

ROLE OF ADULT EDUCATION IN ELIMINATING HARMFUL TRADITIONAL PRACTICES AGAINST WOMEN: A STUDY OF FGM, WIDOWHOOD PRACTICES AND EARLY GIRL CHILD MARRIAGE

Edith Uche Ugwu,

*Department of Education Foundations & Administration,
Federal College of Education,
Eha-Amufu,
Enugu State.*

Abstract

Harmful traditional practices are probably the worst kind of threat to the rights of both young girls and women. Prominent among these harmful practices are female genital mutilation (FGM), Harmful widowhood practices, early marriage for the girl child among others. Community activists, women rights campaigners, church/missionaries and indeed, the state have in recent times, increasingly campaigned against these harmful traditional practices recommending, mainly, the prohibition and obliteration of the practices. These campaigns though widespread and on-going have not really achieved an unqualified success. This study tried to explain some of the major harmful traditional practices in Nigeria and their implications; why the campaigns have not succeeded in totally eradicating them. Anchored on the cultural norm theory, this study suggested how adult education, especially in the vast rural areas of this country, could be effectively used in subduing these harmful practices in the country. The study also aimed at encouraging the people to jettison any traditional practices that encroaches on the rights of the people irrespective of their race or gender.

People of all nations no matter their race or religion have beliefs and practices which mark them out as a group or even as a nation. It is a fact that in every society, there is one or more traditional practices that may though impinge on the rights of the people especially, the rights of the women but are nonetheless, not only practiced extensively but also given society-wide prominence. Though not all the traditional practices are harmful, a good number of them are and often leave life-long telling effects on their victims. In reality, most of the harmful traditional practices are based on deeply-encrusted superstition and magic. Some of these practices have positive effects while

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some are harmful and merely based on superstitious beliefs. This is because majority (if not all) the adherents and patrons of such harmful practices are uneducated. This also explains why most of them are found in the rural areas of the country where the level of illiteracy is worrisome.

In Nigerian, men are not just believed to be superior to women but are treated as such. The women are regarded as the weaker sex. The society is structured in such a way that women are meant as objects of man's satisfaction and pleasure. The men dominate all the socio-economic and political machineries. Women are deprived of all tools of empowerment and what is grudgingly offered are those things that will enhance their capacity to maximize the satisfaction and pleasure of the men. In most communities, women are brought up with strictly to ensure the satisfaction of the future husbands. Hence, her whole life: vision, aspirations, ambitions and others are centred on the husband. Anything that could threaten the position of the man or his happiness from the side of the wife is termed traditionally as a taboo and is promptly outlawed invoking tradition. It is clear from the fore-going that traditional practices are fundamentally biased against women and such practices are insensitivity to the plight of the girls and women.

This paper therefore, examined these harmful traditional practices against using the three most prominent of these practices namely: Female genital mutilation, Harmful widowhood practices and early marriage for the girl child as linchpins. The paper will thoroughly reviewed these practices, while they are still practiced despite being scientifically and culturally known to be harmful the women, the roles adult education can play in eliminating these harmful practices and make recommendations.

Theoretical Framework

This study finds expression in the Cultural Norm theory. According to Okenwa (2001) the theory "assumes that education through the various media can create new norms, modify existing norms and re-enforce existing norms in a society." He explained how this theory can be used to create a new attitudinal change amongst parents towards rejecting early marriage. He further said that the media can create and influence people through their educational functions to accept and imbibe the idea of discouraging societal ills including harmful traditional practices like girl child marriage in the society.

The theory also postulates that special education packages can reach a diverse audience through both oral and some traditional media channels especially in the remote areas of the Nigeria and touch people's lives in positive ways. He expatiated more that before the audience can respond positively to a newly created norm, reject harmful traditional practices. This can be done the process of selective exposure, selective attention, perception and finally selective retention. In this respect the oral and

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traditional channels of communication play a very important by using the local language to explain the evils of such harmful practices. Okenwa argues that when the message gets to the target audience concerning the newly-created idea, they will definitely act in line with the programme expectation. He notes that if the message touches the lives of the audience positively, they would embrace the campaign wholeheartedly for a positive social change.

