

THE FUTURE OF THE FAMILY IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The paper looks at the family as group of people recognized in almost all human societies, which consist of husband, wife and children, whether these are co-resident or not. It also examines the two types of family (nuclear and extended). The paper further discusses some of the family-related policies such as age-limit, marriage, inheritance, family size, education policies, child-labour, land - policies etc. In addition, it examines the functions of the family such as reproduction/procreations, socialization and economic. It further looks at the state of the family in Nigeria. Some of them are poverty, infidelity, alcoholism, barrenness, pressure at workplace, financial problem, loss of job; impact of domestic violence etc. The paper finally suggests some measures for harmonious and stable family living in Nigeria society.

Introduction

Throughout human history, one common phenomenon among the human race is the membership of every individual to one group or the other that is meaningful to him. One such group is the family, which is the basic unit of social life. It forms the link between the individual and the society (Otti, 1985). The family is the most enduring and permanent of all groups.

National Open University (1984) defined family as a group defined by a sex relationship sufficiently precise and enduring to provide for the procreation and up-bringing of children. The concept of family always embodied procreation. What indeed gives a family its character are children, for only in such a family can that intimate personal relationship be established by which the family can perform its function of rearing, protecting and educating the children, transmitting to them the social values it has inherited and creating a special bond between all the members. It is children that cement the union of a man and a woman together and makes it an intimate and lasting one (Otite and Ogionwo, 1979). A married couple in our society can tolerate each other in spite of all their short-comings if their union is blessed with children. But the union is always very unhappy, unbearable and at times short-lived one if it is childless.

The protective function of the family has also declined. The State, Armed Force, and Welfare Departments are now assigned such functions. This is not only because of the importance of protecting the quality of life of the population, but also in the context of a Nation State, national security is crucial for the survival and maintenance of the country. Urbanization brings people of diverse ethnic background, values, and culture together. The moral codes of conduct existing in a homogeneous society breaks down in an urban setting. Consequently, there are problems of sexual promiscuity, delinquency, and violence, among others. Nigeria is contending with many socio-cultural and

economic factors that constitute a serious threat to family life and, by implication, national stability and development.

The paper therefore, discusses the effects of change in family living and its impart on the larger society; and proffers some measures for improving family living and thereby achieving social stability.

The Meaning of Family

The family is the basic social unit. It is a social group consisting of two or more people related by blood, marriage and adoption who live together for an extended period, share economic resources and care for the young (Marcionis, 1987). In Nigerian context, the family consists of a man and his wife of wives, their children and any other kin. Family is the basic unit of social life, which provides for the bearing and rearing of children. It refers to those members of the households who are related, to a specific degree, through blood, adoption or marriage.

There are basically two main types of family system according to NERDC (1988), namely:-

- a. Nuclear family, and
- b. Extended family.

a. Nuclear Family: This is also called the elementary or simple family, since it forms the basic or the building block of all larger family systems. The nuclear family consists of a husband, his wife and their children living together in the same household. There are occasional exceptions where a mother and her children live together, while the father resides somewhere else, or vice-versa. Children of a nuclear family are expected to move out of their parents' home to establish their own residence on attaining adulthood or on getting married. The typical nuclear form of family found more in the European countries.

b. Extended Family: As the term indicates, in this type of set-up, the nuclear family incorporated into the household on a permanent basis, other persons who are usually blood relations, e.g. cousins, brothers, grandparents, grandchildren, etc. This is commonly practiced in Nigeria as well as in other African countries. However, there is increasing emphasis on nuclear family system even though that extended family system is still in vogue. This is largely as a consequence of socio-economic pressure, change in production system and the impact of modernization.

Functions of the Family

The family performs major social functions without which a society could not be maintained. These special tasks according to Otti (1985) are the following:-

1. *Reproduction/Procreation:* For any society to survive, it must replace those who die with new ones. It is within the family that enduring and deep emotional satisfaction is achieved. Therefore, society grants it legal permission for sexual expression; but mainly for the purpose of *procreation*. No other group in society is accorded this function. *Pre-marital* and *extra-marital* relationships do exist but most communities disapproved such behaviour.

2. *Socialization:* This is one of the crucial functions of the family. It is not enough to reproduce children. Parents are expected to rear them up properly and inculcate in them the right values of society. By *Socialization* is meant that the family is expected:

- a. to provide love, warmth and emotional security to its children. This will equip the child to develop positive feelings and loving other people.
- b. to transmit to the child the society's *heritage* and *culture*. i.e. language, behaviour patterns, values, standards of morality and expectations, gender roles among others.
- c. to give the offspring social identity and a sense of belonging to a particular group-Ibo, Tiv, Hausa, Yoruba etc. or religion affiliation.
- d. to ascribe social class status. This does not mean that the child cannot move up or down the social ladder. Through education or other individual achievement, he/she can improve on the social status ascribed to him/her.
- e. to provide physical security, protection, material opportunities for emotional, intellectual, spiritual and social development of the child. In short, the family has the primary and basic responsibility to transform an infant into a social being, capable of all participation in society as a responsible citizen. The other agencies that assist the family in the process of socialization are the school, peer group, religious organization etc.

