

A SOCIO-RELIGIOUS ANALYSIS OF THE LIMITATIONS OF WOMEN IN EASTERN PART OF NIGERIA

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Abstract

Women's subordination and marginalization from the standpoint of culture tends to limit their involvement in public life and therefore it is conceived as a threat to their self-actualization worthy of investigation. The paper is a socio-religious analysis of the limitations women face in Eastern part of Nigeria. The methods used for the collection of both secondary and primary data for the study was the mixed method approach which comprises of sociological, historical and social inquiry. Certain social and religious practices in the Eastern part of Nigeria tend to subordinate women. It was revealed that, inspite of the efforts so far made by individual women, women activists, women in the professions, non-governmental organizations etc towards gender equality, women emancipation and empowerment, women are still discriminated against. It was also revealed that, certain acts and statements made from the standpoint of culture tend to limit women's active participation in public affairs. Some women often times shy away by accepting such limits not to be ostracized. Based on this the paper recommended attitudinal change by the custodians of culture, practitioners of mainstream religion and women themselves in the collective efforts to fight against all forms of limitations of women in the 21st century.

Traditionally in Africa as well as elsewhere: Eastern Part of Nigeria inclusive, commercial, political and socio-cultural institutions have been dominated by men. The opportunity for the advancement of women in any of these areas have been marginal, with the exception of religion in which since the 19th century, the Roman Catholic Church is well known for her order of nuns. Other denominations such as the

Anglican Communion, Baptist, Lutherans have also had women working as teachers and as officials in charitable enterprises (Compton, 2004).

In the socio-cultural context, women have resisted cultural claims and customs which maintain that men were primary and pre-eminent, and that women were secondary, by engaging in many aspects of the church activities that involve decision making such as officiating ministers, evangelists, pastors, church overseers etc and by taking leadership positions in women groups in the churches. Culturally, some women in eastern part of Nigeria have also resisted the socio-cultural notion that “they are to be seen and not to be heard, and to be in the kitchen and take care of children” by playing active roles in the community. For instance, women now participate more than ever before in traditional religious activities by making laudable contributions to the spiritual welfare of their families and that of community.

In some communities, women are priestesses, some belong to masquerade cults and play active roles. The women priestesses offer prayers for both their families and for social cohesion, they consult oracles while some others are traditional leaders and birth attendants who handles children illnesses and also deliver pregnant women in different rural communities. They also play active roles in church related project planning, implementation and levies collection. Women help in raising funds for church buildings, charity and for the implementation and maintenance of other related church activities. Apparently, because of these laudable roles they now play in churches, many churches now support women’s ordination as pastors deaconess, evangelists and as ministers of gospel and thereby encouraging them to hold leadership positions. But some churches that still treat women in accordance with St. Paul’s instruction in the Holy Bible such as the Catholic Church and Communion who do not ordain women as priest but they could become lay-readers.

Many women in the Eastern Nigeria, now engage in vocations of choices to earn some income to support the family such as working class mothers, trading and as public servants (police, military, customs and exercise, immigration, federal road safety corps etc). This development is a form of resistance to the traditional belief that “men lead and women follow” some women have resisted some traditional religious laws and custom that subject them to some obnoxious and less fashionable roles that tends to infringe on their fundamental human rights as entrenched in the 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. For instance the traditional obnoxious widowhood practices that force bereaved woman to drink the water used to wash the body of their deceased husbands as a sign that they were not their killer has strongly been resisted on the grounds of human health and rights. In the eastern part of Nigeria, some women have also succeeded in changing certain policies that tend to discriminate them for instance, in the Nigerian police force, single female officials were once expected to seek the approval for their marriage from the State Police

Commissioner before marriage. But with the intervention of some planned women organizations in the country this policy has since changed (Emeka, 2012). Also, in some vocations, such as banks, married women were not employed, while the single females that were engaged were not encourage to marry nor have babies early.