The relevance of this theory to this study is to that properly packaged education programme on harmful traditional practices delivered through the appropriate media channels especially in the local language can have the desired effects on parents and other key players in the obnoxious traditional practices. Be it the illiterate parents in northern states, the greedy and selfish men in Southeastern states or the poverty-stricken in the south-south Nigeria, such messages perfectly delivered and understood will all the difference. It will definitely make them to have a rethink on these harmful practices and influence them to not only to accept and imbibe the idea but to become campaigners or fighters against the harmful practices.

Female Genital Mutilation

One traditional practice that is not only harmful but tailored towards circumscribing a woman's enjoyment of sex is what is popularly known as female genital mutilation, (FGM). The Technical Committee of the World Health organization (WHO) defined FGM as "a harmful traditional practice consisting of all procedures which involves the partial or total removal of the external female genitalia or injury to the female genital organs whether for cultural or any other non-therapeutic reasons" (WHO, 1998). FGM is still prevalent and active as a traditional practice among the people of different ethnic groups in Nigeria especially among the rural dwellers despite scientific proofs that it harmful to a woman's sex life could harm her fecundity.

The process entails a partial or total cutting away of the genitalia without the use of anesthetics. Unfortunately, traditional healers and elderly women who carryout the disgusting operation do not know nor understand the implications of the act they perform with unsterilized sharp tools. As if it is not bad enough that the procedure is often carried out in an unhealthy environment, with crude instruments such as knives, razor blades without anesthetics, at best only herbal medication is applied to check bleeding and lessen pain. The ritual is performed as a preparation for young girls for womanhood, marriage and child bearing. Many supporters of this obnoxious practice believe rather erroneously that non-removal of the clitoris prevents a woman from giving birth all, having stillborn children and predisposes her unbridled sexual escapades since her cannot control her libido because of the action of the clitoris. The reasons, particularly the last one is self-serving and meant for the benefit of men as can be

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gleaned from some local proverbs that support and underscore these mythical postulations. These are:

1. The clitoris is a cap of prostitution which the vagina wears from heaven.
2. If the clitoris is not clipped, is going to be asking great sacrifices from the penis when it grows
3. The fortune gathered by the penis is taken up by the vagina.

So to tame the clitoris from making this outrageous performances and demands, the illiterate parents careful excise it from the female genital organ before it grows wild and out of control. With that part of her genital gone, the woman can now securely be her husband's exclusive possession and her chances of taking to prostitution or engaging in extra-marital relationships have been permanently taken care of.

But in doing these, they give little attention to the plight of the young girl whose life they are threatening and unwittingly being subjected to a life of sheer misery. For instance, these girls undergo traumatic and excruciating pains during the process of removing their external genitalia. During the mutilation, some important parts of their genitals are harmed and if proper care was not taken, they could bleed to death and or be permanently disfigured. Apart from contracting the dreaded VVF, this practice contributes immensely to the number of HIV victims as the instrument used in the cutting are not sterilized and are most times, used on another person. Later in life, these circumcised girls are denied sexual enjoyment and often experience prolonged labour. The mutilation leaves the girls with long-time mental and psychological effects or trauma. Those who undergo circumcision at three years and above, experience nightmares and hallucinate and live a life of timidity after the incident. Some of the girls who have fore knowledge of it, run away from home before the day of the circumcision; and some have got missing through that means.

Another dreadful practice especially among the Urhobos and Itsekiris of the Niger delta region of Nigeria is the act circumcising a girl during pregnancy mainly during her first pregnancy. Pregnancy as we know, goes with much discomforts especially when it was the first experience. One can then imagine the kind problem such obnoxious and primitive practice will pose to the young girl. The fear and trauma associated with the prospect of have her genitalia mutilated with crude, unsterilized instrument and without recourse to anesthetics often lead the expectant mother to some health complications. Paradoxically, it was girl's mother who kept encouraging her to take the risk in her own interest. These mothers often tell their girl children that they also did it in their own time and were the better for it.

