

# **Gender Discrimination and Cultural Anachronisms in African Societies: Implication for Girl Child Education**

By

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## **Abstract**

*Gender disparity has been an issue of concern in contemporary society by virtue of its negative implications for societal growth and development. This is borne out of the fact that disparity on the basis of sex in some cases determines one's position and attainment. In some cultures, and particularly in African culture, this disparity affects the women in such a way that they are counted as nothing or as a tool or as a sex machine who could only be seen and not be heard. As such, the culture of the African people also places restrictions on women to the intent that they the girl child is seen as "bad luck" and to this intent, she is not given any form of education. In some cases, the kind of education given to the girl child is to make her useful in her husband's house. This presupposes that the girl child is often neglected and she undergoes precarious situations and circumstances for her to make ends meet. Unfortunately, this disparity finds cultural and in some cases, religious support which perhaps aggravate the situation of women in the society. It is in this perspective that this paper examines the anachronistic cultural practices which inhibit the position of women in the society with the view to finding solutions to them thereby improving the lot of the girl child.*

## **1. Introduction**

Social and economic indicators for African societies depict that women bear the brunt of hardship which manifest in various forms. In the same vein, women are key agents for effective grassroots implementation of poverty reduction programmes and economic regeneration. The efforts of developing countries (Africa in particular) to modernize discriminatory laws and galvanize women's participation have been frustrated by deep-rooted cultural barriers that so often run parallel with poverty. This portends that women occupy a precarious position in societal affairs and more often than not, they suffer from discriminatory laws and traditions which keep them in perpetual jeopardy.

It could be deduced from the above that in African societies, women are generally relegated to the background as they are perceived as mere tools or objects. Worse still, their continued subjugation has been entrenched in cultural practices which are used as a means for continued oppression. These inhibitions imposed on women by culture and in most cases religion have negatively affected their position in our society.

This paper attempts to examine and unravel the anachronistic cultural tendencies that have kept women in bondage over the centuries with a view to giving succour and reprieve to womanhood. In doing this, however, we shall beam our searchlight on the conceptual clarification of culture, its meaning and import, and also examine the anachronisms engendered by culture which foster gender discrimination. Furthermore, we shall examine the effect of these cultural anachronisms on the educational system in Nigeria and how this has been a barrier to the implementation of education policy.

### ***Conceptual Clarification***

In order to elicit a proper understanding of this issue, we will attempt to clarify the concepts employed in this paper so as to bring their meanings to light. In this regard, we have to take a look at the concept of Culture.

**Culture:**

Culture is an intrinsic aspect of life among any group of people and it dominates and undergirds their thoughts, social political, economic and religious relationships. It embodies the total way of life of a community or a group of people. It is expressed in the language of the people, their belief, habits, customs and traditions (Kinoti, 1996: 96). This presupposes that culture imbues the society with life as every event is interpreted from its microscopic lenses. Culture is not static; it could be influenced by an indigenous factor like the environment, by human factors or by exogenous factors as exhibited in other culture (Kemdirim and Oduyoye, 1998:22).

**Gender:**

Nwagwu (2009:3) defines gender as “the roles and responsibilities of women and men that are socially determined. It is how we are perceived and expected to think and to act as women and men because of the way society is organized and not because of our biological differences. Roles and responsibilities are “the different work that women and men do, their practical and strategic needs, their different levels of access to resources and benefits”. These roles and responsibilities are socially and culturally determined and may differ from community to community. Therefore, gender is the division that people have made in respect to what a person is or is not capable of doing. The inability of one to do a particular kind of job has brought about castigation and condemnation and this is the root cause of gender discrimination and inequality.

In addition to this, gender discrimination is foisted by patriarchy, a male dominated societal arrangement in which all things are seen from the male perspective. Thus, our society places men and women in particular gender roles and creates two worlds – an inferior world for women and a superior one for men. There are men’s jobs and women’s jobs. Division of labour is also based on sex (Olutayo, 1997). This has engendered a lot of differences in the perception of one group by the other.

Ezeh (2008:106) surmises that “what is known today as gender inequality has both theological and cultural roots”. The underlying fact is that gender disparity or discrimination finds support in culture and religion although religion claims to accord same rights and privileges to both men and women. Odejide (1986), remarks in tandem with the above that:

Review of concepts of culture formation in Nigeria and in most parts of the world show that women are ascribed a subordinate status. This view which is rooted in the social, economic and political structures is reproduced by the socialization process. The final result is that though, traditional African culture places premium on harmonious balance between the sexes and equality before the Supreme Deity, there is in practice a lot of prejudice, attitude and custom that negate this philosophy.

Ezeigbo (1994:15) lends credence to the above proposition. He surmises that:

Gender oppression is a scourge that has its source in religions, tradition and politics. These aspects of society have been structured and solidified by patriarchy to marginalize and silence women who constitute half of the human population.

