

Traditional Mechanism to Eliminate Violence against Women: A Perspective from Nigeria

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Abstract

Different points of view have been projected by scholars with regard to the role culture and religious beliefs play when it comes to women empowerment against cultural traditions that are not constructive. Many of these practices, defended in the name of tradition, that impinge on human rights are gender specific; they preserve patriarchy at the expense of women's rights. The girl child often faces discrimination from the earliest stages of life, through childhood and into adulthood. These cultural traditions among others are responsible for the physical and psychological underdevelopment of women and the girl-child and that in turn affects their input in the development of their nation. There are catalogue of traditional practices in Nigeria which include, girl-child marriages, educational backwardness, widowhood rituals, spousal abuse, irresponsible divorce, male-child preference, female circumcision among others. The need to transform cultural beliefs that perpetuate violence against women can never be over emphasized. These practices constitute violence against women and as such must be treated as a national crisis. There can be no justice, development nor democracy if violence against women is seen accepted. The paper's aim is to seek ways of utilizing tradition (religion and culture) in achieving women's equality and empowerment as stated in UN Sustainable Development Goal. Hence, the paper reviews the challenges of traditional practices and examines the possibilities available for women empowerment by utilising religious and positive cultural practices. This is done through eliminating traditional practices detrimental to female empowerment while the positive elements of the tradition are retained.

1. Introduction

Traditional cultural practices reflect values and beliefs held by members of a community for periods often spanning generations. These cultural practices are either beneficial or harmful. It is these harmful cultural practices among others, that are responsible for the physical and psychological underdevelopment of women and the girl-child and that in turn affect their input in the development of their nation. These harmful traditional practices include Female Genital Cutting (FGC), early marriage, traditional birth practices, preference of male child against female and its attendant implications on the girl-child, reproductive health rights, and nutritional taboo among others. The need to transform cultural beliefs that constitute and perpetuate violence against women can never be over emphasized. Human rights organizations and health professionals worldwide struggle with how to address traditional harmful practices. These practices constitute violence against women and as such must be treated as a national crisis. There can be neither justice, development nor democracy if violence against women is accepted and promoted.

Nigeria is Africa's most populous country going by the demographic figures of the National Population Commission of 2006; Nigeria is populated by more than one hundred and fifty million persons and with different and distinct languages, cultural attitudes, sensibilities, varied religious belief systems and practices (Abara 2012:3). The population of Nigeria is projected at 178,516,904 as of July 1, 2014, while the statistics for 2015 projection is 182,523,432 (Population of Nigeria...).

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There are two main religions in Nigeria, Islam and Christianity. There are also a variety of indigenous beliefs across the country. There are three major ethnic groups, the Hausa, the Yoruba and the Igbo. Northern Nigeria is the home for Islamic communities such as the Hausa, the Fulani and the Kanuri. The Igbo are mainly Christians and are located in the eastern part of the country while the Yoruba, who practice either Christianity or Islam, are located in the western part. The eastern and western parts put together, form the southern region of Nigeria (Abara 2012:3). The three main cultures inhabit different regions of the country and are highly defined by language, religion and ethnicity (Omonubi-McDonnel 2003:5). Although each ethnic group has a unique heritage and customs, the men share the same ideology of patriarchy (Omonubi-McDonnel 2003:6).

According to Onuwa in her article "Harmful Traditional Practices," these practices are those influenced by beliefs held by members of the society especially against women. They, in her opinion, also account for the majority of incidence of violence against women and are practiced in all parts of Nigeria. Some are however, more pronounced than the others, considering the diverse cultural backward of Nigeria as a country. Several Nigerian women are subjected to these harmful traditional practices, resulting in the violation of several of their fundamental human rights and freedoms (Onuwa 2002:17).

2. Definition Of Terms

It is imperative at this juncture to clarify some basic concepts that we will come across in this paper such as tradition, violence, culture and empowerment amongst others.