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Harmful Widowhood Practices

Another disheartening traditional practice against women that is not just harmful but inhuman is the ill-treatments meted out to women after their husbands' demise. When a man dies, his wife(s) became widow(s). She is expected by tradition and culture to observe some rites of passage for her departed husband. Right from the time of her husband's death, the widow suffers all sorts of cruelties, deprivation, vendettas and innumerable forms social injustice. Some of the ordeals she is forced to pass through are horrible and horrifying especially when the man died under very suspicious circumstances. The ordeal is the same in both monogamous and polygamous families as well as in Islamic families.

To begin with, in many communities in Nigeria, a man's wealth is measured by the number of his wives. But after the death of the man, the woman or women are subjected to several terrible and excruciating traditional funeral rites (known as widowhood rites) some punitive, some just mere tradition. This period of mourning normally takes two or more months depending on the community and their culture. The woman is made to walk barefoot, cut her hair with razor, and wear dark or white cloth and many more. In some communities, the widow is punitively made to pour ashes on herself, drink a cup water used in bathing her late husband and sometimes, even made to sleep with the husband's corpse if she suspected to have a hand in her husband's death. Onah (1980:35) argued that, "the series of restrictions imposed on the widow makes such traditional laws discriminatory and exclusively oppressive against women.

As part of the tradition, the eldest man in the family inherits the woman whether she likes or hates the man otherwise; she is evicted from the husband's house with her children and her property confiscated. It does not matter if the man was already married, can actually feed the woman or not, healthy or not. It suffices that the tradition decrees that he should inherit and that is the end it. She cannot say no without risking heavy unpleasant consequences.

Early Marriage

The third class of inhumane traditional practice against women is early marriage for the girl child. Though this practice more prevalent and active in northern parts of Nigeria, it is also found in some parts of the Southeast, Southwest and South-South Nigeria. Girl child marriages are arranged by parents of both the bride and bridegroom long before the girl-child understands the meaning of marriage. Before she knows her body system and the kind of man she would want to marry, she has been given away to marriage; sometimes to a person old enough to be her father.

In the northern states, parents betroth the girls to Mallams and Alhajis in order to cultivate friendship and cement the bond between the families. It is simply stating the

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obvious to say that pedophile is alive and thriving in the northern parts of the country. The case of former Zamfara state Governor, Abubakar Yerima, who married a thirteen-year-old Egyptian girl not long ago is good case in point. Despite all the protests by women's rights groups against the marriage, Alhaji Yerima remained undaunted and contracted the marriage.

This practice of marrying young girls (between the age of 9 and 14) that have hardly started menstruating is as abhorrent as it is dangerous to the girl's reproductive health. There is no doubt that this manifestly unhealthy practice has maximally increased the cases of dreadful disease called Vesico Vaginal Fistula (VVF).

Most of these girls are made to pass through sickening experience as baby-mothers. They are subjected to a life of near slavery and imprisonment in their own (old men) homes. When they are forced into these early marriages, they are also forced into premature sexual intercourse with their husbands even before experiencing menstruation. Most of these traumatized girls run away from the men's houses as emotional and psychological wrecks and sometimes either commit suicide or do other nasty things. Apart from exposing the girl child to serious reproductive health problems, early marriage denies her education, job opportunities and other avenues of self-improvement and empowerment.

Why Harmful Traditional Practices?

Harmful traditional practices like the FGM, harmful widowhood practices and early marriage for the girl child are prevalent in varying degrees in every region in Nigeria. Suggestions as to what may be actually causes of this problem have thrown different answers. However, four of these have been found as being the strongest reasons by it has been difficult to eradicate these harmful practices. These are culture, illiteracy, poverty and religion.

