

CULTURAL REPRODUCTION OF WOMEN'S SUFFERING IN AFRICA: CHALLENGES FOR PHILOSOPHY

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Abstract

Societal ideology occupies a strong foundation upon which the cultural beliefs, norms and value systems of every society are built. While responding to the universal cultural demands, the dichotomy of group **needs** and interests are often neglected. Consequently, certain groups of individuals suffer unequivocally. This situation therefore questions the ideology of cultural universals, which assumes uniformity, co-operation, cohesion and conformity. The assumption in this paper is that these attributes are not easily present in society even when rules and regulations guide the conduct of members. Based on this premise, the paper explores the cultural reproduction of women's suffering at both physical and emotional levels, given education as a strong weapon for solving women's problems in Africa. Using the right education, it is believed that the organization of African women and their engagement in reasoned dialogue in order to identify the sources of their suffering and proffer solutions will be achieved.

The right education will, no doubt, widen their scope and vision of understanding, co-operation, cohesion and integration in both the identification and pursuit of a universally accepted societal ideology.

Introduction

As man interacts with his fellow man as well as the provisions in his natural environment, the consequences of such interaction which include objects, preferred line of thought and expressions, are partly directed by the limits provided in his natural environment. His level of awareness, as directed by the prevailing societal ideology, determines the ability and the extent to which man challenges these provisions successfully. In other words, societal ideology occupies a central position in man's quest for survival and progress.

In Marx's argument, ideology has some integral relationships with social formation. Among other things, it provides a strong, foundation upon which the cultural beliefs, norms and value systems are built as man strives to achieve social, economic and political progress in society. As a result, each generation of individuals or group aims at transmitting aspects of the universal cultural norms, values and beliefs which are considered essential for human survival. No wonder different religious, economic and the prevailing ideology and the consequent level of development attained often guide political pursuits. For Althusser (in McLennan et al., 1978:79) "... ideology constitutes the fabric of the society, ... insofar as it is the medium in which all history occurs, and the relay by means of which men live their real conditions of existence".

In different parts of Africa, the traditional farmer appeases the god of the land for a bumper harvest before he formally begins to eat the newly harvested farm products. Additionally, he believes that specific days should be devoted to farm work as well as the selling of farm products. The extent to which he achieves power in society is determined by the amount of his accumulated wealth and prestige. Hence, the existence of polygamous families and large family size mark some significant characteristics of the traditional African culture.

The gender division of labour in the African family is closely related to the prevailing cultural demands. It is a well known fact in different African countries that while the males pursue the economic and political activities that are supposed to maintain/raise the family status, their female counterparts are mainly engulfed in home management as well as child bearing and upbringing. Other females' contributions towards raising the family's standard of living are often neglected by the males. Thus, the knowledge and ability of the women are underrated. Given these conditions, the males claim superiority, subjecting the females to suffer untold hardship, some of which include battering, domestic violence, neglect, inferiority complex, starvation, gender discrimination (at both home and work places) sexual assaults, poverty and the like. The colonization of African countries and its

consequent division of labour further perpetuated the seclusion of the female population to subsistence living while the males were prepared to be employed in the main production and industrialisation sectors. Even the changes in the post colonial period have not been of much significance.

The above situation results to the universal knowledge that the status of women in different parts of Africa continues to be in the downward position of the social ladder. As this conception continues to be transferred from one generation to another, it becomes a challenge for philosophers to unravel the cultural universals that perpetuate the downward position of the female population. Furthermore, one needs to identify different avenues through which the reproduction of this regrettable pattern of the women's position could be challenged. This will, no doubt, pave way for the African countries to be carried on board the present globalization effort in the development process. Discrimination against women, as rightly pointed out by the General Assembly (1977: 34, 180) is considered as,

... any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of-sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of the marital status, on a basis of equality of men and women, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil, or any other field.

The General Assembly recognizes the fact that there has been discrimination against women at different institutional levels, educational qualification notwithstanding, in both developed and developing countries of the world. In India, for example, the subjugation of women, especially at both home and work places, made the women to be treated as if they did not constitute part of the society (Mies, 1991). In parts of developed countries, De Beauvoir (1974) makes reference to unequal rights of males and females in favour of the males as a result of the societal culture. Similar reports from African countries also identify women's suffering to be caused by the problems in polygamous homes, delay/denial of equal educational opportunities for the female and non-recognition of the abilities of women in public societal activities (Blakemore and Cooksey, 1981). As Rowbotham (1972:11) rightly points out, "... the liberation of women necessitates the liberation of human being ... It is a living reality". The liberation and planned integration of the women into different functional units of existing institutions will, no doubt, set the African countries in the right direction towards achieving progress.

