

# Power and Womanhood in Africa: An Introductory Evaluation

by

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## Abstract

There is no gainsaying the obvious that women have played leadership roles in the development of various African societies from pre-colonial days till now. Even though the patriarchy system in Africa cannot be denied, yet, the African woman possesses the power that binds the society together. In traditional African society, the survival of the family and the future of marriage depended a great deal on the African woman. Thus, the African woman played a key role in the education and the teaching of children social, ethical and moral values which were part of the cultural standards for evaluating proper societal behaviour. Even in contemporary Africa where most women are now more equipped and empowered, the traditional care-giving, home-making and nurturing roles of women in the African family which formed the basis of their identity as wives and mothers are gradually being abandoned, as they have become increasingly involved in new roles and relations outside the home. This paper identifies the indispensable role the woman plays in the society. It seeks to address the sense of inequality which revolves around the concept of gender in contemporary society which arguably fails to recognize the power the African woman possesses. The paper, nonetheless, examines the implications and consequences of the increased social and economic empowerment of the contemporary African woman in the light of her traditional roles as wife and mother.

## **Introduction**

The leadership roles women have played in the development of various African societies cannot be underestimated. The contributions of women towards the social, economic, political and educational developments of African societies cannot also be gainsaid. In fact, traditional African society attached no importance to gender issues because every individual had a role to play both in the family as well as in the larger society. Each gender had its traditional role in the development of the society. In other words, the position of women was complimentary to that of men. There was the non-existent of gender inequality. Each role, regardless of who performed it was considered equally important because it contributed to the fundamental goal of community survival. What this simply implies is that indigenous people in Africa performed varying roles to maintain the efficient functioning of their society, prior to colonialism. The claim, therefore, is that gender inequality came with the advent of colonialism (St. Clair, 1994: 27).

In spite of the complimentary role women played to men, the dynamism that prevailed, *ipso facto*, was that there existed the patriarchy system where men were still seen as the head of the family and leader of the society. This therefore shows that traditional Africa was not based on gender inequality but a complement of gender, because each gender had a role to play in contributions to societal development.

## **Womanhood in Traditional Africa**

The fact remains that no degree of stereotyping against women existed in traditional Africa. The woman possessed the power to organize the family and the society at large. There was an enormous task and responsibility conferred on womanhood. In fact the responsibility of both men and women were seen as complementary to one another “there was a co-dependence and a balance that existed” (St. Clair, 1994: 27).

In various traditional African societies, the African woman possessed the power that binds the society together. In fact the survival of the family and the future of marriage depended a great deal on the African woman. This is why Leith (1967: 34) emphasizes that:

*Culturally, African women were the transmitters of the language, the history and the oral culture, the music, the dance, the habits and the artisanal knowledge. They were the teachers and were responsible for instilling traditional values and knowledge in children. Men were also essential in the transmission of knowledge to the youth because they had a different type of knowledge of the earth and environment, and also of ceremonies and traditions that were performed exclusively by men.*

What Leith explains in this regard is the fact that each gender had its role and responsibility which helped in the formation and upkeep of the family, particularly, as it affects the essential upbringing of children. Furthermore, Leith (1967:40) points out that the

*Woman had extensive knowledge of the natural environment; they were gatherers, which meant that their communities depended on them to provide nourishment or they would face starvation. Indigenous women in Africa held vital knowledge of herbs and medicines that also ensured the survival of their communities, they were the healers.*

The indication here is that women's role in traditional Africa is a sine qua non to societal development. The impacts of the women were felt in every aspect of life of the society. Thus, the African woman played a key role in the education and the teaching of children social, ethical and moral values which were part of the cultural standards for evaluating proper societal behaviour. Evaluating the status and position standing of women in traditional Africa, Hafkin and Hanson (1976: 59-60) reiterate that:

*Women were treated with unparalleled respect because they were seen to be closer to the creator than men ever had the potential of being. This is because women themselves had the ability to create due to the fact that they were able to give birth. As creation of life, they were charged with the sacred responsibility of caring for the needs of the next generation, and because of this, they can be regarded as the originations of the idea that is now known as sustainable developments.*

Buttressing the above quotation, it is an incontrovertible fact that societal sustainable development depends essentially on a solid family structure. In every society, the most important aspect of life and survival was a family. The women are often the backbone of the family in traditional Africa. The African family has always been characterized by strong women who usually held pertinent positions in the family (Agarwal, 1970: 75).

