



Patriarchy, Culture and the Social Development of Women in Nigeria

Patriarki, Budaya dan Perkembangan Sosial Perempuan di Nigeria

Ekwutosi Essien Offiong¹, Eyo Itam Eyo², Asibong Essien Offiong³

¹Department of History & International Studies, University of Calabar, Cross River State, Nigeria

² Department of Banking and Finance, University of Calabar, Cross River State, Nigeria

³ Faculty of Law, University of Calabar, Cross River State, Nigeria

*Penulis Koresponden: ekwutosioffiong@gmail.com

ABSTRAK

Aturan dan kontrol eksklusif oleh laki-laki di sebagian besar negara Afrika termasuk Nigeria telah menjadi praktik umum selama bertahun-tahun, ini telah diabadikan melalui beberapa praktik sosial budaya yang berkisar dari pernikahan anak dan pembatasan perempuan hingga upacara janda, mutilasi alat kelamin perempuan, penolakan hak waris dan lain-lain. Dengan menggunakan metode analisis sejarah penulisan, penelitian ini akan mengandalkan sumber literatur lisan dan tertulis. Makalah ini akan mengkaji bagaimana praktik-praktik di bawah sistem patriarki ini telah membuat frustrasi dan menghambat perkembangan sosial perempuan di Nigeria selama bertahun-tahun. Direkomendasikan bahwa praktek-praktek sosial budaya yang bertentangan dengan keadilan alam, kesetaraan, dan hati nurani yang baik dalam masyarakat kita harus dihapuskan untuk memungkinkan perempuan menikmati hak yang sama sebagai rekan laki-laki mereka tanpa bias budaya atau hambatan.

Kata Kunci: Patriarki; Budaya; Nigeria; Wanita; Keadilan alam; Ekuitas.

ABSTRACT

The exclusive rule and control by men in most African countries including Nigeria have been a common practice over the years, this has been perpetuated through several socio-cultural practices which range from child marriages and female restrictions to widowhood rites, female genital mutilation, denial of inheritance rights and others. Using the historical analysis method of writing, the study would rely on oral and written sources of literature. The paper shall examine how these practices under the patriarchal system have frustrated and impeded the social development of women in Nigeria over the years. It is recommended that these socio-cultural practices that are repugnant to natural justice, equity, and good conscience within our societies should be abolished to enable women to enjoy equal rights as their male counterparts without any cultural bias or hindrance.

Keywords: Patriarchy; Culture; Nigeria; Women; Natural justice; Equity.

1. INTRODUCTION

Nigeria is a country in West Africa. The country has been described as “a land of contrasts and a melting pot of ethnicities, religions, and cultures” (Nig. @ 50 2010, p. 9). The country has a rich and diverse cultural history spread across more than 250 (Two hundred and fifty) ethnic groups within the nation (Offiong & Uduigwomen 2021). Each of these ethnic groups has its language and heritage. The largest of these ethnic groups are Hausa, Fulani, Yoruba, and Igbo (Ekpo & Offiong 2020). The traditional socio-political organization of a majority if not all of these ethnic groups is the patriarchal system of administration, where the men rule and run the affairs of the communities.

The rule and control by men within the Nigerian communities have left the society with socio-cultural laws and practices that have put women in a disadvantaged position. These laws and practices have led to socio-cultural attitudes which have been discriminatory and economic inequalities that subsequently reinforce the women's subordinate place within the various societies (Offiong 2012; Offiong 2016). Several of these cultural practices exist across the nation and serve as barriers to their social development. According to one of the Beijing declarations (1999) and cited by Mojekwu-Chikezie (2012), “Socio-cultural factors are major obstacles to women's advancement. Customs, culture, tradition, and religion have continued to relegate women in Africa in particular Nigeria to an inferior position of virtually no status thereby limiting their rights to equality and freedom from discrimination.”

Within the traditional Nigerian society, women are not regarded when decisions are taken in community meetings and most instances within families and homes. Their opinions are not sought even in matters that concern them crucially. The notion that women are expected to be submissive to men remains one of the foundation stones of Africa's political, economic, and social structures. That is why patriarchy has characterized several Nigerian socio-political traditional institutions and this has influenced the society to a very large extent up to the present day (Mojekwu-Chikezie 2012; Undiyaundeya 2012).