From the Determinism perspective, the objective here is to explore the regrettable deploring social and cultural position of African women which has given rise to their suffering at both physical and physiological levels, even when education has been introduced to relieve them of their present situation. Is there a time the African woman will be free to do whatever she likes? If not, what could be done to critically review the prevailing universal culture, to reduce to the barest minimum, the suffering of the African woman? How will education contribute to this effort to re-instate the rightful position of the African woman? These questions will provide a guide to different avenues through which the African women's suffering will be greatly reduced in order to achieve universal co-operation and cohesion among them for full integration in the march towards achieving development in Africa.

Determinism Vs. Freedom: The Social and Cultural Position of Women in Africa

Hume-Mill (in Edwards and Pap, 1973:7), in his support of Determinism perspective, avers that "... what human beings do is always independent of their desires, choices, deliberations and other psychological states and aspirations." In other words, Determinism presupposes that no individual is free to exercise his freedom, given the fact that in society, there is a continuous interaction in different magnitude and at different intervals. If co-operation, cohesion and integration are to be achieved for societal progress, these interactions should be encouraged. Hence, individuals must bury their differences and, relentlessly, seek for generally acceptable universals that are binding so that exchange of ideas and knowledge will be unrestricted. The identified universals, therefore, are supposed to guide societal interests and their consequent objectives, all of which will provide an acceptable point of focus in the daily activities of societal members. Spinoza, Eisteni and Melvdle, among others (in Edward and Pap, 1973) agree that a rational individual, at any point in time, should be guided by well-laid objective(s). Since freedom denounces dependency and requires that one

should not at any time be deprived of, or restricted from, any kind of operation (Locke, 1970), it follows that social and cultural beliefs, norms and values play a deterministic role in societal functions. The condition of members to operate freely is therefore set by the limits provided by these beliefs, norms and values. No wonder Littell (1956:68) believes that "when freedom is truly responsible, it implies a rightful response to legitimate authority".

Generally, in agreement with the Determinism perspective, it is universally known and culturally approved that African women occupy the lower social status in the social ladder. This is mainly as a result of the beliefs, norms and values surrounding the existence of/and assigned roles/activities of women in different parts of Africa. Social status is a function of power, prestige income, occupation and educational qualification. Marxist analysis (in Bray et al., 1986:58) posits that "... conflict between classes is not necessarily open, ... those who are oppressed (as well as dominated and intimidated) may be too busy securing the necessities of life to have time and energy to actively oppose their oppressors". Examples include the following:

- the cultural prescription of engaging female adolescents and youths in early marriage in Nigeria;
- the restriction of Muslim wives from public participation in socioeconomic and political spheres in parts of Africa;
- the limited educational opportunities given to the female population as a result of social, economic and political reasons.

Such listed situations continue to perpetuate the women's under-representation in important modern development sectors (Assie-Lumumba, 2000). The pre-colonial Algerian culture supports the confinement of women in the home, veiled, considered as subordinates, even to the extent that they have no say on who to marry. However, with colonization and women's effort through the acquisition of educational knowledge and job employment at a later stage, it is being reported that the modern African women are dissatisfied with the lives their mothers had to lead. Gender inequalities especially in access to education are glaring in countries such as Tanzania, Ethiopia, Zimbabwe, Ghana, South Africa and Kenya, to mention a few. Even in paid labour force, the African women constitute only about 18% and 48% of the unemployed. FIDAK (1997:11) added that,

- women do not have the same rights to marry and divorce men; their rights to inheritance, particularly if they are widows, are also often curtailed. In many countries, women's ability to own property is also limited in practice by customary law.

From FIDAK's observation, it would be seen that, among other things, the determination of the social, cultural, economic and political practices of African societies by the men alone, deprives women of the freedom to exercise their full knowledge and ability to go about their daily activities. As a result, they suffer both psychologically or physically especially as they are grossly under-represented for their voices to be heard. Added to this, the fact that the women, themselves, want to remain loyal and maintain the required unity, they prefer to suffer in silence. Hence, the downward social status of the African woman presents them as weaker vessels that should be handled with great care; fragile objects that would be difficult to put in place, if broken. The truth remains that the cultural provisions for the women do not allow them to exercise their freedom, hence, they see themselves as the weaker sex. In addition, they suffer from poverty and its attendant diseases, illiteracy, marginalization, suppression and seclusion from participating in a progressive environment.