It is important, however, to mention that one of the many forms of traditional African notions of family structure which cannot be ignored was polygamy. It is, as it is known, the practice where a man marries and lives with more than one wife. Despite its many woes, it is often viewed as a means of achieving family social and economic stability. B. Dobson explicates in broad perspective the necessity and importance of polygamy in family structure as well as the many benefits it portends for the woman. According to him:

*As a result of the agrarian society of the economy of traditional Africa, polygamy was warned as socially necessary in order to ensure continuation of the society, and to provide for the needs of the many woman who might otherwise never enjoy the status and benefits which accompany becoming a mother, a bearer of children and are thus a vital link to the ancestors. Wars between groups often resulted in the reduction of the male population, thus females usually outnumbered males. Unmarried women risked social humiliation without a husband and children, thus the system sought to provide for the needs of everyone in the society. (Dobson, 1954: 57)*

Narrowing our discussion on the roles women played towards societal development in traditional Africa to the cultural perspectives of the Urhobo of Delta State, South-South, Nigeria, Ikperha (2003: 71) explains that:

*Women have played a significant role in Urhobo culture. They are highly respected and adorned in many fashions throughout several clans. Essentially, the women's role is not only that of a caretaker, but extends to other forms. In art the Urhobo woman has been portrayed in several ways procreator, goddess, mother, ancestor and sage.*

In Urhobo traditional family structure (irrespective of the form of family structure) the female influence on the moral character of the traditional society was very enduring. The reason for this is women's traditional care-giving roles, which put them in a unique and strategic position not only to produce and sustain life but also to help instill socio-religious values and morals in the family. Thus, in Urhobo traditional society, the survival of the family depended fundamentally on the women. Women in Urhobo family played an important role in teaching children social and moral values. Much of the teaching, according to, Ikperha (2003: 74) "was focused on regulating sexuality and family life in general".

In submission therefore, one could say that women have played indispensable roles in traditional Africa. But in spite of the activities, roles, responsibilities and positions women held in traditional Africa, the man in pre-colonial Africa was still the head of the family as well as leader of the society; society was purely patriarchal in nature. The man still played the controlling agent in the family; women played supporting roles to the men, and the roles of women were complimentary to men.

## **Colonialism: The Root of Gender Inequality in Africa**

In his work on gender inequality titled, *Many faces of Gender Inequality*, noble laureate Amartya Sen looks at the problems of discrimination against women in the development process, on survivorship differentials between men and women under conditions of social discrimination against women. According to him:

*It is a known fact that the world in which we live in is characterized by deeply unequal sharing of the burden of adversities between women and men. Gender inequality exists in most parts of the world, from Japan to Morocco, from Uzbekistan to the United State. (Amartya, 1994: 13)*

With Amartya's assertion the assumption would be that gender inequality is an inherent nature of all human societies. The perception, if clearly understood, is that there has always been the nature of inequality between men and women in our world, right from the inception of the human society. Thus, if inequality characterizes gender right from the consciousness of human existence, it simply implies that the claim of women's complementary position to men's roles in the upliftment of the family and societal development is not tenable. Records of history have however shown that there existed no gender inequality in traditional African society rather; women's role was complimentary to that of men. In pre-colonial Nigeria, for instance, women had roles they played in economics, commerce and politics of the society. Many of them excelled and distinguished themselves in various endeavours. Queen Aminat of Zaria, Madam Tinubu of Abeokuta and a host of other notable women excelled in politics, and particularly commerce. But Africa's contact with European colonialism became the concatenation to gender inequality in Africa. Boserup (1970:87) captures the result of this contact succinctly:

*Today, the complimentary roles of women to men no longer exist in Africa, but Africa's women subordination to men and gender inequality in various forms.*

In a similar vein, St. Clair explains that upon contact with Europeans, indigenous people in Africa were confronted and interacting with a society that had markedly different moral and value systems from their own. According to him, the European perspective of gender roles was fundamentally that women were subordinate to men and that their roles were less important because they were confirmed within the family unit. It was the men that had the decision making power the wisdom and the knowledge to build their communities (St. Clair 1994: 19).

