

PROTECTING THE RIGHTS OF WOMEN: THE ROLE OF THE FAMILY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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Abstract

The role of the family in the protection of women folk cannot be overemphasized. This is because whatever or whoever the girl today and women tomorrow will be depends largely on the extent to which the family have been able to protect her image and rights. This paper tries to look at some concepts like human rights protection and also examines area where women are discriminated against such as education, economic, social, religious and political. The roles that can be played by the family in protecting the rights of women are highlighted followed by some recommendations and conclusions.

Introduction

Women all over the world are creatures that are inevitable. Women's importance to the development of their family, communities and the society at large cannot be underestimated yet they are not given their rights and privileges to perform their crucial roles.

In the ancient time, the obligation of the women was to stay at home and take care of the housework. She was thought to be house mother and what she learnt from her mother was to manage the internal affairs of the household. It is hard for us to understand why women are not permitted to work or simply to express their ideas in some countries.

The protection of women's right is very imperative when we examine the fundamental roles of women in the moulding of individuals that make up the larger society. We need to give credit to

those women that above all, learn on their own and overcame the problems that society gave them. Men and women with the same natural ability should be given equal right to education and training and the same kind of work. With this, there will be female guardians and rules as well as male ones. The society that gave women credit for their job and viewed them as 'equal' to men was the Egyptians. To them "women's nature was believed to be different from men but not of any lesser value: Alume (2004).

Women are generally referred to as weaker vessels or sex and are less capable of withstanding challenges and high responsibilities. This notion is the general world view because the arrogance is held by men even in the advanced countries of the world like the United States, Britain, Europe and others.

Ibu (1988) stated that the place of Igede women in Benue State is in the home which is also applicable to every Nigerian woman.

Mba (1982) brought out the general trend as that of sex segregation. Women according to her, were found to be in subordinate but complimentary positions to men in government.

This paper examines the role of the family in the protection of women's rights in the 21st century.

Conceptual Definitions

Right: Right here means a moral or legal claim to have or get something or to behave in a particular way.

Human Right: Refers to basic rights that every one has to be treated fairly and not in a cruel way, especially by their government.

Woman: A woman is a female who has attained puberty, but in legal term has attained the age of 18 years. A woman is a definite being in the line of creation. She is in the company of man as a co-habitant of the planet earth (Gen. 21 - 23). The woman is the most celebrated being on earth, despite the various discriminations against her by all. From the foundation of the world, women have continued to play significant roles in human history. In Genesis 2:19 the Lord said, "It is not good that the man should be alone, I will make a helpmeet for him".

The woman was originally created to be a helper of destiny. There would have been no need for woman if there was

no problem to be solved (Alume, 2004). Women are important and crucial to the development of their families, communities, states and the nation.

Family: The family is one of the essential institutions for the survival of any society in the world. The family is the fundamental unit of social life. It is the smallest but most important because through it, new members are produced in order to ensure the continuity of the society.

The family is a social group of people consisting of a parent or parents and their children, (Encyclopedia Britannica, 1981). Mezeiobi in JOWICE (2005) defined family as "a social group in which there is sexually cohabiting of men and women with possibly offspring or children resulting from the cohabitation. According to Randall and Wright (1975) through the family everybody starts life, even if it is the family of only two – mother and child.

Ways of Discrimination Against Women

Women have been marginalized in various aspects of life. Women are not allowed to speak in the public i.e in the family, village, community, society and even in the church.

In the Bible, Saint Paul supported this idea in 1st Corinthians 14:34-35 when he said, "As in all the congregation of the saints, women should remain silent in the Church. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission as the law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home,

for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church". Even in the home, how are you sure the husband is going to offer any reasonable answer?

There are various ways in which women are deprived of their rights. In Africa, there's a great struggle by women to overcome cultural pattern of male domination. This endeavour has come under varying but related concepts such as woman's liberation, women empowerment, women emancipation, gender inequality and gender differences as opposed to women's subordination, marginalization, discrimination, suppression, oppression, sexual assaults and abuses.

In recent times, many international conferences have been held on women's rights. For example in Mexico in 1975, the United Nations designated 1975 the International Woman's Year. In 1980 and 1985, there were women international conferences at Copenhagen and Nairobi respectively. In 1995, another world conference was held in Beijing, China. Over 4600 women from all works of life attended the conference representing over 183 countries.

They arrived at a consensus on major issues e.g women's health, violence against women, increased resources for women, qualitative education, rights of women, importance of economic and political participation and empowerment among others.

Educational Discrimination

Education is the training of the mind and character for effective

performance. Education is also process by which a community seeks to open its life to all individuals (women inclusive) within it and enables them take part of it.

Education is an important indicator to human development. Unfortunately, women are deprived of right to education.