Socially and culturally in the eastern part of Nigeria, culture places conditions or repulsive tendencies towards the female in marriages and in other ceremonies such as birth, death, burial and taking up titles which have resulted to conflict, crisis and class struggle. An unmarried woman for instance, is often treated with less social acceptance when compared to their married counterpart. Sometimes she is name tagged, while those married are celebrated in marriages, the birth of male children are also celebrated (sociological and psychological) male children are given more preference than the female. As Agu (2005) notes “no matter how great one may be without a male child there would be no one to succeed him, his race is considered ended on his deaths (Amaoshishi, p4)”. In the eastern part of Nigeria, females are not allowed to have access to the family land or partake in disposing of their parents. They are restricted from taking part in policy making in the male dominated tradition even on matters affecting them, females do not present or share kolanut in the presence of males (Uchendu, 2010).

Women in eastern part of Nigeria, now play active roles in politics as party supporter, political party members and some of them have even contested and won electoral political offices to represent their various communities. While other women help to mobilize support groups for women empowerment emancipation in general. Women resistance implies women acting upon and against certain actions, things, issues and roles of societal concerns to them, and major aim of such a movement is social transformations. According to Saraydarian (2011) social transformation are the feelings, emotion and actions designed to put things in proper perspective. However, according to Emeka (2012) women political movements dates back to 1929 (Aba Women Riot) which was a reaction to the proposed implementation of women tax, and since then, a number of women movements and individual activists has become united in their struggle and commitment to retain and expand their civic rights and gender equality. Similarly, it was the collective effort of women to resist some socio-religious limits in Latin America that led to the feminist theology, a popular movement among women rediscovering their roles in Christianity.

Feminist theology in Latin America originated within the context of liberal theology which placed emphasis on the need to encourage more women to participated in religious, social and political movement (Williams, 2012).

Conceptual Framework

Women limitations refer to restrictions placed on women based on tradition and customs. These acts includes condition, statements and actions carried out from the standpoint of tradition and customs that tends to marginalize and subordinate the girl child and women in general. Without doubt, women have been marginalized and subordinated in a patriarchal dominated culture of eastern Nigeria various factors are at work in limiting women's potentials in their family, immediate community and society at large.

According to Sadie (2005) at the bottom of women's limitations is the patriarchal system where decision making powers are in the hands of males. Moreover, traditional beliefs and cultural attitude regarding the role and status of women tends to limit them. She went further to state that despite women's education and entry level into the job market, the women's role is typically one of a home maker. (Tripp, 2001), argued that women themselves tend to limit their potentials and status-quo, since they are often reluctant to play active roles in public life due to cultural prohibitions on women speaking in public, extensive travel, meeting and mixing with men and so on. Thus, women who aspire for political leadership position must consider the risk of being labeled "loose or unfit" as mothers and wives, and being socially stigmatized such consideration make many women shy away from politics, and positions that put them in public eye.

Women's discrimination is also attributed to the socialization process. According to Melody Emmett (2001:67) "the life passages of women are not sacramentalised, celebrated or even acknowledge (p. 16). This is illustrative of the position ascribed to women from birth, in comparison with the male child and the subsequent positions of males in the society. Collaborating this view, Uchendu (2005) notes that traditionally, women are subordinated in marriage, in divorce and in widowhood. He stated further, that unwholesome cultural attitudes, obnoxious customary practice negatively affects women. From time immemorial males have been given preference over females in eastern part of Nigeria.

Gonyak (2008) stated that women have been limited in socio-cultural, political and other spheres of life. These limits are borne out of the sentiment attachment on the female gender, historical evidence shows that women have not been accorded that rightful position in the society and even to take part in decision making on matters that affect their welfare conditions. Collaborating this view, Ohakim (2008) notes "that women in east as well as elsewhere are faced with discrimination from culture and tradition" (p3). Socio-religious analysis of women limitations explores the ways and manners women have been subordinated and marginalized in a patriarchal dominated culture in the east. It also identify attached to culture and tradition, through the ways some of these limits have been resisted by women and the

influence such resistance may have had on the women, the group and the society at large.

