal access to legal rights, social welfare, education, property and political participation (Doki, 2003:3). Among the Tiv and Idoma ethnic groups in Benue State, manifestation of female exploitation and oppression abound in cultural provisions usually by unfair property of relations and access to means of production. In a research into reproductive rights of women in Nigeria, Osakwe, Madumagu, Unman and Osagie (1993) observed that the values girls were taught while they are growing up were different from those of their male siblings in the area of the study. The girls were taught domestic chores and made to work within the home while boys were brought up for outside tasks and allowed more freedom of moment. Just as the Hausa (north) custom of "Kunya" (shy) socialized girls to be shy and obedient to their husbands, in the south-west and south-east, girls were similarly socialized to be "respectful and of good manners". In these areas only such skills that will make them "good wives and mothers" such as house keeping were taught to the girls while boys were given greater freedom and taught skills that would enable them perform their future roles as family heads. This preferment in socialization process is to a great extent, responsible for the allocation of the role of the bread winner and head of house holds to males even in situations where it is apparent that women performed these roles in addition to that of house keeping females function which are regarded as female function and which real men do not perform.

The findings also buttress the fact that boys got preferences where the issue of formal education was concerned in areas covered by the study. A girl in the study gave this assertion.

I wasn't sent to school because in our time, as far as school was concerned, it was for only boys. Sending female children to school was sending them to have their eyes opened. It was believed that a girl who went to school would be morally spoiled and would spoil the family name (Osakwe, Maduwaigu, Usman and Osagie, 2003:59).

Where the girls were given formal education, it was mostly in preparation for traditional feminine professions that would leave them enough time for taking care of their families. This is confirmed by the Focus Group Discussion (FGD, 2009) (conducted by Benue Health Fund). The findings showed that women were trained for “less tasking professions like nursing, teaching and secretarial duties, while boys were encouraged to be engineers, lawyers, doctors etc” (Okpoh 2004:59). Exploration of other reasons for this through personal interviews showed that other bases for this dualism were because men and women were not equal in our culture (north) and girls were expected to “leave their parents homes to go to serve another family” (i.e. their husband’s families) while boys were “expected to care for their wives and households” (north and south-west), “to be leaders and family heads” (south-east).

Widowhood Practices

Another area of female exploitation is the double standard manifested in widowhood. Among the Bini, a widow is called “nogegbe” literally meaning “one who has fallen in the family”. The rites that women observe when their husbands die are innocence in connection with their husbands’ death in conformity with the belief that “no man dies if not killed by his wife” and the desire to ensure that an innocent wife is free from being hunted by the late husband’s spirit. It may be pertinent to point out that while the Bini women insist that the essence of the entire mourning rites is to prove their innocence, the male informants used in collating information on customary laws held that only acts like swearing are done to determine the innocence of the widow and that all other aspects of the mourning rites are to protect the woman from being united to the late husband. This then is yet another case of women adhering to practices for explanation different from men. Whichever explanation that is accepted as correct, we find a situation where widows subject themselves to the rites because doing otherwise, may either mean that they are guilty or still married to the dead man. This explains why despite the trauma the rites present, not many women refuse to observe them.

The south-east widow also passes through a stressful time for periods that vary from family to family, and may range from five months to one year. During the period, she wears black clothes, does not go to the market, church or any such public place, wears her hair unkempt and cuts it at the end of the period. Generally, families insist on their daughters-in-law performing these rites first to enable the soul of their dead son to successfully go to rest and not to turn very much into different from those that the men observe when their wives die (where men observe nothing at all). Staring with mourning, the Muslim woman (mostly in the north) “mourns her husband for about three months (moons) during which her movement is restricted so as to determine

whether she is pregnant or not”. This according to them is in line with the religious injunction that says so “widows shall wait, keeping themselves for four and ten months after their husband’s death”. (Osakwe, Maduagu, Usman & Osagie, 1999 : P 30).

In the south-west among the Bini in particular, there is an assumption that a woman is often responsible for the husband’s death as sinful acts committed by her such as adultery or procurement of evil charms are believed to be capable of killing her husband or / and children especially male children. As such, she is taken through mourning rites that differ from family to family and in most cases involves ordeals to prove the woman’s innocence. The relationship between the woman and her late husband’s family influences what she is made to conform to, on the average a widow is expected to sit on the floor, have no bath, wear the same clothes, eat with unwashed left hand throughout the mourning period, which usually lasts between three to seven days. On completion of the rites, she cries unescorted to a nearby bush at midnight to take her bath using water from an earthen-ware pot placed there by the husband’s relations. She returns from the bush naked without looking backwards and wears black cloths from that day for period ranging from 3 months to one year. In addition, she may have been made to swear that she is innocent – the consequence of false swearing being illness and death. If a woman goes through all these without falling ill or dying, she is exonerated of a restless spirit, secondly, to protect their daughter-in-law and her children from being haunted by the departed spirit and lastly, to ascertain that the woman is not responsible for their son’s death.

Women go through these rites to gain acceptance from their in-laws so that they would not be neglected, and according to tradition, enable their husband’s spirit to pass smoothly to the land of the spirits so that it does not become restless, and in some cases the intention is to successfully sever all links with the dead so as not to be haunted.

The genesis of widowhood for women starts from the time when the couple have a romantic relationship and bothers on the cultural roles governing the age at which people marry. The woman by contrast is limited by custom, that if she finds somebody to marry her, he could be a man of her age or older than her. She has access to age brackets in which some people are married. She is thus deduced to the supply of men who come back on the marriage market as a result of divorce or widowhood or to those few who are not yet married. It is easy to see which of the two will have an easier time finding companionship of a married partner.