Tradition: It refers to specifically beliefs, rituals that have been passed down from generation to generation. It has been defined by the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (7th edition) as "a belief, custom or way of doing something that has existed for a long time among a particular group of people; a set of these beliefs or customs: religious/cultural, etc."

Culture: Aina defined "Culture as the shared ideas, norms, values and beliefs of a people" and has both material and non-material components. The non-material components of culture comprise the inner behaviour, attributes, ideas, desires, values and norms of a group of people, expressed in the form of customs, folkways, mores, language and other external symbols. However, the material culture is made up of the physic-social environment, objectively expressed in things made from inorganic elements including tools, weapons and machines (Aina 1998:3).

Violence: The kind of violence we are most concerned about here is gender violence. "It refers to any verbal expression or physical attack against a wife or any other woman that results into psychological, sexual or physical harm to the person or arbitrarily deprives her of personal liberty whether it is done in public or private life" (Idyorough 2005:8). Gender violence may occur within the home or outside the home. Violence could be carried out by; either male or female and or by a group or individual and it mostly affects the female gender.

Empowerment: The word empowerment has been defined in different ways by different scholars depending on the perspective on which they view it. In most of the definitions, the word empowerment tends to be interconnected with words like access to resources, autonomy, agency, status, gender equality, to invest with authority, well-being, power etc. However, women's empowerment is "the process by which women, become aware of the subordination under which they live, and execute actions to lift the subordination. This can range from strengthening women's self-respect and self-image to actions to gain parliamentary representation of women" (Faces of Inequalities...2002).

Different points of view (or schools of thought) have been projected by scholars with regard to the role culture and religious beliefs play when it comes to women empowerment against these traditions that are not constructive. While many believed that tradition (especially cultural and religious) is the cause of women backwardness, some others believe that tradition enhances empowerment. Fundamentally, tradition evolved for the purpose of societal guidance, such that, it seeks to epitomize virtues to the detriment of vices. It is on this premise; a clear understanding of the role of tradition in relation to African women empowerment must be viewed. In Africa, tradition thrives with diverse outlook across geographical boundary but is usually driven by commonality of goal.

The goal is to mould a society that breeds social harmony, supports virtues, equity, peace and security and guarantees economic emancipation.

The paper's prime aim is to seek ways of utilizing tradition (religion and culture) in achieving women's equality and empowerment as stated in UN Sustainable Development Goal. Hence, the paper reviews the challenges of traditional practices and examines the possibilities available for women empowerment by utilising religious and positive cultural practices. This is done through eliminating traditional practices detrimental to female empowerment while the positive elements of the tradition are retained.

3. Review Of Traditional Practices Detrimental To Female Folk

Many of the practices, defended in the name of tradition, that impinge on human rights are gender specific; they preserve patriarchy at the expense of women's rights. The girl child often faces discrimination from the earliest stages of life, through childhood and into adulthood. Her low status is reflected in the denial of fundamental needs and rights and in many harmful attitudes and practices (Fact sheet No. 12, 2000:1 of 5). Some of these practices include:

Educational Backwardness: Overall girls' school attendance still lags severely behind that of boys. One of the main reasons why so many girls do not attend school is because of their workload, both within and outside the household. Daughters are often kept at home to help the family because the social and economic values of educating girls are not recognized. It is a little known fact that among the world's exploited child workers, girls outnumber boys (Fact sheet 12, 2000:2 of 5). Without access to education, girls are denied the knowledge and skills needed to advance their status. By educating girls, societies stand to gain economically. Thus, education provides empowerment.

Girl-Child Marriage: This is still prevalent to date. It takes place mostly in the rural areas where parents don't have the means to send their children to school due to poverty or ignorance (Sada et al, 2004:26). These practices result to health hazards, because most of these girls in the rural areas are malnourished and don't have access to antenatal care, hence when pregnancy occurs, it often leads to complications such as, chronic anaemia, obstructed and prolonged labour, pre-eclampsia, vesico and recto vaginal fistulae, higher risk of maternal and child morbidity and mortality. Emotionally and psychologically, these girls are not fit to be mothers due to their being underage but ended up being mothers.