Skolimowski (in Ebo, 2002:3) notes that "... a healthy and well-functioning society must, have its guardians and its enlightened critics". For Africa to claim such a position, the female population must be relieved of their imposed and insurmountable determined socio-cultural setting, the operation of which is enhanced through different institutional programmes. This situation therefore, calls for the universal achievement of solidarity, co-operation, openness and reasoned discourse gender not withstanding. In other words, for full integration and co-operation to be achieved, the female population in different parts of Africa must be adequately represented. As Ebo, (2002:7) rightly suggests, they should be allowed to participate "... in decision-making, addressing the issue of gender inequalities, fighting for social justice, for gender-blind laws, for equal citizenship rights, and for the abolition of women inferior status". Specifically, put simply, there should be a call to critically review the determining variables that contribute in perpetuating the lower status of women in Africa. Such a forum must include adequate representation of the women in order to avoid a re-occurrence of earlier mistakes.

Education and Women's Suffering in Africa

In different parts of the world, education is considered to be an essential weapon for achieving development. In other words, knowledge and skill acquisition, free flow and exchange of ideas, reasoned discourse, successful planning and implementation of programmes earmarked for human survival and progress in society, among other things, are achieved through education. In spite of the fact that African countries have diverse culture, resources and different historical experiences of which colonialism and political policies are equally inclusive, there are still common features and experiences, which appear to be commonly shared. No wonder that Bray et al. (1986) argue that any educational system must take into consideration the political, economic and historical aspects of the society in question.

Unfortunately, in consonance with Marxism perspective, education in many countries of Africa is geared towards perpetuating the ruling class position. In support of this view, Althusser (in Haralambos and Heald, 1981) considers education as an "ideological state apparatus". In other words, education is an essential weapon through which the ruling class perpetuates her position/power in society. The ruling class controls the admission, sponsorship, standards, staff recruitment, programme planning as well as the promotion of educational activities, to mention a few. This position constitutes a serious deviation from the major objectives of education in modern times. It is most likely that only the ruling class interest is canned on board!

Specifically, the consideration of gender as a crucial factor in the processes selection and admission of individuals into the educational institutions appears to favour the male population in the history of education in Africa (FIDAK, 1997). For example, in Ethiopia, report in 1990 shows that the female population constitutes about 50% of the entire population but only 23% of this comprise the student population. In Kenya, there is 27.1% of female population compared to 16.5% male population that have received formal education. In Nigeria, over 50% of the female population are still considered as illiterates, in spite of the fact that Nigeria strives to achieve education-for-all by the year 2000. If these countries must progress, all hands should be actively on deck in carrying the responsibilities of their respective countries. Consequently, to eschew intimidation and poverty, all of which give rise to different types of suffering, the doors of education should be widely opened, in the right direction, to societal members without any restriction. This suggests that there should be some educational reforms where priority is given to the integration of the female population in African development. This will, no doubt, go a long way to nullify the view that "... since colonization ... poverty is the indelible identity of Africa" (Ramose, 2002:1 1).

There is no gain saying that the female population requires 'freedom' from the present culturally instituted barriers, for them to be fully integrated into the societal development programmes. Freedom eschews dependency on person/persons, which may result to different types of suffering. As Locke (1970:301) puts it, freedom requires "...man to be free from any superior power on earth, and not to be under the Will or Legislative Authority of man, but to have only the law of nature for his rule". Contrary to Locke's view, the beliefs, norms and values in society are ideologically and culturally based and there is a universal understanding of the implications of their operations. Freedom requires that no individual or group of any kind should restrict the existence and/or activities of another person. However, with mutual understanding, reasoned dialogue and universal acceptance, individuals or groups understand the need for co-operation that is considered to be the centrepiece of development in society. The 'freedom' proposed here allows both men and women to exercise their rights (without any gender restriction posed), given the different cultural practices.

Modern African Women and Cultural Reproduction

Presently, there is no gain saying that African women are trying to achieve their culturally denied position through education and public enlightenment. The formation of different women non-governmental organisations and co-operatives in many African countries to tackle specific problems appears to be popular. Such problems include experiences found in widowhood, domestic violence, illiteracy and female sexual and reproductive health. Others include some regrettable cultural practices that belittle the dignity of womanhood such as female circumcision, female sacrifice and early marriage. Among the educated women, Okeke (2002) has identified different solidarity groups formed in the effort to build a cohesive force and create awareness among them. She has

further identified the appointment of female leaders in different political arena. These efforts indicate women's optimism in challenging their earlier position in society. In essence this given situation requires a free flow and exchange of ideas for successful consideration and re-orientation of the prevailing negative social and cultural practices that continue to bug the female population. This brings to a reoccurring question that Hudson-Weems (1998:149) states as follows:

What is the relationship between an African woman and her family, her community, and her career in today's society that emphasizes - in the midst of oppression, human suffering and death - the empowerment of women and individualisation over human dignity and right?