Consequently, gender mainstreaming and stereotyping have been engendered and these have resulted in the gulf which now separate the men folk from the women folk.

Basically, this gender disparity, discrimination, mainstreaming or stereotyping have been induced by cultural factors which are endemic in our society. While culture is good and performs a leading role in the socialization process, it must also be remarked that there exist certain anachronisms in our cultural practices which inhibit and prevent equal gender status between the men and the women.

***Cultural Anachronism***

By cultural anachronism we mean those negative cultural traits which serve as a hindrance to equal partnership between male and female. They serve as the purveyor of discriminatory tendencies in male and female relationships thereby polarizing the essence of human community. In this regard, these anachronistic tendencies are inhuman, unjustifiable and bastardize the status of women. They should be expunged from our cultural ethos in order to guarantee even development between men and women.

Through the ambience of culture, women have suffered untold hardships and experienced inhuman conditions as several cultural practices contradict their essence as human beings. Thus, Adebayo (2000:275) opines that:

Cultural myths as well as the Christian and Islamic religions emphasized the main roles of women as maternity and domesticity. Within these contexts, female education consisted mainly of teaching obedience and submission to male authority.

This presupposes that a lot of African cultural practices are outmoded and obnoxious and they do not give credibility to womanhood. Oduyoye (2001:3) categorically asserts:

African culture is replete with language that enables the community to diminish the humanity of women. No amount of denial negates the fact that relationships between men and women are not all that they could be... in human culture, and in most cases arising out of religion there is endemic sexism that has given rise to gender stratification, male entitlement and female self-abasement coupled with acquiescence that plainly cannot be exhibited in the presence of God.

It is on account of this that Omoigui (2001) also asserts categorically that “culture has dealt such blows on women that to affirm their plight as pathetic is an understatement. This indeed, is the situation in which women have found themselves as a result of the anachronistic cultural tendencies that have lowered their status in all fronts.

It will therefore, be apposite to discuss some of these anachronisms which have affected the womanhood so badly. They are numerous and differ from community to community in severity and consequences. Howbeit, it will suffice to examine a few of them:

**Widowhood:** Widowhood is the most debasing and dehumanizing treatment that culture unleashes on women after the demise of their husbands. Several scholars, Nwachukwu (1995):57), Ganusah (1997:13-158), Ahonsi (1998) and Oladipupo-Okorie (2009:769-179) to mention a few attest to the hardship experienced by widows. In different parts of Nigeria and indeed, Africa, widowhood rites subject the woman to dehumanizing conditions which infringe on her rights as a person. She goes through psychological and physical trauma exposing her in some cases to health risks particularly in cases where she is mandated by culture to drink the water used in bathing her late husband. In some traditions, the woman undergoes mental torture when her hair is shaved, even the one on her pubic area, and she may not be allowed to sleep or take a bath until the body of her late husband is interred. Widowhood rites are cumbersome particularly in Igbo land. Hence Osita observes that “some of the anachronisms in Igbo custom and tradition centred around widowhood”. This is one area in which hardship resulting from tradition appears to be deliberately assigned to women exclusively (Osita, 1976). At the death of her husband, the woman loses all her possessions to her husband’s brothers. This is the precarious situation in which a widow finds herself. As a widow, she does not have the right to her husband’s property as this goes to her first son or to the husband’s brother. To have a share of her husband’s property, she must be willing to marry her husband’s brother.

According to Umeh (1997: 159-171), “the constitution which states that an individual must not be subjected to torture or inhuman treatment (section 33 (1) is similarly violated by “daughters of the lineage” in the traditional Igbo community. These ladies subject widows to continual and ceaseless weeping under the guise of tradition. They make sure the widow cry day and night until they are satisfied. They purposefully confine the widow to protect her from the spirit of her dead husband for three months. If she wants to call anybody, she will have to use a stick to tap on a chair. She will have to sit and sleep on a mat. A widow is regarded as unclean and must observe all taboos.

Modernity has not been able to expunge this cruelty from our culture. Thus, Nwachukwu (1995:57) observes that “unfortunately, these traditions have become resistant to contemporary social changes as a result of habit, fear or wanton insistence on known patterns for the maintenance of tribal or ethnic identity, social cohesion and the established status quo.”

**Female Genital Mutilation:** According to Akumadu (1995:4) this practice entails the ablation of the clitoris and parts of the *labia majora* of a girl or young woman by a traditionalist or midwife. In addition, the World Health Organization (WHO 1997) describes it as “all procedures involving partial or total removal of the external female genitalia or other injury to the female genital organs whether for cultural, religious or other non-therapeutic reasons”. This practice is endemic in Nigerian societies from the North to the South. It involves the use of local objects like knives, razor blades e.t.c. in the operation of their victims who mostly are girls in their tender ages.