Women discrimination according to Okeke (2000), Obasi (2004) refers to the many social or cultural constructed characteristics qualities, can play in the society. Ebiringa (2005) notes that women in east remain dominated by their male counterparts. She further that cases of inequality continue to be perpetuated in the different sectors of the society, in families, education, politics, language, religion and so on, and they come in different shapes to limit the women's access to public life. According to Chima (2006) women limitations refers to crude and cruel traditional practices which tends to subordinate them. He cited cases of female genital mutilation and suppression of sexual desires and instincts, lack of voice in the family, right to public custom and tradition. The women denied right to inheritance is also construed as a form of socio-cultural limits. According to Agbaeze (2006) in Egbucha (2002) the matriarchal tradition as it appears in Nkporo culture of Ohafia in Abia State, eastern part of Nigeria, if a man dies, people from his maternal home will come and share his property according to their will not according to the will of the deceased.

The females in most cultures do not own kind and as such bereaved women do not also have access to such facilities of their late husband. Dimson (2006) citing the United Nations Publication on Education in the World observed that the female illiteracy level in Africa (Nigeria inclusive) in 1990 was 61.1 percent. He went further to state that the bulk of women in rural areas have little or no education. Thus education disparity is also construed as one of the limits of women in Nigeria collaborating this view Ebiringa (2005) reported that the Nigeria demographic and health survey (NDHS) of 1990 indicated that women have limited access to education as the survey report shows 43% of males and 58% females have never been to school. She went further to state that the 1991 census figures shows that 32% of males and 56% of females are illiterates although the national average improved from 50% to 44.3% during the same period. The same NDHS indicated that 32% of males and 26% of females attended only primary schools. The corresponding figures in 1991 census were about 37.4% for males and 38.35% for females. This was a significant improvement but this did not last. At the higher education levels, the improvement disagreed. About 0.3 million males were admitted into the post primary institutions while 0.22 million were admitted into the post primary institutions while 0.22 million were admitted for the female.

All over the world, women have opposed actions or statements made from the standpoint of culture that tend to relegate them, and those acts that tended to trample on their fundamental human rights in a number of ways collaborating this view William (2012) stated that it was women's opposition to some aspects of religious teaching that were not in their favour that led to some religious transformation in

Latin America where in the early 1970s, the feminists theology became a popular movement among women rediscovering their roles in Christianity. He stated further, that feminists theology was an offshoot of erstwhile liberation theology, which emphasizes economic justice, preferential treatment for the poor and oppressed, and inspiring women to take active roles in religious, socio and political movements. In the same way, while explaining the societal discrimination against women in South-Eastern Nigerian.

Emeka (2009) reported that in some Moslem's countries in 1990s, it was the Islamic women experiences and struggles in different countries that also led to Islamic feminism, Islamic feminism is grounded in re-reading Quran, seeking the equality in all aspects of Islamic discourse. It tries to showcase the differences between sharia as path to follow in life and sharia's laws which are man-made and therefore open to change. According to Macher (2012) feminist theology which has now become so popular was developed in three stages, the first stage was the struggle for liberation based on re-discoursing women's leadership roles in the Holy Bible. The second stage was feminization of theological concepts and the discovery of the feminine face of God, and the third stage was the full reconstruction of theological paradigm. He went further to state that, these stages were not exclusive but overlapping depending on the country or group history.

The theoretical framework chosen for the study is the theory of relative deprivation. The American sociologist Robert K. Merton in 1938 was among the first (if not the first) to use the concept of relative deprivation in order to understand social deviance, using French sociologist Emile Durkheim's concept of Anomie as a starting point. In one of the first formal definitions of the relative deprivation, Runciman (1966) noted that there are four preconditions of relative deprivation (Of X by person A)

- Personal A does not have X
- Person A knows of other persons that have X
- Person A wants to have X
- Person A believes obtaining X is realistic.

Runciman distinguishes between egoistic and fraternalistic relative deprivation. The former is caused by unfavourable society position (of which A is a member) and the latter by unfavourable comparison seen in the example of a worker who believes that he should have been promoted faster that may lead to that person taking action to improve his position within the group. Those actions are however, unlikely to affect many people fraternalistic deprivation of biology (sex) and socially constructed values.

Deprivation theory means that people who are deprived of things deemed valuable in society, whether money, justice status or privilege, join social movements with the hope of redressing their grievances. Relative deprivation is the lack of resources to sustain the diet, life style, activities and amenities than an individual or group are accustomed to or that are widely encouraged or approved in the society to which they belong. It is used in sociology to describe feelings, attitudes, status, economically, socially, politically and culturally or social deprivation that are relative rather than absolute.