It is hoped that the emphasis on woman education in many countries in the modern times and the consequent acquisition of rational knowledge, the suffering of the female population will be greatly reduced. The identified women's efforts to minimize their suffering are yet to yield fruits. As Rowbotham (1973:xi) notes, "... sisterhood demands a new woman, a new culture and a new way of living. The intimate oppression of women forces a redefinition of what is personal and what is political". Unfortunately, the tendency for women (including the educated ones) to cling to their family members thereby withdrawing from job appointment or going on early retirement beggars the imagination of reducing their suffering. One gets more worried to note, as Nnaemeka (1998:2) observes that "... the Western educated African women of the new order are ineffective, always timidly and indecisively stepping behind the man and periodically making weak scratches at issues of importance". Nnaemeka's observation becomes more worrisome, given the fact that western education is supposed to lead in the struggle to liberate the women from the fettered chain imposed by the existing culture. In addition, the problem remains that the women have accepted and believed their inferiority to men, in spite of their intimidation and suffering received from the males. Added to this, they are used to engaging themselves in the family's production system that is considered different from the men's work situation.

Both Rowbotham and Nnaemeka's observations bring to question the reoccurring influence of the African social and cultural conditions on women, even with the introduction of western education which is supposed to expose the mind for critical thinking. This situation calls for an urgent ideological reconsideration of the societal culture especially in the present period when men easily lose their jobs or go on early retirement as a result of recession in the global economy. There is therefore a dire need to empower the women to identify their dilemma and retrace their rightful position in society through a planned, well executed education programme, while recognizing the dilemma position which earns total submission, dependency and humiliation on the part of the women among their male counterparts. The women need to form strong solidarity front by being united, cooperative, speaking with one voice, their individual differences notwithstanding. . The rightful position of women in Africa must be regained. The general saying that 'What men can do, women can even do better' is not in vain. It is also possible to apply the same to African women in the present period if some positive steps are taken in the right direction.

The Way Forward

The downward position of the African women in the social ladder which culminates to her neglect, distress and disrespect, all of which give rise to different types of suffering could not be imagined or doubted. A significant impact to change this ugly situation has not been made in spite of the relentless effort, especially in recent time, to bring up their level of awareness through the promotion of educational activities for the women. Okeke (2002:8) notes that "... it will be a difficult venture for a group (or individual) to plan for any form of co-operation and subsequent progress without seeking for a way to effect a global synthesis of differences and awareness". For a long period of time, western education failed to focus on identifying and developing the potential capabilities as well as the pre-colonial experiences of the African woman. Okonjo, Behlsen and Sofola (in Nnaemeka, 1998) express this view in their varied but similar experiences from different parts of Africa. In some parts of Nigeria, for example, the precolonial period witnessed the women's influencing power of settling disputes in families without minding the rulings of their male counterparts. This is especially the case with 'umuada' in Igbo land. A similar example could be drawn from the Akans of Ghana who were known to have invested power on their traditional women (Aidoo, 1998). These examples demand an urgent call to re-channel the misplaced priority of isolating

the women in the match towards achieving development in different parts of Africa. It is presently being recommended that such mistakes of the past should not be repeated. In other words, the potential resources of the women must be identified, recognized, developed and integrated into the development system in the match towards achieving national development. Their voices must be heard as they carry some important messages.

Accepting the fact that there is heterogeneity in the African culture, there are features of shared beliefs, norms and values. It is therefore recommended that an immediate re-examination of the cultural universals in different countries of Africa be embarked upon, since the existing African culture is as defined and acted upon by the men to the detriment of the women. This has resulted to different aspects of oppression and suffering. Consequently there should be a search through positively constructed dialogue, between African men and women, focused on arousing collective consciousness. This will, no doubt, lead to the identification, linking and utilization of important marks of affinity, while discarding areas where controversial issues pose themselves as wave-lets.

One way of embarking on the above recommendation is to intensify the education of the African women. The main objective will focus on identifying a new set of educational programmes aimed at developing co-operative and cohesive spirit while relegating the spirit of individualism to the background in order to achieve unrestricted exchange of ideas and knowledge. They have to be involved in every planning stage in order to focus on their needs and interests and be able to place priorities. Projects involving their full participation should be proposed for them. This will, in no small measure, reduce women's suffering and bring aboard their indefatigable wealth of experience and knowledge to be purposefully integrated into different development activities for the desired objectives to be realized.

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