Widowhood Rituals: Looking at widowhood practices, it is important to know that in certain traditional cultures and in Nigeria where superstitious beliefs hold sway, husbands are deemed not to die naturally and so the widow is regarded by the society as a witch and the woman suffers pain. There is no doubt from that cultural perspective; the widow is accused in the society while the widower cannot kill his wife as it is God's time for her to die. The woman must prove that she is not responsible for her husband's death. The woman goes through rituals from the death of her husband, while the man begins to think of a new wife the day his wife dies. There is a whole catalogue of different treatments of widows in most societies. These come from different cultures. The period of mourning has rules that must be observed. It is observed that only women are subjected to widowhood rituals, most of which have created several conflicts, squabbles and even death. It has set families against families, in-law against each other (example is the case of the *Umuadas* in the eastern Nigeria), wives against sisters, and fathers against wives (Ayantunji 2006:6).

Spousal Abuse: Spousal abuse is another area of concern on the catalogue of traditional practices harmful to the women folk. In most societies, traditions, cultures, customs and beliefs are most unkind to women. Women face so many unpleasant treatments in their relations to men. The most common form of domestic violence is wife battering, referred to as 'wife abuse' or 'spousal abuse.' The act includes slapping, pushing, kicking, throwing, stabbing etc. (Liman 2011:28). The report of the Legal Research and Development Centre in Nigeria reveals that it is culturally acceptable for a man to punish a woman who oversteps the boundaries of her subordinate status. This is the report exemplified by daring to answer back a man, communicate her opinions or feelings of all which have no place when they are not in concordance with the man's wills. Such women are set to be impetuous and deserved their battery in so far as they challenged the man's authority by failure, refusal or neglect to his desire or will (Atsenuwa 1995:49).

Domestic violence hurts us all. Women in abusive relationship cannot fully participate in community life. Their ability to share their energy, ideas, skills, talents and opinions with their families, communities, and places of worship and in the political process is lost when their bodies and minds are consumed by domestic violence. For an abused woman, violence results in health problems, sadness, isolation, and loss of income and self-confidence (Domestic Violence 2004:7).

Irresponsible Divorce: Rules guiding the institution of marriage whether cultural or religious are not always followed. There is threat to the marriage institution through constant abuse of the laws legislating divorce in some societies. Women get routinely thrown out of their matrimonial homes and exposed to danger and hardships when they are divorced. They go through terrible times and they have no money to eat and cannot just resume their normal lives without the help of their parents and or society.

Male Child Preference: Another harmful traditional practice is that of preference of a son over a daughter from time immemorial. In most traditions, a woman who is unable to bear a male child has a diminished status.

Son's preference refers to a whole range of values and attitudes which are manifested in concomitant daughter neglect. It may mean that a female child is disadvantaged from birth; it may determine the quality and quantity of parental care and extent of investment in her development; and it may lead to acute discrimination, particularly in settings where resources are scarce. Although neglect is the rule, in extreme cases son preference may lead to selective abortion or female infanticide (Fact Sheet No. 23, 1979,). Sesay and Odebiyi (1998:8) added that in the past, sons were believed to provide more economic support for the parents, while continuity of the family name depended on whether or not there was a male child.

Female Circumcision: Female genital cutting (FGC) also called Female Circumcision (FC) is a custom or tradition synthesized over time from various values, especially religious and cultural values. Immediate complications that could follow female genital cutting include severe hemorrhage, which may result in shock. The excruciating pain of the procedure further aggravates this since no anesthesia is used in most cases. Urinary retention could result due to excessive pain. Infection easily sets in and damages to the urethra, bladder, and anus by way of tears and fistulae formation could be very agonizing and associated with psychosocial problems (WHO et al 1997:4). Delayed complications include dysmenorrhea, vaginal stenosis, crypto menorrhea, dyspareunia and subsequent inability to consummate marriages, urinary tract infections, pelvic inflammatory diseases and sometimes infertility results. Even where these problems have been surmounted and a successful pregnancy results, there is difficulty with delivery which could be complicated by the presence of iceloid or implantation of dermatoid cyst of the vulva (Mandara 1995:31-32).