3. *Economic Function:* The family co-operates as an economic unit. Both husband and wife complement each other's economic endeavour. In some instances, the children are also involved in the economic output of the family. For the family to effectively and adequately perform this crucial task, it seems imperative that it has to properly plan the size, i.e. the number of children according to its social and economic circumstances. In so doing, parents would be able to give their children the very best which they are capable.

Otherwise, as indicated earlier, increasing the quality of what is available for each child's socialization. This could result in:-

- expectation of frustration in the family.
- poor child care

- possibility of delinquency
- death problems
- family instability
- emotional and material deprivation, etc.
- overcrowding.

The ramification of these would affect the society. For, as one writer points out: “a community is sound only when the families are sound, and families are sound only when the individuals are sound. This is so because a community is made up of families and families are made up of individuals”.

The Family – Related Policies

Government has provided some policies which directly or indirectly protect the well-being of the family. Some of these policies according to FRN (1988) are the following:-

1. **Age-Limit:** The age-limit that a child can start school has been put at six years, while voting and driving is 18 years. These are for the security of the children, and also to enable them mature both physically and emotionally.
2. **Marriage:** In Nigeria, there are three system of marriage under the law – Church licensed Islamic law and customary law. The human rights law provided any citizens to choose freely. All these systems protect the offspring of such marriage as legitimate. The National Population Policy has taken a step further by suggesting 18 and 21 years as the least age of marriage for girls and boys respectively. This is an attempt to discourage marriage to underage children, which has a terrible health and social effects on the new family.
3. **Inheritance:** In Nigeria, every child, has the right to the inheritance of parent’s property. The “will” is sometimes provided by some educated or enlightened people to be administered after their death. The family at least is sure of means of subsistence after the demise of any parent.
4. **Family Size:** The emphasis on Nigeria family size has always been on four children. The National Population Policy has also advised families to have only four live births. However, no incentives have been placed on this to further enhance its practice because it is said to be voluntary.
5. **Education Policies:** Free tuition at all levels has always been provided for children, because the government feels that every child has the right to education. This boomeranged in 1976 which the Universal Primary Education (UPE) Scheme started, many children were withdrawn from the farms to school. Universal Basic Education (UBE) is another scheme working towards the achievement of “Education for All” by the year 2020. 4

6. **Child Labour:** This is a law which forbids under-aged child employment. This is basically to protect the right of the child.
7. **Land Policies:** The land policies give the right to own and collect rents on land. Family land acquired by government or any company is highly compensated to enable the family to survive.

The State of Family in Nigeria

Nigeria, like many other African societies, is contending with many socio-cultural and economic factors that constitute a serious threat to family life and, by implication, national stability and development. Some of these factors are:-

1. **Poverty:** Poverty has been defined as the inability to attain a minimal standard of living (World Bank, 1995). Johnson (2002) reported that about 70 million Nigerians are living below poverty level. The growing incidence of poverty in the country makes it difficult for many families to satisfy their basic needs on daily basis. Many parents, as a result of poverty cannot fulfill their social and economic obligations to their children and other dependants. Such situation causes stress, frustration, anguish and conflict in many families. Some men are said to have abandoned their families as a result of their inability to fend for them (Osunde, 2003).
2. **Infidelity:** Married couples are expected to love and be faithful to one another, and to refrain from engaging in acts of infidelity. Arebi (2003) described infidelity as one of the most painful injuries one can inflict on a trusting partner. It is the root cause of the collapse of many families not only in contemporary Nigeria society, but in many other societies worldwide. Besides, infidelity increases the possibility of contracting sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV or being involved in unwanted pregnancy outside wedlock.
3. **Barrenness:** Barrenness or inability to achieve conception and give birth to a child is a major factor which often militates against harmonious family living (Njoku, 2004). Such a condition often leads to stress and quarrels among couples, and ultimately divorce.
4. **Pressure at Workplace:** The pressure at work place may be so daunting that a worker may devote more time and energy to his or her job to the detriment of his family responsibilities. For instance a husband may be dubbed a 'deadwood' by his wife if pressure at the workplace constantly overwhelms him and saps his energy. Similarly, a housewife may be accused of being frigid if her daily work constantly overwhelms her and saps her energy and desires for love relationship with her spouse. This is one of the factors that contribute to serious problem in the family.