The Limitations of Women in Eastern Part of Nigeria

Certain areas have been identified where women face limitations in the African context., especially in the eastern part of Nigeria. Some of these are identified and explained as follows:

1. Ideology of ‘Biology-is-Destiny’

An ideology is the attitudinal and projected set of ideas at the root of the beliefs, practices and sustained traditions associated with a particular group, movement or people (Odunsi, 2010:4). It is the belief that the basic biological and psychological differences that exist between male and female sex, pointers to the assignment of social roles and the destiny of sex. It decrees that men should be productive and dominant while women should be reproductive and caring, since, it is a popular belief and saying in Nigeria especially in the eastern culture that “women are to be seen, not to be heard, and to be in the kitchen and take care of children”.

2. Separate Sphere Ideology

The separate sphere ideology which is related to the “biology-is-destiny” tend to define social roles for both sex strictly along the parameter of reproductive and domestic roles for women and productive and administrative roles for men. The men belong to the public world of law, politics, economics, education, commerce etc while the women are confined to the private world of home. Hence, a woman has no social or legal identity of her own separate or different from that of her husband. She cannot sue or be sued and was thought incapable of entering into any contract except through her husband. It is the separate sphere ideology that is behind the belief that women have no leadership qualities and cannot be entrusted with social responsibility or public treasures.

3. The Belief that Women are Associated with Evil

Women have been construed as a source of evil and temptation and being worrisome because of the fact that this belief has been woven into history, myths, legends etc of most cultures in the east for instance, the creation myths of most cultures reflect the negative roles played by women in the fall of humanity. Even the Judeo-Christian story of creation (Genesis Chapter 3) associated evil things in

the society to women. Over the years, this belief has informed traditional saying and a practice which in no small measure, has acted as psycho-social limits to women in the east.

4. Education

In the east, the education of women and the girl-child was construed as the white man's culture. It was believed in the time past, that, educating the girl-child was a waste of resources because she would eventually end up in another man's house in marriage who will then reap the proceeds. As a result, women and the girl-child were not given equal opportunities.

5. Widowhood Practice

In traditional Igbo culture, widowhood practice was aimed at checking the mysterious circumstances surrounding the death of spouses. But the rituals and the associated practices of maltreating the women by their late husband's relatives such as shaving their hair, sleeping on the mat or bare floor for a period up to one year, and making them perform certain obnoxious traditional rites that tramples on their basic human rights tend to traumatize the women and predispose them to health hazards. In large measures, widowhood practice is one of the limitations women face in the east.

6. Religious Teachings

Religion is a social institution involving beliefs and practices based on a conception of the sacred (Marconis, 2002:366). Religious teaching has been identified as one of the limits of women in the eastern part of Nigeria. According to Anunudu and Ononuju (2011:17), religion is one of the limits of women through its teaching and beliefs that the first named man Adam was the head of the women. According to Marcionis, virtually all the world's religion are patriarchal, Christianity, Islam, Judaism etc through their sacred text gives man social dominance over woman. And because of this, in many ways, women have been subordinated in public sphere of life.

7. Culture

Culture is a total way of life of a people whose components are language, signs, symbols, mores, folkways, value, etc, the social life of Igbo people tends to limit the average woman. The Igbo myths, songs, legends and folklore do not only help to explain the cultural values and norms but they help to clarify the ethics of Igbo social institutions such as the family system, societies and peace keeping. It is the conduct in the eastern part of Nigeria's social life to regulate the conduct and activities of members using taboos to administer political, religious, economic and social relations. The taboos are divine sanctions that tend to regulate inter-group, family ties and social cohesion divination and liberation also play important roles in the social life of the people.

8. Religious Practice Limits Woman

Through religious practices basic beliefs, norms and values are expressed in social relations in order to make its tenet reflect on peoples conduct and that of institutions in the society. Worship, liturgy, incantations, language, signs and symbols, emblems functionaries and sacrifices. All combine to give society a sense of direction, purpose and meaning.