Culture

Collins Dictionary of Sociology says that culture are human creations and use of symbols... culture may be taken as constituting the way of life of an entire society and this will include codes of manners, dress, language, traditions, rituals norms of behaviour and systems of belief. In layman's language, culture is simply the totality of a people's way of life. Culture tell a person who he is, what to do, who to associate with and how; how children are brought up; dictates what we eat; what we wear; how we talk; who and when to marry among others.

As a result of the all-encompassing roles of culture in a people's life, it is not too difficult to understand why people find it difficult to let go of that aspects of their culture that is in disharmony with modern civilization. Matters are made worse by

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widely-held belief that Europe and America are out to wipe local cultures and replace them with theirs. This process of acculturation has been aided and abetted with coming of globalization which seriously wiping away people's cultural heritage with amazing speed. Hence, many people in different societies are holding tenaciously to their cultural heritage even those are in reality, harmful and distasteful.

While people should guard culture jealously, this should not be done at the expense of people's rights and liberty. In fact, any culture that is found not to be promoting human rights, freedom and pursuit of happiness should be discarded. The culture that relegates the women to the status of second class citizens even in their own countries is done away with.

Illiteracy

Lack of education can be an incredible problem in any society. Plato in his *Laws* cited in Okolo (1993:22) submitted correctly that it is education that determines whether man becomes the tamest or the wildest animal on earth. According to him, "if man lacks education, he is the most savage of beasts."

The level of illiteracy in the country is still disturbingly high especially in the rural areas where these harmful traditional practices are still commonplace. In the rural areas, access to and acquisition of education is still low, most parents are stark illiterates who find it difficult to accept modern ways. There little wonder then why these parents often cling to how things were done in the past than embrace the wonders of modernity. Hence, these low literate people still in indulge in these harmful practices despite international and local outcry against them.

Without doubt, ignorance is heavily at work in Nigeria. The inability of the many uneducated persons to come to grips with the realities of the day and therefore overcome their prejudices becomes a serious problem. In the words of Dewey (1922), the task of education is emancipation and enlargement of experience. Thus, it frees a man from the prejudices and irrational assumptions of everyday life and enlarges his experience. Therefore, absence of education is at the core of the continuing prevalence of harmful traditional practices.

Religion

Religion is responsible to some extent, in the continued lingering of harmful traditional practices against women. The three main religions in Nigerian: Christianity, Islam and African traditional religions have somehow encouraged the traditional practices that are detrimental to women. There are some core tenets of these religions that are not friendly to women's rights.

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Christianity, for instance, does accord equal opportunity to men and women. Religion makes it unequivocal that women are inferior to men. By teaching that the woman was created from a man's rib is a tacit agreement that the man is superior to the woman. In some Christian denominations, women cannot aspire to certain positions in the church. It also teaches docility to women even when her husband chooses to be inexplicably irresponsible. While Christian men could indulge themselves in some anti-Christian activities like adultery without much reprimand from the leaders of the church, the women dare not even dream of it.

Islam fares even worse. A male Muslim is permitted to marry not more than four wives at a time. This means that he can divorce his earlier and older wives in order to marry younger ones as far they do not exceed four at any given time. What is more, the oldest one may be the most respected; the newest is the most favoured. Definitely, there is no way a man could treat all his wives equally. These women go fighting for the man's love and favour and as a result of that poison one another. Without proper care and maintenance, the women who often bear children under these harsh conditions increase the high rate of maternal mortality in Nigeria.

Besides, Muslim men go about indulging in all kinds of extra-marital activities while their wives are locked away in their rooms and in total isolation of all the activities outside her bedroom in name of religion. The women in purdah can only come at night accompanied by a young child. In any few occasions she ventures out in the daytime, she must wear a veil that completely covers her face.