2. CLASSIFICATION OF KEYWORDS

For clarity, the following concepts will be explained using the definitions that best suit our discourse. Patriarchy according to Rich (1977, p. 57) is; “A familial-social, ideological political system in which men by

force, direct pressure or through rituals, tradition, law and language, customs, etiquette, education and the division of labour determine what part women shall or shall not play in which the female is everywhere subdued under the male.”

A patriarchal system is characterized by unequal power relations between women and men (Ekpenyong *et al.*, 2017). In such societies, women are systematically disadvantaged and oppressed. The males hold power and predominate in roles of political leadership, moral authority, social privilege, and control of the property (Obiora and Onwuyi 2018). These political systems using cultural practices make the Nigerian communities essentially patriarchal (Offiong 2019). This is because the social and cultural laws are stipulated by men without any input of the women, even though women make up a significant percentage of the population (Olojede 2004). Thus, the political, economic, social, and personal interests of women are often underrepresented and undervalued (Henderson, Jeydel 2010: 9). Furthermore, power and resources within the society are distributed in such a manner that men maintain power and the control of resources while the women are powerless and dependent on the men as stipulated by their culture (Oyekanmi 2011).

Culture according to J. Mbaebie (2018, p. 105) is said to be “The whole complex of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features that characterize a society or a social group. It includes not only arts and rights but also modes of life, the fundamental rights of the human beings, value systems, traditions, and beliefs.” Culture is therefore all-encompassing. It covers everything that is learned socially and shared by all within a society. As a shared behaviour it affects the ways of life of all individuals in society. The culture of a group helps them to develop a set of rules and procedures from their experiences and defines their attitudes, values and goals. All individuals within the society learn the accepted behaviour unconsciously as they learn their language (Mbaebie 2018). Several cultures exist in Nigeria. These cultures have similar traditional practices with patriarchy as one of such similar traits. Against the backdrop that cultures shape's personalities, control people's behaviours, and guide the relationship between people in a society, several of the cultures in Nigerian society have impeded the social development of women in the country.

Social development is said to be all “about improving the well-being of every individual in society so they can reach their full potential” (Essien 2021, p. 106). It means investing in people. It requires the removal of barriers so that all citizens can journey towards their dreams with

confidence and dignity. These barriers perpetuated under patriarchy through various cultural practices over the years in Nigerian societies which subjugate and impede the social development of the women are said to be repugnant to natural justice, equity, and good conscience. Natural justice, equity, and good conscience are said not to be derived from any individual legal or social system but from the notions of what is just and proper. The phrase is also usually used to invalidate customs that were considered "barbarous" (Park 1983, p. 70). This has been applied to several customary laws in Nigeria over the years.

There are several theories of gender. The theoretical explanation on gender that best suits the discussion in this paper is the Liberal Feminist Theory. This theory is based on the notion that gender inequality in society is a result of patriarchal and sexist patterning of the division of labour, thus "gender equality can be produced by transforming the division of labour through the re-patterning of key institutions – law, work, family, education and media" (Olomjobi 2015, p. 7). The liberalists believe that "women, as well as men, are rights-bearing autonomous human beings. Rationally, individual choice, equal rights, and equal opportunity are central concepts for liberal political theory" (Olomjobi 2015: 6). The main thrust of this theory is the right of everyone to be treated equally, the theory attaches high importance to fundamental human rights. It "campaigns for equal rights for women based on the constitutional principle of equality of opportunity and freedom" (Olomjobi 2015, p. 7). According to Ritzer, liberal feminism rests on the following beliefs: (1) All human beings have certain essential features – capacities for reason, moral agency, and self-actualization, (2) the exercise of these capacities can be secured through legal recognition of universal rights, (3) the inequalities between men and women assigned by sex are social constructions having no basis in 'nature' and (4) social change for equality can be produced by an organized appeal to a reasonable public and the use of the state" (Olomjobi 2015, p. 7).

Liberal feminist pursues the legal angle, seek gender education, and appeal for logical persuasion or advocacy as instruments through which their views can be propagated, practicalized, and fulfilled (Idyorough 2005; Ekpenyong *et al.*, 2018). The cultural practices that have impeded the social development of women will be discussed in the following section.