9. Politics and Political Roles

In Africa, the patriarchal tradition professes politics and political roles as the domain of the men. According to Odunsi (2010) it often professes that power belongs to the men, while women are to obey she argues using the Igbo proverbs which states that “when an atrocity is tolerated for a whole year, it becomes a tradition”. Thus, the conditions monopoly of power by the male folk tends to limit women taking active parts in politics and playing laudable leadership roles in public life. To the extent that, many women have endorsed this tradition in such a manner that “when it comes to the question of power, they prefer to take cover and retreat into their hypnotized cocoons”. That, the customs and tradition of the Igbo people proclaims that politics and political roles are exclusively for the men tend to relegate women to domestic roles, hence it is not also surprising that many women shy away from politics and leadership position in public life.

10. Polygamy

Certain beliefs and practices against womanhood in marriage in the east tend to encourage polygamy at the expense of a woman. For instance, the inability of couples to give birth to children in marriage results in the women being (sometimes) wrongly accused as the cause of couples childlessness. This encourages polygamy because the husband of such woman is very likely to marry a second wife. In the same way, in a marriage that do not have male children the husband of such a woman also is free to marry another woman. In these examples, “it shows that the values, respect and reputation a woman gets in marriage is predicated on her being a mother and not love or companionship as such”. This practice, therefore encourages polygamy, promotes patriarchy and the pervasion of true spousal love

11. The Bride Price Syndrome

The bride price as a cultural price is an intending husband requirement before he can be given his intended wife. Too often, the monetary, materials and ceremonial attachments to this practice any families in the east tends to be costly and demanding to the man and as such, when the man have succeeded in meeting the said requirement admits pain “the man would feel, and see himself not just as the husband but as the “owner” of the wife who he has bought at so great a price the bride price”. In this sense, when the bride price is too high (as often the case) the man sometimes see that woman as their own property and therefore can

maltreat them whenever necessary. So, when it is too high it encourages delayed marriages, single parents, co-habitation and the like.

Summary and Conclusion

Various factors are at work in limiting women's potentials in public life. Kiamba (2008) cited by Sadie (2005) to have advanced argument that at the bottom of women limits is the patriarchal system where decision making powers are in the hands of males. In the African context, the traditional beliefs and cultural attitudes regarding the role and status of women in society are still prevalent and many women are part of the system, finding it difficult to dislocate from this culture and tradition lest they be ostracized. Despite women's education and entry into the job market, the woman's role is typically one of home maker. The man, on the other hand, is the breadwinner, head of household and has a right to public life. Some women who have been able to transcend cultural limits and rise to the position of power and influences is meant to juggle cultural expectations with their leadership roles.

Again, the women themselves are often reluctant to run for public positions due to cultural prohibitions of women speaking in public places. Women who want to campaign for electoral offices have to consider the risk of being labeled "lose or unfit" as mothers and wives.

Conclusion, apart from cultural and religious barriers there are cases of gender positioning, lack of unity among the women themselves, institutional culture and micro politics-implicitly or explicitly.

Recommendations

Based on this paper, the following recommendations are put forward to help strengthen woman's movement against all forms of subordination and marginalization in the eastern part of Nigeria.

1. Education as an instrument of change should be used to help create the necessary gender sensitization on both male and female custodians of Igbo traditional culture to transform their beliefs, attitudes and perceptions. This can be done through awareness raising programs using the local dialect (language) to stress the consequences of women subordination and the need for change.
2. To encourage more women to participate in the decision making process on issues concerning them in their private and public life.
3. To establish, implement and sustain women empowerment programs in different communities to help improve on women's productive capacities and not just as home maker and child bearers.

4. The religious organizations should continue to act as agents of change by way of imparting more positively on the people, institution and social tradition of people of Igboland. In this sense, both traditional and Judeo-Christian values should be made to complement one another in their collective effort to bring about the desire change.
5. Women's movement should mobilize support groups at both the local, national and international level in a sustained manner so that collectively they can help bring about the change being advocated or to promote issues relating to women's living standards employment, education, economic and social-political progress as well as the promotion of the universal respect for human rights and gender equality.
6. Socio-cultural and religious practices are not resilient, but dynamic for this reason, it is recommended that women (both in rural and urban) in the eastern part of Nigeria needs to raise their self-consciousness to be able to change certain traditional practices, belief and values that are not only discriminatory, oppressive and dehumanizing.

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