According to Lawal (2005) "If you educate a man you are educating an individual, but if you educate a woman, you are educating a family, a nation". In developed countries, substantial amount of the resources is plunged into human development with particularly to women both within and outside the family.

Women education is that which is geared towards developing women's abilities, skills, knowledge and other forms of behaviour.

With quality education, women would be able to discharge their duties effectively as mothers, teacher's administrators and decision makers within and outside the family enclave. As a mother, woman is more responsible for the upbringing and inculcation of acceptable attitude in the minds of the children.

The major problem is that there has not been any serious and conscious effort on the part of government to cater for the educational needs of the woman folk in Nigeria.

For instance, the National Policy on Education (1998) which is the country's blue print, does not specifically have any provision for the education of women folk. All these have led to higher percentage of illiterate girls and women. Newland in Otoja (1993) says that literacy is one of the

most important pre-requisites for development. Otoja (1993) also state that “good education is a passport to achievement. Aliyu in Agocha (2004) asserts that women cannot emerge economically strong even in the next century unless they are given ample access to education, as it has been available to the men folk.

Unfortunately, a number of parents stopped sending their female children to school on the ground that social advancement has moral laxity among the school population. Boys are sent to school at the expense of girls in order to assume roles as the heads of the families whilst girls take the domestic responsibilities.

Few women who manage to go to school, were prepared for stereotyped jobs such as teaching and nursing. Two out of three illiterate people are women.

Otoja (2007) posited that men are afraid that educated women may not be good house – wives. To them education will make women wiser, more outgoing, cause them to know and demand their right from their husband.

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Social Discrimination

Another area of discrimination against women is the social aspect of life. From the time a female is born, she is trained to accept that a woman exists to assist a man in building his home and achieving success in life. Due to the multiple roles that woman play, their potentials are either shielded or remain undeveloped. After a host of household cores, including taking care of her children, her husband, cooking and other domestic activities with little or no support from family members, exception sets in. that prevents her from participating or contributing towards any other activities since the society sees the woman as a person whose ideas and thoughts are not as

valuable as those of man. The nature of their work remains valueless to the outside world.

Utulu in Otoja (2007) Observed that woman is conditioned very early in life to look after the younger ones, the home and the kitchen. This is why it is believed that the women's place is culturally in the kitchen. Women are expected to be seen and not heard. The ultimate in a woman's life is to be obedient, rear children and conform to societal norms.

The need for education was not felt because after all the woman does not add any education to enable her perform ascribed roles of house keeping and child rearing.

According to Otoja (2007) a woman must obtain permission from her husband before she can embark on any capital project otherwise the husband reserves the right to stop such project not minding the financial commitment that must have been made. Men always think that woman do not possess enough quotient of intelligence to receive and critically process information and arrive at meaningful decisions.

In traditional Nigerian society, a woman is not expected to inherit land or property of her father. Where the girls in school and the father happens to die, that marks the end of her education as no relation will accept to bear the burden to educating an orphaned girl and since she cannot inherit her father's property or land, that therefore ends her education.

Furthermore, the right conferred on a man in marriage is the right to have

sexual intercourse with the wife at his desire. There is that belief also that the family name is preserved in the lineage by the male child hence, the male child should better be equipped than the female in order to get a good job and provide for the family.

Another area of social discrimination is in the aspect of female circumcision or genital mutilation. The reason for this practice is to curb sexual urge of the woman so as to ensure their fidelity to their husbands. This is in-human because countless young women have died or gone through harrowing experience to ensure that they satisfy their make folk.

In the area of food habit, some foods are a taboo to the girl child but her male counterpart can enjoy these foods. It is believed that if these foods are eaten by woman, they could make a woman steal or even induce her to kill her husband to become head of family so as to enjoy these things.

Economic Discrimination

The economic stand of the nation affects the standard of living and general welfare of the home. It is clear that majority of the home are subjected to subsistence living. Women are placed in the frontier towards helping homes to cope with this hard condition of living through their active participation in making the home get over the uncomfortable state of living.

Ideally, woman is expected to be catered for by her husband but, the state of economy today implies that woman may not continue to be on the receiving end.

Women are seen engaged in petty trading exercises within and outside their localities to raise the economic well-being of the society.

Women in Nigeria have limited access to socio – economic rights and privileges, enjoy lower social status and are encumbered by harmful traditional practices. Gbamanja and Aboho (2006) identified economic factors such as the cost of acquiring education, school organizational patterns which locate schools away from homes, opportunity costs of formal education to parents in terms of forgone earnings and discriminatory practices against women in the labour market which confine women to low-paid jobs. Time is another problem, which compels women to spend more time on domestic activities than in academics.