Marriage and childbearing are important to most women and rejecting genital cutting carries with it a potential loss of status and acceptance within the community. As a result, women, important teachers of cultural traditions, are often the procedures strongest proponents. Those who perform genital cutting also advocate strongly for its continuation because it provides most of their income (Giving up Cultural Practices...). The age at which circumcision is carried out varies from area to area. FC is performed on infants as young as few days old, on children from 7 to 10 years old, and adolescents/adult women also undergo the operation at the time of marriage. Since FC is performed on infants as well as adults, it can no longer be seen as marking the rite of passage into adulthood or as ensuring virginity (Fact Sheet No. 23, 1979). In 1948, the UN General Assembly adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The Declaration prohibits all forms of violence and discrimination based on sex and ensures the right to life, liberty and security of person; it recognizes equality before the law and equal protection against any discrimination in Violation of the Declaration.

4. Traditional Mechanisms As Mitigating Measures

Replacement of Sexual Rituals with non-Sexual Rituals: Change in social values also determines or dictates change in cultural values – culture is thus dynamic. The practices of FC, son's preference, harmful traditional practices and so on require re-evaluation so that the damaging elements in them are eradicated. For example, in Zambia, sexual cleansing for widows is being replaced with non-sexual rituals so that the overall ceremony continues and retains its value, and the same participants remain involved, but sex no longer takes place (Jackson 2002, cited in Njogu and Orchardson-Mazrui 2008:11).

Promotion of Life Planning Skills instead of FC: In places like Liberia, Sierra Leone, Kenya and Tanzania where the practice of FC forms part of their initiation rites, they are beginning to adopt the other rites of passage while dropping the Female Genital Cutting aspect (notwithstanding the reasons for maintaining the practice which include religious custom, decreasing the sexual desire of women, hygiene, aesthetics, facility of sexual relations, fertility etc.). In these other rites, girls are secluded; they undergo life planning skills and are prepared for the future through counselling. The life planning skills relate to decision making, adolescent development, gender roles and equality, relationships, and the incidence of teenage pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections and planning for the future (African Youth Alliance 2002, Cited in Njogu and Orchardson-Mazrui 2008:20). It involves education of how to be a good wife or co-wife, the use of herbal medicine and the "secret" of female society (Fact sheet no. 23, 1979). Therefore, such reformations should be emulated in Nigeria too. The positive aspect of such traditional practices should be retained while the harmful aspect should be discouraged. By so doing the positive aspect of the tradition that is empowering is retained while the ones that degrade women are discarded.

Economic Empowerment of Women: Violence against girls as well as women remains persistent problem that takes many forms, including sexual exploitation and abuse, rape, incest, prostitution, trafficking (Fact Sheet No. 12, 2000:1 of 5). Harmful traditional practices discussed in this paper also constitute violence against women. Economic empowerment is the key to women emancipation in this regard and it will go a long way in reducing most of these practices.

Use of Traditional Birth Attendants (TBAs): One area in which women have always excelled in traditional African societies is in health, especially reproductive health. Apart from being the protectors of cultural traditions, customs and beliefs, women also are the preservers of indigenous knowledge related to herbal medicine and spirituality. Women are involved in childbirth, gynaecological treatments and cosmetic treatments and massage techniques for expectant mothers (Njogu and Orchardson-Mazrui 2008:12). This is a very good culture which needs to be reinforced in a country like Nigeria where both the clinic and the health workers are drastically inadequate and some people still prefer TBAs to attend to their wives. TBAs should be empowered by further training them in art of midwifery to reduce mother and infant mortality.