Several reasons have been adduced for this act. Kopelman (1994:55-71) gave some of the reasons as “to preserve group identity, to maintain cleanliness and health, to preserve virginity and family honour to prevent immorality, to preserve cultural identity and peer influence”. In some cases, it is believed that it makes a woman desirable for marriage.

This procedure poses a lot of health hazard for the girl child as complications could arise in the process, thereby impairing her organ. This often times leads to Vesico Vaginal fistula (VVF) and other deadly diseases. According to Hedley and Dockenoo, (1992) this practice has been described as an extreme example of the general subjugation of women in Africa because it is one, in which the health and welfare of women suffer a long-term effect. Thus, it has been described as representing the violation of the human rights of girl children and women in general. FGM increases the chances of stillbirth or death of the mother during delivery; it increases the chances of infections such as HIV as a result of using unsterilized instruments on several girls at a time (Koso-Thomas 1987:29). Whatsoever may be the reason adduced for this practice, it is obnoxious, barbaric and cruel and it should be expunged so that our girls would live normal lives.

**Child Marriage:** This is another harmful traditional practice that inextricably violates the right of a girl child and women in general. In addition, it inhibits the developmental capabilities of the girl child as well as their integration into their country’s developmental process (Ezeh, 2008:113). It should however, be noted that child marriage receives approbation from some religious systems particularly Islam. Hence, in the Northern part of Nigeria, there is a preponderance of early or child marriage. The girl child is compelled or forced into marriage against her wish.

Various reasons have been given for this antiquated cultural practice and they include the protection of the family name and honour and the prevention of teenage pregnancy and delinquent behaviour, the limiting of excessive liability due to school fees and sundry expenses that may arise in bringing up the girl. In some places, a girl child is seen as a liability and as such, the only way to “get rid” of them is through child marriage.

The issue of child marriage was given publicity recently in Nigeria when the news broke out that a Senator of the Federal Republic of Nigeria wants to marry an Egyptian girl who is the age if his

grandchild. The case has become a matter of public debate as it is enmeshed in controversy. This shows that our Legislators are only paying lip service to the child right Act. As such, Ezeh (2008:113) opines that:

Child marriage reveals the low status to which women and young girls have been relegated and the widespread assumption that women have no alternative roles other than housekeeping and child-bearing.

**Inheritance:** This, according to Ige (1993:1), refers to the “act of receiving property from one who is dead”. This can either be written or documented as in a WILL or without a WILL (i.e. intestate). It is observed that most inheritance does not favour the girl child or the widow.

It should be noted that under the customary law, there is a high degree of discrimination on female inheritance. In fact, women cannot inherit property. Among the Igbo, a woman cannot acquire immovable property such as land; particularly communal or family land. In Igbo society, the property passes on to the eldest son and where there is no son, it passes to the brother or uncle of the deceased while the female child gets nothing. This shows that little or no regard is accorded to the female gender and this berates our social equilibrium. The bottom line is that the girl child loses her right to inherit part of her father’s property. There is the argument that it is the boy child that perpetuates the family name; that the girl child becomes part of another person’s family and loses the name of her father. On account of this, some women today insist on bearing their father’s name alongside that of their husband in order to perpetuate the father’s name.

**Wife Battering:** According to Oduyoye (1995:161), “in Africa, wife beating is one aspect of domestic violence around which a heavy cloak of silence is drawn. Worse, some men see wife beating as a duty and are proud to declare their compliance”. This aspect of African culture contradicts human rights, and robs women of the honour due to them and reinforces their subordination. Some men also see wife beating as a show of masculinity and an ego boosting. This act negates God’s injunction for men “to love their wives. It is inhuman.

**Polygamy/Polygyny:** African culture supports the marriage of many wives and this puts women in a precarious situation. Many arguments have been proffered in favour of polygamy in Africa, such as the Agrarian nature of African societies as they depend on land. Therefore, in order to take care of the farm produce, men often need more hand and the marrying of new wives is seen as an avenue for acquiring more farm lands. The number of wives a man has also determines his social status. No matter the reason advanced for polygamy, it is demeaning. It breeds jealousy, hatred and unhealthy rivalry among wives and children.

Polygamy clearly debases and dilutes the incomes that should accrue to the average woman in a polygamous relationship. The men decide and dictate what to grow, when to clear the bush, what to sell, what to keep and what to buy even for the wives. There is very little a woman can do when her husband decides to bring in another woman. This is not limited to the so-called uneducated folks, even presidents, like Jacob Zuma, the president of South Africa, are doing it. Most African presidents have wives they show and present at official functions, and wives and concubines whose roles are not clearly defined, except to give the man bragging rights and more babies, especially sons. Too many children by too many women deplete the wealth and quality time of the man who is engaged in polygamy and thereby, they are not able to concentrate on in-depth grooming and raising of their kids.