5. ***Financial Problem:*** Financial problem is one of the major factors that lead to family crises. Nnamani (2003) observed that head of a family who fails to provide for the family faces not just the risk of losing self esteem but the threat of family dislocation, disorientation. Moreover, financial problem could compel some husbands to abandon their families and consequently expose them to greater danger, social insecurity and misery (Osunde, 2003).
6. ***Nagging or Cantankerous Attitude:*** The attitude of nagging or being cantankerous is one of the factors which often results in the break-down of relationship among couples in the family. Most spouses do not like partners that have penchant for nagging. Many cases of domestic violence are traceable to nagging or cantankerous attitude of some partners in marriage.
7. ***Interference in Family Affairs by Outsiders:*** In most Nigerian ethnic groups, the primordial ties embodied in network of social relationship associated with extended family system still prevail. In such situation in-laws, for instance, play significant roles in the life of the families of their sons and daughters. However, the attempt to dictate for the couple or either of the partners by in-law(s) or any other relative may have adverse effect on the life of the family. For example, some mother-in-laws are known to have been at daggers-down with their daughter-in-laws. Such situation may lead to the collapse of the family, if not resisted by the couple.
8. ***Impact of Domestic Violence:*** Domestic violence is a major factor leading to the collapse of many families in contemporary Nigerian society. Some couples are known to engage in fighting which, in most cases, results in wife battering, and traumatic experience to the children. Ovibiagele (2001) observed that there are many women who are constantly battered by their husbands, but who cannot leave because they are financially dependent on their husbands, and they have no one to turn to for help. She stated that the passage of the bill on domestic violence is laudable, but insisted that what will actually reduce violence in homes is an orchestrated campaign at different places denouncing such a dehumanizing destructive practice.
9. ***Effect of Children's Delinquency:*** The increasing break-down of socio-moral values and the consequent rise in the incidences of children's delinquency has resulted in social disorganization of many families. In such circumstance, parents often resort to accusations and recriminations against one another. Moreover, serious acts of delinquency committed by children may erode the stability and harmony on their families. Obi (1999) stated that the seed of juvenile delinquency is planted at home, watered at school and harvested in the society. He advised that in order to stem the

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surging tide of juvenile delinquency, the moral upbringing of the young ones must be taken seriously.

10. **Denial of Sex:** Sex is one of the greatest pleasures of marriage. Onuh (2003) described sex as the most beautiful gift from God. She stated that it is meant to be enjoyed and not to be endured. She noted that sex is at the root of many family crises and as such, therefore couples need to be adequately equipped to tackle such problems. Couples should take care of themselves sexually. This will engender harmony and minimize conflict in family living.

Other factors that could cause serious problem in many families are alcoholism, impact of the growing number of women in the labour force, loss of job, loss of affection and impact of modernization.

Conclusion

We have examined the family in various aspects. A married couple in our society can tolerate each other in spite of all their short-comings if their union is blessed with children. We considered the functions of the family which we identified as sexual, reproductive, economic and education. Co-operation and inter-dependence among individuals in the family are needed for the progress of the family. This is because no member of the family can survive without the service of others. In a family where there is mutual understanding, these roles and rights are not regimented. A united family is like a bundle of stick, which is not easy for one to break. As long as the family is united, their enemies cannot easily penetrate them. The importance of unity, co-operation and understanding in a family cannot be over emphasized in this period of hash economic situation.

Recommendations

The future of family in Nigeria is very bright and promising. However, the following measures are hereby recommended for sustaining harmonious and stable family living in Nigerian society.

1. There is the need to alleviate poverty among many families which, no doubt, constitute the poor in their society. This is through comprehensive strategy involving the provision of basic education, healthcare, employment opportunities, affordable food etc.
2. There is the need to protect the rights and privileges of the citizens.
3. There is also the need to provide employment opportunities for the youths as a way of improving the income and welfare of many families.
4. Parents should ensure proper social and moral upbringing of their children so that they would group up as responsible members of their family and the society at large.
5. Eligible adults should be given opportunities to participate in public affairs.
6. The government should sustain the effort towards the provision of social amenities such as good roads, electricity, health care, potable water etc.7

particularly in the rural areas. This will enhance the quality of life of members of various families and as well discourage rural – urban migration. Apooyin (1998) observed that the drift from rural to urban cities has left many homes desolate. She noted that it is now so common for a few family members to take the age mother to town while the father is left behind in the village to face a lonesome life. As a result of lack of care most of such elderly people bowed untimely to the cruel hands of death.

7. There is also the need to improve social security so as to guarantee the security of lives and property, and enhance social freedom for all.
8. There is also the need to ameliorate the adverse effects of inflationary trend on the family's social and economic life through policies and programmes.
9. Barren couples should resolve their problem of barrenness by seeking appropriate medical attention and having faith in God's abundant blessings. Childless couple may as well decide to adopt a child or children.
10. Exchange of family roles among families should be discouraged by married couples. This is because, "he who plays the piper detects the tune."
11. The following tips can enhance the intimacy among couples – sleeping on the same bed, talking together, eating together and praying together. Sex should be seen as one of the marriage rights among couples. Sex is ordained by God. Nobody can be holier than God, the creator. Sex is also one of the keys to open the doors of affection among couples. This same affection can also be extended to the children. This will engineer harmony and minimize conflict in family living.

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