Distribution of Domestic Chores between Girl-Child and Boy-Child: In order to entrench equal rights for girls, measures should be taken to enlighten people to distribute domestic chores between the girl child and male child as it is found in the houses of some elites in Nigeria where the mother goes to school or work. Each child is given his own duty in the house irrespective of gender. There is a great advantage in doing so; the male child will learn how to wash plates, sweep and cook. This will empower him too in life because such skills will come handy when he needs them. At the same time it will reduce the male chauvinism that culture has engrained in him and that will teach him to respect women. This will allow the girl some little time to play and study too.

Religion as a Traditional Mechanism for Elimination of Violence against Women and Girl-Child: There is serious campaign against harmful traditional practices that constitute violence against women and girl child in Nigerian societies. The Nigerian First Ladies are involved and also so many organisations like the United Nation, Governmental and Non-Governmental Organisations. On the part of government there is a serious effort to pass into law the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women. While some states have ratified the articles of the convention, some of the states have refused to, because some provisions therein are contrary to their religious laws and therefore, that makes the whole thing non-effective.

Proper interpretation of religious laws can be used to empower women especially in the northern part of Nigeria where religion plays a significant role in the life of the people. In both the two major religions viz; Christianity and Islam, women are revered and entitled to basic rights; to be clothed, fed, housed and adorned. Most of the practices attributed to religion especially Islam like refusing to educate the female child, FC and early marriage are more of cultural than religious. These are practices that predated Islam and are purely enhanced by traditional culture and not religion. For example, statistics have shown that Female Circumcision is less prevalent in the Muslim region in Nigeria and the statistics by zone reveals that: North Central 9.9%; North East 2.9%; North West 20.7%; as against South East 49.0%; South South 25.8%; South West 47.5% (Nigeria Demographic and Health... 2014:377).

While the statistics by religion reveals: Catholics 31.4%; Other Christians 29.3%; Islam 20.1%; Traditionalist 34.8% (Nigeria Demographic and Health... 2014:377). What this means is that, Islam did not command or sanctioned it but rather merely found people practicing it and tried to regulate it as shown in the following Hadith: The Prophet (SAW) said to Ummu Atiyah, a woman who used to circumcise female: "when you circumcise do not cut severely since that is better for her and more pleasing to the husband" (Abu Daud Vol. 5, *Hadith* No. 5271, 2008:487). Based on this, the Maliki school of jurisprudence (followed in Nigeria) holds that circumcision is prescribed and recommended for women but is not compulsory (Al-Areefee ND:89). Iyasa went further to say that where the whole clitoris has been cut and stitched which causes legal defect in woman called *Rataq* i.e. closure of the vagina orifice making sexual intercourse with the woman impossible, the husband can terminate the marriage contract with such a woman, unless the defect is removed (Iyasa ND:59). Therefore, scholars should educate on this.

Traditional widowhood practices are not common among the communities of northern Nigeria because they adhere to the teachings of Islam or Christianity. Here again Islamic Law has provided for a strong and acceptable legal system to protect widows. She is not blamed for the death of her husband. Islam sees widowhood as acceptable and a natural transition for all married couples. Islam forbids the deceased brothers from taking the children from the widow with the intention of inheriting his assets and she cannot also be forced to marry any of the deceased brothers. She can only be separated from her children in a situation where she is found to be immoral or proven medically insane. Apart from that, the Shari'ah does not relegate the widow to any kind of inhuman conditions like not taking bath, not eating, leaving the head unkempt or drinking of the water that has been used in washing the deceased in order to prove her innocence etc. Also the Shari'ah provides inheritance for the relatives i.e. the parents, children, brothers and sisters and also the wives in the properties of the deceased. Hence, they cannot take away the deceased property in disarray leaving the widow without anything to fend for herself and children. See Qur'an 2:240 and Qur'an 4: 10.