3. CULTURAL PRACTICES AGAINST WOMEN PERPETUATED UNDER PATRIARCHY

Nigeria as a country has several ethnic groups with corresponding diverse cultures. Within these cultures

are practices that are against women which have been practiced over the years under the various patriarchal systems that exist in these communities. According to Olomjobi (2012), "Perceptions of gender are deeply rooted in cultural determinism and strict religious beliefs which are based on gender stereotypes. It is useful to note that gender discrimination leaves half the populace without fundamental human rights thus delimiting half of the populace's contribution to economic and social development. It is argued that a strong index of gender discrimination in Nigeria is the strong root of custom. Custom has been in the sphere of influence of men. It is perceived that men are the custodians of a people's tradition. This is seen from the fact that the status and control over customs are held by traditional rulers and religious leaders. It then appears that old customs of the past are not evolving but remain in a static state" (Olomjobi 2012).

The above quotation clearly captures the scenario in several Nigerian communities where customs and traditions practiced over the years have frustrated and impeded the social development of the womenfolk. These traditional practices include- child marriages and female restrictions, widowhood practices, female genital mutilation, denial of inheritance rights among others.

3.1 Child marriages and female restriction

Early marriage for the girl child was and is still rampant in Nigeria. Several women are given out in marriage from girlhood without any education or skills as most of them are usually withdrawn from school. A huge number of girls are given out in marriage in their teens without their consent to men much older than them sometimes, men old enough to be their fathers. This greatly reduces their opportunity for self-development and empowerment (Ikpe 2011). Biologically, the "baby mothers" are prone to complications during childbirth which leads to VVF (Vesico Vaginal Fistulae) and in most cases abandonment by their husbands (Mojekwu-Chikezie 2012). Since they are younger than their husbands and educationally deprived, it is easy for the men to dominate them and in most instances limit their opportunities for self-actualization resulting in the dominance of males in the family sphere (Ikpe 2011). Under this condition, several women have suffered several forms of abuse because they have no means of survival economically outside such homes as a result of their total dependence on their husbands.

Also, under the patriarchal system, male children are valued more than females. There is a preference for the training and education of males to the disadvantage of the females. It is as bad as where a wife delivers only female children, she would be informed that she has no

child yet. Males are valued over women. Traditional parents were more inclined to train and educate their sons more than their daughters. Investing in women's education was seen as a waste considering the fact that the women were expected to get married. Even for some women who were educated, E. Ikpe (2011) notes that several of them ended up at home as housewives on the instructions of their husbands as such the majority of the women were not empowered to be active participants in the development of their societies.

3.2 Widowhood Practices

Widowhood occurs when a married woman becomes single as a result of the death of a spouse (husband). When a woman loses her husband and becomes a widow she is usually subjected to severe social, cultural, and economic sanctions. In most Nigerian cultures, widowhood practices are inhuman and degrading. These widowhood rites are as diverse as the ethnic groups that exist in the country. These obnoxious rites that cut across different sections of the traditional Nigerian society have left many widows in sorrow, dejection, loneliness, and diverse intimidation from kins and in-laws. There are a wide variety of widowhood practices. These variations exist between language groups and cultures and within individual cultures.

A woman/wife is often suspected of being responsible for her husband's death especially where it is untimely or occurs in mysterious circumstances. Olomjobi (2015) and Mojekwu-Chikezie (2012) submit that widowhood practices inflict physical and mental pains on women thereby adding to their loss which amounts to a violation of their human rights. Violence against widows is loosely categorized to occur in three forms namely: (1) Mourning practices detrimental to a woman's health, (2) denial of inheritance rights, and (3) general degradation as a result of her status without her husband.