Another phenomena in the custom that sets widows at a greater disadvantage than widowers is that a widower at any age is expected to remarry a woman of his choice who may be much younger than him. A widow on the other hand, is not likely to remarry. The fact that remarriage is less for women than for men, women have physical problem of intimacy. Sexual intimacy is one of the prime joys of living. Expert in sex therapy tells us that maintaining a regular sex life is essential to continued well being

into old age (Masters and Johnson, 1970). However, for many women, particularly for those in their fifties and sixties, it is unthinkable to have sexual intimacy outside of a marital relationship. For them, widowhood becomes literally celibacy. Stallion (1979) pointed out that while our society recognizes the problem of sexuality in widowhood, it offers no solutions.

The immediate period of bereavement may involve such extreme pains that sexual urges are virtually eliminated, but once that period is over, sexual needs surface, often accompanied by feelings of guilt and anxiety. While the widower can find an available outlet for his sexual urges, the widows may not.

Inheritance

Inheritance practices just like mourning rites vary from community to community. According to some Muslim participants in the rural and urban settings of the north “inheritance is according to Islamic injunction” and is based on formulae for sharing wealth among legitimate heirs, as presented thus:

A son inherits twice as much as a daughter. A brother twice as much as a sister, a husband twice as much as a wife. (In cases where there is more than one wife, they share what is meant for one wife between them (Osagie, 2003:83).

Because the male children are expected to provide for the family, his sisters inclusive, it is held to be logical that he gets the larger share of the wealth in order to meet with increased responsibility.

Other tribes from other part of the country hold that only male children can inherit their parents’ wealth because they were to carry on their father’s names, while women were entitled to no property because they would marry into other families. In the south-west, widows have no right to inheritance as only children can inherit their parents’ wealth. If a woman is childless, she also does not inherit as a general saving has it that “if a woman does not have a child for a person, she cannot go away with the person’s property”.

The south-east participants hold that widows can inherit depending on the disposition of in-laws. Generally, a widow’s right to property is through her children, or if she stays on to marry one of her husband’s relations. If she leaves and remarries elsewhere, she forfeits all the properties of the first marriage (Osakwe, Maduanagu, Usman, Osagie, (2003 : 84).

Curriculum as an Intervention

Curriculum reflect societal characteristics and trends. The school curriculum therefore changes in consonance with the dynarries of the society. Gbamanja (1997) observed that the wealth or poverty of a nation depends on the content of the

curriculum. This is because it is primarily through the curriculum that the values, dreams and desires of a nation are better articulated and realized. The curriculum therefore, consists of a carefully mapped out programme consisting of what to teach and how to teach it. The curriculum determines the knowledge to be acquired (the experiences the learner will be exposed to with the intent of making the child useful to the nation).

Curriculum is dynamic and changes to reflect changes in the society. During the colonial era in Africa, the focus of the colonial governments was to inculcate the culture and values of the colonial masters. After independence, therefore, the focus of the independent nations changed hence, there was vigorous curriculum innovation and revision. It was in realization of the importance of skills acquisition that the Federal Government of Nigeria introduced the 6-3-3-4 system of education. The arrangement was for pupils/students to spend six years at the primary schools, three years at the Junior Secondary School (JSS), three years at the Senior Secondary School (SSS) and four years at the tertiary level of education (university, polytechnic or college of education). The essence was for those students who were technically inclined, having acquired literacy and technical skills, if they do not want to continue with education, could leave school, establish their workshop, earn a living and possibly, employ others. Those who had acquired technical skills but desired further training and education could go either to the polytechnics or universities still pursuing their technical interest. Students who were academically inclined could go to universities. This change was meant to break the wrong and undue emphasis the colonial administration laced on academic subjects.

Alarmed at the level of illiteracy in the society and desirous to improve the level of literacy, the Federal Government of Nigeria introduced Universal Basic Education (UBE) which makes the first nine years of education free and compulsory. The argument of this paper is that the culture, values of the society as well as government policies and programmes are best articulated and implemented through the educational curriculum. Emphasis in society now seem to be shifting to gender issues especially the female gender.

The last few decades have experienced an obvious general concern for the female gender. According to the United Nations Charter, the role of women everywhere should be “without distinction as to race, sex, language or religion (Odey Onekutu, 2003:23)”. The motion to further the course of women by granting them political rights in all countries of the world was first conceived by the United Nations Commission on the status of women in 1946. In 1952, the United nations General Assembly adopted the resolution as the first international law on women political rights. In 1953, the World League was formed. In 1971, all the 129 member nations of the U.N. accepted to allow women to vote in any election (Odey, Onekutu, 2003:23). Indeed at no time in Nigeria has so much been said and done to radically alter the lives of women. In order to address discriminations and prejudices against the female gender, therefore the

curriculum approach must be duly explored. Other approaches, particularly the emphasis through the media-print and electronic, workshops, conferences and communiqués are cosmetic. It is in the curriculum that traditions, customs and values about the female gender could be analyzed and programmes and strategies adopted, taught in schools to educational institutions youths so that the next generation grows up with values that reflect the enhanced status of women.

Conclusion

The gender and particularly the female gender has become the focus of not only the Nigerian society, but the entire global society. In order to address discriminations and prejudices against the female gender, the educational curriculum approach has been recommended.

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