One of the consequences of the advent of colonialism is the erosion of gender equality which characterized traditional African society. Both men and women had different roles they played in families and the society at large. But the case became different since the contact of Africa with colonialism. Hunter (1973: 94) narrates this ordeal:

*But since the era of colonialism, women have been placed on the lower rungs of the proverbial ladder by the dominant forces of capitalism, and now globalization, which emphasizes this need for power, superiority and compartmentalization of roles and responsibilities with different values attached to them.*

Going by Hunter's assertion, the face of African society on gender equality changed owing to the influence of colonialism. Women began to suffer oppression from men. The Shackles imposed by law, custom, religion and attitudes forced women to play 'the second fiddle'. In fact, women mostly remained relegated to the last rung of the social and political ladder. Women no longer were given the opportunity to exercise any power except those supervised by men. Dennis (1974: 88) accurately captures the situation:

*The religions of many Nigerian societies recognized the social importance of women by emphasizing the place of female gods of fertility and social peace, but women were also associated with witchcraft which appeared to symbolize the potential social danger of women exercising power uncontrolled by men.*

What this indicates is that Western influence restricted women's participation in Africa's social – economic and political affairs. Women thus had relatively or little opportunity to become involved in whatever they desired.

Nevertheless the influence of colonialism in perpetuating oppression against women in Africa, some African women who were enlightened and powerful were able to organize and had formidable resistance movement against the early white intruders. There was, for instance, women like Dona Beatrice who led a rebellion against pre-Portuguese Congo leadership, Queen Amina of Zaria who was a prominent warrior, and the women in Eastern Nigeria who led the Aba revolt against British colonialists for inhuman taxation in the 1920s (Saje and Abubakar, 1997 : 22).

## **Women in Contemporary Africa**

As fallout of the role European colonialism played in eroding the rights and obligations of the African woman, women have continued to play very passive roles with no corresponding rights. It is on this basis that the position of Bulkachuwa (1996: 15) is clearly stated as it relates to the Nigerian Woman:

*In many areas women are still regarded as chattels to be inherited, they are given no formal education as it was formerly considered more advantageous to educate a female child who is given out in marriage at an early age. They are forever under the control of either their husband or male relatives... They cannot inherit or own property nor can they participate fully in public life and the decision making process within their immediate community. They had no right over the children they bear and are mostly the victims of domestic violence...*

The above assertion nonetheless, the trend is now changing. The last three decades after independence of all African nations from the shackles of colonialism, have witnessed dramatic improvements. Parents have now realized the importance of educating all children irrespective of gender, early marriages have drastically reduced and “we now have women in every profession as we can boast of female professors, doctors, judges, engineers, lawyers and pilots” (Bulkachuwa, 1996: 15).

All over the world, the wind of change is blowing in the direction of gender equality in contemporary times. Several women groups and organizations are coming up daily to demand for equal participation of gender in all issues that involve all members of the society. Conferences are being held regularly to advocate women rights, duties and positions in the society. Such moves are now beginning to yield faithful results. Women are now becoming societal leaders and achievement. Some women have even become politically successful to rule their home countries. Notable among them are Indira Ghandi of India, Benazi Bhutto of Pakistan, Madam Acquino of Philippines, Margaret Thatcher of Britain and the most recent first female German chancellor Angela Merkel.

Africa is not left out in this pedestrian of change. The first female African president, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, has emerged in Liberia. In Nigeria, a large number of women are now taking up elective positions in the National and state legislative assemblies. Women are getting ministerial and state commissionership appointments. A number of women have become, in very recent time, deputy governors, speakers of state legislative assemblies and even chairpersons of local government councils. Even in the sphere of economics, women are now managing directors of banks, insurance and also director generals of public corporations.