The mourning practices are also known as widowhood rites include a series of superstitious acts performed on or against the widows by the family of the deceased husband in the name of customs and traditions. These include (1) Being locked up with the corpse for days or hours, (2) being forced to wear the same cloths for the duration of the mourning period, (3) isolation of the widow from other people even her own children, (4) being forced to sit on the bare, hard floor for the duration of the mourning period, (5) being forced to eat meals from a dirty plate, (6) being forced to eat with the left hand, (7) being forced to shout and cry every morning until her husband is buried, (8) being prevented from taking a bath even during menstruation, (9) shaving the hair on the head and or

pubic hair of the widow, (10) drinking of water used in washing the corpse of the dead husband, (11) sleeping with the corpse, (12) having sexual relations with the family members of the deceased to 'cleanse her of evil spirits', (13) restriction of diet, (14) forced marriage to in-laws and husbands relatives.

Olomjobi (2015) and Mojekwu-Chikezie (2012) asserts that these widowhood practices occur in varying degrees from one ethnic group to another and from one town to another within the same ethnic group. In Southern Nigeria, one of or a combination of the above practices is found among the Binis of Edo State, the Enuoha and Ndoni of Rivers State, the communities of the Owerri Province, the Afikpo and other communities in Ebonyi and the Abia States, the Akwa Ibom people of the South East and also in Anambra State (Mojekwu-Chikezie 2012).

In Northern Nigeria, widowhood rites among Muslims are as stipulated by Islamic injunctions. Among other communities that are not Muslims in the north and middle belts such as Adamawa State, Kogi State, Kwara State, Benue, and the Plateau States, several forms of widowhoods rites exist which are dehumanizing to the women (Mojekwu-Chikezie 2012). There is therefore no uniformity of practice in all parts of Nigeria. However, there exist inequality between men and women in Nigeria as reflected in the discriminatory treatment of widows. In contrast to the dehumanizing treatment of widows, widowers (men who lose their wives) rarely (if ever) go through any form of exploitation or oppression. They are often never viewed as prime suspects when their wives die as in the case of widows, neither are they subjected to long confinement or physical abuse as part of mourning as the women are subjected to in the hands of their in-laws (Akinboye 2004).

Customary laws vary from one ethnic group to another so do inheritance laws under the various customary laws. In several Nigerian societies, women have no access to land except through their men that is, a father, husband, and sons. This access was limited depending on the status of the men involved and the status of the women in the family. The disfavoured wife or widow according to E. Ikpe (2011) was not sure of enough land for her agricultural activities.

Widows fall easy prey to exploitation by in-laws who as a result of the death of their husbands deprive them of their means of survival particularly when the women had only female children. Even male children are oftentimes exploited especially when they are still minors. In some customs, a widow is considered a chattel to be inherited along with her late husband's properties. Where any such widow refused the advances of her husband's

brothers, she is made to go through a lot of deprivation (Mojekwu-Chikezie 2012).

Another form of discrimination against women is the general degrading as a result of widowhood. Widowhood results in a change in the life and status of the woman. The loss of her husband who was the provider leads to her change in attitude to life. She feels betrayed, lonely, and in most cases, traumatized as a result of her experiences with the death of her husband. Even other people's perception of her changes because to most people particularly in typical traditional society, she is the one responsible for the death of her husband. Under various customary laws, a woman is said to be regarded as chattel to be owned. When single, she is owned by her father, on getting married she becomes the property of her husband. On the demise of her husband, it is generally believed that whoever inherits his property inherits his wife. In addition to the customary law provision, other social challenges exist. A widow becomes easy prey for all sorts of treatment because she has no one to fight for her. Several people will want to take advantage of her because of her status as a widow. However, like all other customary practices, these challenges are not applicable generally in Nigeria. In some communities, the widow is respected and offered any assistance available but such instances are very few as compared to the general scenario of discrimination, exploitation, and oppression (Akinboye 2004, Mojekwu-Chikezie 2012).

3.3 Female Genital Mutilation

The practice of female circumcision also known as female genital mutilation is one harmful traditional practice in several Nigerian communities. According to Y. Olomjobi (2015), it is "a grave atrocity committed against women and girls... This act is deeply rooted in traditional and religious beliefs. It has become accepted as part of our patriarchal institution which seeks to subjugate women and their sexuality" (Olomjobi 2015, p. 79). In a patriarchal system such as obtained in almost all Nigerian societies, it is an accepted norm that the man should dominate the woman in all aspects of life including sex. It is also believed that the man should bring the act of sex to an end. It is assumed that a circumcised woman may not demand sex when her man has ended. Thus the conventional man wants his wife to be passive as opposed to being dominant in sexual activity. A woman who is not circumcised is considered to be promiscuous and stands little chance of getting married. These perceptions are discriminatory and oppressive (Olomjobi 2015). The consequences of this practice on women are physical and psychological. However, in spite of some laws that have been enacted, prohibiting the practice, the practice