Poverty

Poverty is one of the biggest causes of harmful traditional practices especially early marriage for the girl child. It is on record that some parents give out their very young girls out for marriage simply because they need the bride price and the in-law's support for the upkeep of his family. In the northern parts of the county, fathers give away their teenage daughters away to marriage to wealthy men old enough to be their father because they want curry the rich man's favours and cement a bond of friendship between him and the rich man's family. In the eastern parts of the country cases where girls have been used as mortgage or collateral to loans or used as repayment for debts are rampant. In a case like this, the girl child has no say on the choice of her husband and indeed has even less say in her home because of the circumstances of her marriage.

As a result of the fact that most girls are denied sources of financial empowerment they acquiesce to all the inhuman treatments they receive from the men. Right from her father's house, the girl hardly receives enough opportunity of progressing or advancing her future to a reasonable level. The girl child is denied education so that the preferred male children could go to school. In some ridiculous

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situations, parents tacitly encourage their daughter to go into prostitution in order to earn money that will be used to train her brothers and for the family's upkeep.

The Role of Education and Adult Education

Education is a potent tool against harmful traditional practices against women. By education we mean inculcating fresh knowledge into everybody in the society. Ehiemetolor cited in Okecha, (2008, p.21) noted that education is the acquisition of knowledge, the aggregate of all processes through which a person develops ability, skills, attitudes and other forms of behaviour with positive value in the society in which he lives. Okecha (2008:21) adds that:

Education is a life-long process, which frees a man from ignorance and, to some extent, superstition. It enhances the quality of an individual and enables him to build up his personality in such a way that he is able to play an effective role in the development of the society in which he belongs.

This implies bringing fresh and ideas and issues to the knowledge of the people. It is the kind of education that emancipates the human mind from error, prejudices, false opinions and values. Scholars agree that sound and proper is a panacea for building a progressive and egalitarian society where justice, fair play and respect for human rights reign. The philosophy of the policy is based on the development of the individual into a sound and effective citizen; the full integration of the individual into the community; and provision of equal access to educational opportunities for all citizens of the country at primary, secondary and tertiary levels both inside and outside the formal school system (Okecha, 2008).

Conclusion

In the Nigerian Labour or workforce, the number of women is low. But the few that are engaged have acquitted themselves creditably. The exploits of Dora Akunyili, Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, Ndii Okereke, Oby Ezekwesili, Riqqufiat Abubakar to mention a few speak for themselves. The women are our mothers, wives, sisters and Aunts. We gain nothing by keeping them in perpetual bondage and unhappiness. We should preserve and encourage our women for they are the primary tool of procreation and if anything, the only way of ensuring continuity of the human race. If we destroy our women we have destroyed ourselves and the entire humanity.

Recommendations

To be effective in eradicating harmful traditional practices against woman, everybody: the fathers, mothers, girl child, young men and women should be made to benefit from it through the process of well organized and executed adult education programme. The education envisaged here is meant specifically for adults who lost the

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opportunity of obtaining education as children. These are the people who are directly involved in the issue these harmful practices. The curriculum should include human rights issues, especially the UN-endorsed Convention on Elimination of all Forms of Discriminations Against Women, CEDAW; reproductive health, freedom and happiness.

The Adult educators should use relevant traditional modes of communication and the mass media and packaged in local languages. The primary target of this education campaign should be the vast rural areas of the country where most of the illiterate people live. Traditional rulers and such other opinion leaders should be used to mobilize the rural people to attend such adult classes and ensured that the right ideas were inculcated in them. Government at all levels should legislate against these harmful practices. All the stake-holders including traditional rulers should actively discourage the harmful traditional practices against women in their domains. Also women empowerment groups and non-governmental organizations should be at the vanguard of the education campaign effort. In addition, individual state governments should go beyond mere legislation against these harmful traditional practices and ensure strict compliance to the law and that offenders are punished to serve as deterrent to others. They should also make generous financial allowances for the programme to ensure its success. Religious leaders both Christian and Islamic should be trained and made to educate their congregation on women and girls' rights as their moral voice can persuade local communities that the practices not only harm but in most cases, are against Christian and Islamic laws.

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