Again, Islam is in the fore front of advocating education for all without bias of gender or race. In addition, it was reported in a Hadith, the Prophet (SAW) said: "Seeking for knowledge is compulsory upon all Muslims" (Ibn Majah, Vol. 1, *Hadith* No. 224, 2002:221). Islam also frantically frowns at sons' preference. What we learn from these examples is that, religion, whether Islam or Christianity has nothing to do with anything that will cause harm to humanity in general. On the contrary, religious ideals can be used to empower women and free them from the shackles of these discriminatory violent practices. Therefore, religion can be used as another mechanism for eliminating violence against women and girl child, while the religious leaders have to do a lot in order to educate the adherents on the evils of such practices and the true position of religion on the matter.

5. The Role Of Government

Mainstreaming Gender into Development Efforts: Within the contemporary political culture, a number of actions have been undertaken by some African countries (including Nigerian government), to eliminate violence against the female folk. Key among these is the attempt to mainstream gender issues in development efforts, health, education, agriculture, environment, industry, politics and decision making positions in order to influence politics that affect them directly. Through lobbying and sensitization, the phenomenon of affirmative action, even when it is not sufficiently institutionalized has started paying dividends (Njogu and Orchardson-Mazrui 2008:6).

Mainstreaming Women in the Political Sphere: There is no doubt that globally things have changed positively for women. In Nigeria, there is a huge increase in the higher level of female education, with women professions excelling in the various fields with national and international awards of honours. Many more women are appointed in higher positions in government, but participation in mainstream politics is still very low. The irony of the situation is that with all the opening up of opportunities, women's visible involvement in government and the huge economic contributions women make nationally, they are still in the greater majority with less access to political power. In order to transcend this limitation and get into mainstream politics where they can make impact, women must network across regional and religious divide. They must study women history and learn of their roles in society, not only as wives and mothers, but as stakeholders in nation building. Women need to learn more from the likes of Asma'u Dan Fodio, Queen Amina of Zazzau and Moremi of Ile Ife. For as the wise saying goes, "in order to understand the present, and plan wisely for the future, you must understand your past."

Certainly, Nigerian women are forging ahead and attaining success, but there is still a lot to be accomplished (Alkali 2014:27-29). It is strongly believed that with growing women political participation, they will be able to stimulate policies that will checkmate violence against women.

Promotion of Girl-Child Education: Government Policies such as compulsory free education for all and the school feeding programme initiated by the government will go a long way in attracting poor and malnourished children to education. The policy of providing opportunity for vocational and professional training for girls and women should also be further enhanced. Government should also continue with the public enlightenment advocacy in order to eradicate all harmful traditional practices. As programmes are designed, husbands, brothers, traditional rulers and religious/community leaders must be involved. This will go a long way in ensuring access as well as sustainability (Az-Zubair 2014:24).

6. Conclusion

The article has so far examined some harmful traditional practices affecting the girl-child and women. The article using traditional mechanism provides possibilities for deconstruction and reconstruction of these practices so they can be more acceptable and less harmful to humanity. Most of the time, women execute and monitor the compliance of other women to some of the acts like FC, widowhood rituals etc. this is because many women are unaware of their basic human rights. It is this state of ignorance which ensures their acceptance and consequently, the perpetuation of harmful traditional practices affecting their well-being and that of their children. These practices violate the rights to health, life, dignity and personal integrity. Many of these traditional practices that remain harmful to our women are usually in the rural areas where education is in its lowest ebb. This is usually less of a barrier as women move up the class structure.

Poverty is also another key factor responsible for the tenacious adherence to these traditional practices. The struggle for gender equality is achievable when we provide ample economic space for mutual participation. I therefore advice, that we must pay attention to reviving our industries for women to unleash their economic influence. Educational and economic empowerment is the most critical to women folk and yet the most elusive. Most vices which appear to be an offshoot of culture in Africa today are indeed manifestation of inadequate empowerment. The agonising story of FC, child marriage, the disturbing reality of child trafficking and child labour will not part from us until those women and mothers are educationally and economically empowered. Let us all support and encourage the emancipation of the women folk from these harmful practices. Let us educate and empower women by so doing we build an egalitarian society built on justice and peace for all.

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