With increased political, social and economic empowerment of the African women, they have become increasingly involved in new roles and relations outside the home. However, the traditional care-giving, home making and nurturing roles of women in the African family which formed the basis of their identity as wives and mothers are no longer adequately exercised, and their roles have gradually been abandoned. Our assertion, in this regard is not in absolute terms. Cases of women in contemporary period who stand-up to the challenge and perform their roles as wives and mothers in the face of personal career developments are still abound.

Of course in traditional Africa society, women were expected to be significant wage earners in the family like men equally did. Women laboured in farming, fishing, herding, and commerce like pottery, cloth making, and craft work, alongside men. Women had the right to profit from their work, although the money usually served as a contribution to the family income. But this right was lost due to colonialism. However today the economic freedom and emancipation which women have also make them contribute to the family upkeep. In other words, in the contemporary African society, as it is with many societies of the world today, the challenge is that women's self empowerments leave them open to competition for positions with their male counterparts. Women now fight for the right to work. Thus, the role of women as wives and mother in contemporary African society makes it more difficult for the woman who also has to compete for positions outside the home, and at the same time, expected to make financial contributions to the upkeep. It is therefore apt to say that this modernization process which is sweeping across Africa and beyond leaves the women vulnerable and has far-reaching consequences for the family and society at large. The African woman has no choice but to perform her role as wife and mother in the family. She is equally vulnerable to humiliation, harassment and unhealthy competition in the work place.

The implications which all these portend for the family and the society is that the role which women play in transmitting moral values to children through socialization which help to regulate people's behaviour emanating from the family to the larger cultural milieu is no longer adequately exercised since it has become a free for all, rat race society. The consequences of the erosion of traditional values are evident in our society today. The African moral and cultural values which are usually taught from the family have given way to moral decadence leading to cultism in our schools, corruption in all sphere of our lives and electoral fraud in our polity. In fact the sense of duty, spirit of patriotism, justice and tolerance are no longer part of our societal values. All these no doubt, are effects of the new modernization process in contemporary Africa which has distorted the Africa family traditions, and conjoined to produce a new system of moral order and family issues which have changed the meaning and character of gender roles and responsibilities.



## Conclusion

No doubt, it has been established that women have made significant contribution to societal development. Women all over the world have played great roles in the socio-economic development, as well as leadership roles in society. The fact that women have suffered from injustice, inequality and other forms of oppression in modern African society is a fact of history. This has been attributed to colonial administration in Africa which deliberately excluded women from activities such as road constructions, the mines and processing industries “which led to their gradual displacement from engaging in productivity activity (Saje and Abubakar, 1997: 23). Equally discriminatory was the character to colonial education system which marginalized the female gender.

However, today the idea of gender inequality has been downplayed. It is no longer fashionable to discriminate against an individual because of gender. But one cannot deny the fact that the contemporary society is going through dramatic changes with concomitant shifts in the role and status of women, as well as its attendant erosion of traditional family values. The call here is not to go back to the traditional African past where women possessed the power that binds society together, rather there is the need to recast the traditional order by incorporating some viable traditional values with modern realities for the good of contemporary society. In spite of the new increased social and economic empowerment of the contemporary African woman, her traditional roles as wife and mother must not be abandoned or neglected. Such neglects have caused the society with the existence of various social vices. The key role the traditional African women played in teaching of children social, ethical and moral values helped to maintain a high level of morality in the traditional society. It is therefore important that the contemporary African woman braces up to this challenge.

Conclusively, one would be right to say that the contemporary is in transition as a result of a conglomeration of factors such as “urbanization, Christian teachings, formal education, Islamization, male labour migration, monetization of the economy, feminism and other modern social forces” (Ogede, 1991: 13). It is therefore important to submit that as a panacea to societal development, the understanding of traditional African perspective on gender roles is crucial to a sustainable future of Africa. Of course, “by giving equal value and importance to the roles played by both male and female, the balance and harmony that once existed can be re-established”. (Olufemi and VerEecke, 1992: 226). The misery of our society today has its genesis from the oppression, inequality and discrimination against women. Our society must not lose sight of the fact that cooperation between man and woman, interdependence on one another is quintessentially fundamental to achieving a well-ordered society.

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