Discrimination in Employment

Women are discriminated against in the area of employment. Women are denied management positions in ministries and parastatals when compared to their male counterpart. There is clear evidence of discrimination against women even against those who manage to excel through western education. For instance, out of the twelve commissioners in the Benue State Executive Council, only three are women. This ratio is quite discriminatory against women. Similar discriminatory treatment can be seen in the appointment of Federal Board members and even the appointment of ministers in the Federal Executive Council. Adeyanju in Agocha (2004) confirm that critics have bluntly refused to assign roles to women outside the home

and proudly frown at women's active participation in policy-making and management positions. When it comes to employment in organizations and institutions, men are preferred to women no matter their level of education.

A story is told of a woman worker who took her child's medical bills to her working place but was denied payment on the ground that she is a married woman; meanwhile, her male counterparts enjoy such facilities. According to the story, the accountant reminded her that since she is a married woman, her husband should claim such rights or bills in his workplace. When jobs are scarce women are more likely than men to be unemployed.

Religious Discrimination

The various religious practices of the world have impacted on our women development negatively. The three major religions we have do not allow women any freedom at all. In some parts of the country, women are compelled by the purdah system to remain secluded from taking active part in the social life of the community. Though religious in nature, the practice is an indirect means of denying women the right to education. According to Wokacha (2003), Islam which is said to be a religion of peace, still show favoritism to the men folk. According to Islamic religion, a woman is supposed to be seen only once all her life time and that is only when she is leaving her father's house to her husband's house. A woman by name Hajiya Rabi contested into the House of Representatives in Borno State and on the eve of the education, there

were circulations all over that the Quran says that a seven year old boy is wiser than a seventy year old woman and that Allah does not want women to be rulers, lawmakers and judges.

This negative idea and attitudes against woman is also applicable to the Christian religious group as well. They said that God created man in His own image but He (God) said let us make for the man a helpmate suitable for him. So the woman's role according to them is to be an assistant designed by God not for any other functions. This is why they also believed that a woman should be seen and not heard.

The traditional religion holds such bias attitude against woman as well. They said, it is an abomination for a girl to go to school because the school will expose her to so many social vices and make her wise and difficult for man in the house to rule over her. The only place for the woman they believe, is the house where she will get married early and bear children. Women were often traditionally seen as beings suitable to carry and nestle the baby on their backs and perform all the household chores.

Political Discrimination

Politically, a number of actors impede the participation of women in politics. Examples are illiteracy, lack of finance, lack of self-confidence, early marriage, lack of support from family and the general chauvinistic or arrogant attitude of the entire nation towards women.

Considering the enormous impact woman can bring to bear in the polity of the nation if given the opportunity, there is need to create ways and means of empowering Nigerians women politically so that they can contribute their quota in the development of the country.

Despite the numerical strength of the woman folk, Nigerian society has schemed woman out of the political arena. Agaba in Okpaga (2008) stated that some traditions believe that the woman is less intelligent than the man hence, she should not be given equal education with man, or that the woman is not expected to be in politics because "she should not be seen and not heard". Despite the fact that the woman is made in God's very image like any other human being, it is the woman who is marginalized and given only crumbs of token recognition where possible".

Suffice to say that with steady transformation in the society due to the influence of education, social interactions, intermarriages, civilization and religions, the role of the woman has significantly broadened.

The Role of the Family in the Protection of Woman rights in the 21st Century.

The immediate environment of the woman is the home or family. Lawal (2005) viewed the home as the first socializing agent the woman comes in contact with. The home should therefore, provide conducive environment for all individuals at all times.

Due to the fact that the home has unique chance of wielding great influence on the women's mental, physical, moral, social

and educational development, the family is in a good position to help protect the woman's right.

The female child is part and member of the family, given birth to by the parents as the male-child. The parents/family should grant equal right to all their children.

If there is an opportunity for the boy child to go to school, the girl child should be given that opportunity to be educated as well as they both have the right to contribute to the development of their country.

The family can protect the female by sharing the family's responsibilities and not to leave all the duties for the female. The family should realize that every child is unique, even the girl have her own potentials to be developed. The parents should identify the girls potentials and develop them and not concentrating on the male children as well.

The family should give the girl (woman) opportunities of self-expression, recognize her contributions and efforts in the family and ensure order and discipline as well so that the girls will also have the spirit of belonging even as the male child. The parents/family should show love and warmth toward the girl in the family. Loving the girl-child (tomorrows' woman) will have positive effects on her development and behaviour.

Conclusion

Women have contributed considerably to social, economical, emotional and health growth of the family,

which considerably influence the growth, peace and development of the nation.

Economically, women in all societies are responsible for the work of making ends meet financially and emotionally. They have played important roles in various societies of the world including Nigeria.

Therefore, the family as an instrument of change and protector of human rights should also put into consideration the necessity of protecting the rights of woman as well for they (woman) are the custodians of our tomorrows leaders as well.

The family is one of the social means through which the women can achieve and develop their potentials. For the family to succeed, she depends largely on the contributions of the women for no family can do without a woman.

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