has neither been reduced nor has any perpetrator been prosecuted (Olomjobi 2015). In many of the communities, circumcision is carried out at a very young age where there is no possibility of the individual's consent while in some others the stigma of your being uncircumcised and therefore not material for marriage according to tradition forces others to subject themselves to this ritual.

3.4 Inheritance Rights

Several customary laws across Nigeria restrict women from possessing land. The women are neglected and are treated with prejudice in respect of their rights of succession and their right to equal opportunity under the various customary laws (Olomjobi 2015). Under customary law, the patriarchal system in Nigeria is solely determined by men. This automatically puts men's interests and values over and above that of women leading to inequality between men and women. Thus, to a large extent, customs and traditions have served as instruments that tend to delimit women's right to property in Nigeria. This has put women in socially and economically disadvantaged positions. Traditions and customs have relinquished the rights of women to enjoy property rights and have segregated women from communal decision-making activities (Olomjobi 2015). This practice is very common among the Igbo communities in Nigeria both for daughters and widows.

However among the Yoruba generally, children of a deceased father or mother all have equal rights, irrespective of sex or age to inherit or succeed the properties of their deceased parents (Mojekwu-Chikezie 2012). On the other hand,

"a widow under Yoruba customary law cannot inherit her intestate deceased husband's properties or estate. The reason for this principle of Yoruba customary law has been stated to be because the widow herself is like a chattel or property which can be inherited by a relation of her late husband. This means she cannot inherit but she can be inherited as she forms part of her late husband's estate" (N. Mojekwu-Chikezie 2012, p. 123, Olomjobi 2015, p. 169)

,arried women under customary law have no personality and her identity in her marital home is subsumed under that of her husband (Olomjobi 2015). This scenario leaves a childless widow in a very precarious situation at the death of her husband with whom she had labored and acquired properties in his lifetime. The widowhood practices among the Igbo and Yoruba are therefore

similar under their customary laws. According to Berkley in the case of Sogunro Vs Sogunro "In an intestacy under native law and custom, the devolution of property follows the blood. Therefore a wife or widow not being of the blood has no claim to any share" (Mojekwu-Chikezie 2012, p. 127).

The customary laws across the country have slight variations as it affects daughters and wives/widows and in the majority of the traditional customs and laws, the widows or wives have no right to their late husband's properties. The Islamic law covers the areas where the communities are predominantly Muslims and gives some negligible portion of the inheritance. It has therefore been asserted that women possess hardly any legal status in society except for marriages under statutory laws, their rights to inheritance and property are not protected in marriages contracted under Islamic and customary laws" (N. Mojekwu-Chikezie 2012, p. 161).

The above cultural practices perpetuated under the patriarchal customary laws and traditions of Nigerian communities have frustrated and impeded the social development of women. There have been several policies and laws promulgated by various state governments to counter, check and curtail these ills within the various communities. These include among others: Enugu State of Nigeria 2001 No. 3 on the prohibition of infringement of a widows and widowers fundamental rights law. The degrading customary practice, such as the requirement for a bereaved widow to drink the water used to clean her deceased husband's corpse in order to prove that she is not responsible for her husband's death is one of the many customs which have been banned by Enugu State, the Zamfara State Sharia penal code of 2000, Vol. 1; No. 4 Sections 207-239 protects women and girls from all forms of cruelty and degrading treatment, sexual exploitation and trafficking, forced labour and economic exploitation.