#### ***Implications of Cultural Anachronisms on Educational Development***

Having examined the aforementioned cultural anachronisms, it let us now take a look at their implications and consequences on the girl child education. Edewor (2001: 36) asserts that:

The culture that portrays women as less important than men and deserving of fewer privileges thwarts their aspiration and lowers their expectations and self respect. These discriminatory practices have serious consequences for the dignity and the survival of women.

This portends that there are consequences and implications arising from gender discrimination particularly on the education of the girl child.

Ezeh (2008:115) in examining the implication of the cultural anachronisms on the girl child education surmises that:

The low literacy rate and unequal access to educational opportunities between boy and girl child coupled with other domestic responsibilities which the girl child is saddled with often result in the girl child's poor scholastic performance and early drop out from school which consequently affect all aspects of woman's lives. This means that the girl child faces more problems as far as education is concerned.

In some cultures or communities in Nigeria, there is an aversion for sending a girl child to school. It is considered a waste of resources to send a girl child to school because all the education she acquires will end up in the kitchen and in another man's house. This is particularly true of the communities in the Northern parts of Nigeria. This also accounts for why child marriage is prominent in that part of the country.

Due to this factor, there is a high level of female illiteracy in Northern Nigeria and the girl child is the worse for it. Where the female gender is denied access to inherit her father's property, she may not be able to go to school. In some cases, the girl child has to drop out of school in order to give the boy child a chance.

Gender stereotypes and discrimination have been the bane of our educational system and policy. This accounts for why Maduewesi (2005) avers that:

The Nigerian National Policy on Education stated laudable goals and objectives to be achieved and realized through education but practically in the society both those educated and uneducated are steeped into gender bias, marginalization and discrimination.

This has negatively affected the education of the girl child. There is an adage out there that says "If you educate a man, you educate an individual, but when you educate a woman, you educate a whole nation". How so true but also, how so tragic. We have not adhered to this revelation and have often relegated our women to the bottom half of the totem pole. The education of the girl child should be given priority.

There is a constant struggle against prioritizing the family budget and education. Since the boys are the ones supposed to carry the family name and take care of their parents in old age, it is not unusual to see parents frowning upon and discouraging female education. It is even assumed a highly educated woman cannot find a suitable husband, since the men become intimidated by them. So what happens is the family's money is skewed towards ensuring the boys get an education while the girls are trained and taught how to cook, clean the house, and take care of babies. As we saw in the introduction, the women are given away to marriage in their teens and prime, as soon as they have acquired some modicum of education, which indicates they can read letters and follow simple instructions. A woman's worth is measured in her fertility, how many children she has, and how good she can cook, clean, and work on the farms. Herein lies some of the reasons why Africa is caught up in stagnant growth and retrogression. Clearly it is hard to see how African countries can make headways in terms of economic development and catch up with the advanced countries when half of the population is tied down by anachronistic

cultural practices and beliefs. One cannot make any meaningful economic and social development if the women are left behind.

In order to change the status quo and return to a vibrant educational system, and achieve the philosophy of the National Policy on Education, it is necessary to change the prevailing socio-cultural paradigm of gender discrimination and inequality and usher in a new generation of women and men working together to create a more humane national order. There must be a departure from the old chauvinistic tendencies and we must put premium on the equality of both men and women in the social order. Education should be used as a yardstick for eradicating the inadequacies inherent in our culture, thereby creating an enabling environment under which men and women can freely exercise their God given rights and privileges.

Education should be made compulsory and free, from Primary 1 through to the Senior Secondary School, and parents should be made to face sanctions if they fail to send their kids, especially girls, to school. Pro-poor initiatives such as providing at least one free meal a day for students in school, and allowing students to board state buses freely nationwide, would go a very long way in increasing school enrolment and reducing or almost eliminating child labour.

## 2. Conclusion

The foregoing makes it abundantly clear that unless the government and traditional authorities sit up and come up with far reaching policies and solutions bothering on social engineering, empowering women and giving adequate and equal attention to gender equality issues, our dream of catching up with the advanced countries would remain just that a dream and a mirage.

While we recognize that culture is an intrinsic aspect of life, it is imperative that these cultural anachronisms which tend towards enforcing a negative structure should be expunged. Culture should be dynamic and this means that we should jettison those cultural traits that have negative consequences on the lives of our women. A tradition or culture that makes us to look down on a segment of the community as subhuman and subservient is inadequate as it breeds sectionalization and impinges on our rights and privileges as human beings.

Men and women should be equally and mutually involved in changing the cultural and traditional perceptions and attitudes which portray women as subordinate.

There should be an affirmative action from our governments at the Local, State and Federal levels towards a gender free educational policy that will promote the girl child education and uplift the womenfolk from the doldrums and abyss in which culture has relegated them.

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