This legislation is similar to the Bauchi State's Hawking by Children (Prohibition) Act 1985, Cap 58, Ebonyi State Law (2000) on the Abolition of Harmful Traditional Practices against Women and Children and Edo State Female Genital Mutilation Prohibition Law 2000, the Cross River State Girl Child Marriages and Female Circumcision (Prohibition Law) 2000. There are also laws protecting the rights of women and widows in some other states. These include: Anambra state Malpractice against widows and widowers prohibition law 2004, Edo State Inhuman Treatment of Widows (Prohibition) Law, 2004, Oyo State Widows Empowerment Law, 2002. Other states include Ekiti (2002), Bayelsa State Female Genital Mutilation Prohibition Law (2002), Delta State Female

Circumcision and Genital Mutilation (Prohibition) Law 2001, Ogun, Rivers, and Osun. It is important to note that these laws abrogate harmful widowhood practices and the age-long traditional female genital mutilation, which is a crucial act of the violation of reproductive and sexual rights of women (Olomojobi 2015).

Although these laws have been promulgated to remove the barriers to women's advancement within society, more still has to be done to improve the well-being of women so that they can reach their full potentials within society. According to Mojekwu-Chikezie (2012, p. 207), "Women empowerment and their full participation on basis of equality in all spheres of society and implementation of women's rights are fundamental for the advancement of quality development and peace". The government and other non-governmental organizations need to consciously implement some programmes to eradicate these practices. There is a need that the following should be done.

4. DOMESTICATION OF INTERNATIONAL PROTOCOLS

Nigeria has been a party to several conventions on women's rights but has failed to domesticate most of these treaties. The domestication of such international laws will give these conventions legal force within the Nigerian state (Olomojobi 2015). As part of the global world, Nigeria cannot be going back when other countries are looking forward. Nigeria needs to domesticate the international obligations particularly to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women (Mojekwu-Chikezie 2012).

4.1 Review of antiquated laws

The legislature must review laws that subjugate women. Examples of such laws are laws that discriminate against women. Any of such repugnant laws should be abolished. Customs is said to be the fabric of society, however, where any custom relegates a people to the dark ages, it is considered negative and ought to be jettisoned. The law plays a great role in women's advancement and is considered to be an instrument of social engineering. As such, there should be appropriate laws to be augmented by formal and informal education within the society.

4.2 Education

This should come in the form of including women's rights issues in the school curriculum. Gender education should be strengthened. The future generation should be properly sensitized and trained so that the derogatory customs will be discarded and modern trends are

practiced, with consistent education and over time, these barbaric customs will be eradicated.

4.3 Sensitization of Relevant Agencies

Relevant law enforcement agencies and other agencies within the society should be trained and informed to take issues pertaining to the violation of women's rights to dignity seriously (Olomjobi 2015). Discriminatory practices cut across class and political affiliations. Relevant agencies and civil societies should strive to create awareness within the society against such discriminatory practices.

4.4 Building Gender Support amongst Women

There should be a conscious effort to sensitize women to learn to support fellow women. This would enable them to build a strong network, among themselves for the purpose of empowerment (Olomjobi 2015). Over the years, it has been observed that most of the customs and traditions have been implemented by women on their fellow women, and in cases of protests by some women often times, they get no support from their womenfolk leaving them frustrated within the system.

5. CONCLUSION

Nigeria as a country is made up of several communities with various cultures and traditional practices under a patriarchal system. Patriarchal being the rule and control of the society by men determine all customary laws within the various societies and most of these laws have been discriminating against women. Thus, despite the several progressive actions by various regimes and world organizations to redress women's conditions, the institutional environment dominated by men contradicts gender politics. The various acts perpetuated under customary laws have frustrated, discriminated, and impeded the social development of women in several communities across the nation. The women have remained poor, illiterate, and marginalized in several situations. The government has intensified efforts to shift women from the periphery to the centre of national development processes but this has been hampered by women's unequal and subordinate positions derived primarily from the gender discriminatory cultural beliefs that infiltrate institutions at various levels of society (Oyekanmi 2011).

These discriminatory practices need to be consciously eradicated from society through the domestication of international protocols, review of antiquated customary laws that are negative to the social development of women, education, and the conscious sensitization of all relevant agencies and organizations to create awareness

against discriminatory practices. The women themselves, the police, court, and other state agencies should be willing to assist victims of such discrimination and where necessary punish or heavily fine the perpetrators to deter others from committing the same offenses. Unless and until these ills against the female gender are checked and eradicated, the women will not be able to enjoy equal rights as their male counterparts without cultural hindrances. There has to be conscious respect for the human rights of women.

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