

SOCIO-CULTURAL DYNAMICS AND EDUCATION FOR DEVELOPMENT IN ZIMBABWE: NAVIGATING THE DISCOURSE OF EXCLUSION AND MARGINALISATION

Biri, Kudzai^a and Mutambwa, John^b

ABSTRACT

Africa enjoys large numbers of institutions of higher learning and it has seen many women sailing through these institutions. This paper argues that, in spite of the negatives that characterise the educational system in Africa and the marginalisation of most women, there exist avenues that can be exploited to promote and strengthen the relevance of higher education for development. Women have either been 'excluded' from education or 'bound' by socio-cultural factors deterring their potential to contribute to the development of the continent. This study locates education in Africa (Zimbabwe) within the global context but at the same time paying attention to local dynamics. It looks at the contribution made by women in mainstream national development. The researchers perused through government bulletins and UNESCO reports on human capital development. Using a womanist framework, the paper argues that in order to realise sustainable development, attention should be paid to socio-religious ethics that 'disempower' women but are often ignored by scholars, politicians and other stakeholders.

KEY TERMS: women, culture, exclusion, education

^a *Department of Religious Studies Classics and Philosophy,
University of Zimbabwe. Contacts: kudzibiri@gmail.com, P. O. Box
MP167 Mt Pleasant Harare, Zimbabwe*

^b *Department of Linguistics, University of Zimbabwe, Zimbabwe.*

INTRODUCTION

The theme of sustainable development has been topical for more than a decade. It has to be understood within the context of widespread poverty, marginalisation and underdevelopment that characterise most African countries. Educational institutions have been identified as powerful stakeholders for equipping and empowering people. The quest for institutional development has prompted great attention to the workings of both private and public sector organisations and there is still considerable ignorance of African institutions, dynamics and of the ways in which organisations function, both inwardly as well as in terms of their links to social, cultural and political institutions in the surrounding societies (Woodford-Berger 1998:34) The paper argues that, despite the increasing numbers of women with qualifications from tertiary institutions, the women have failed to make an impact on developmental issues in the country as well as on the continent. This poor showing by women has been attributed to socio-cultural and religious beliefs that continue to chain women to traditional roles, despite them having acquired expert knowledge from universities and polytechnics.

BACKGROUND AND PREAMBLE

This paper utilises the Zimbabwean context, at the same time locating it within the broader context of Africa. It examines how the

traditional Shona socio-cultural religious orientation prevents women from participating in development in spite of attaining education from institutions of higher learning. Several measures have been undertaken by government and non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and even religious institutions (churches) to empower women. This came as a result of acknowledging gender disparities or gaps that exist in almost every sector in the country. The call for women empowerment through education has seen universities and colleges in the country adopting affirmative action in order to encourage the girl child to access education. The paper argues that development at a 'micro level' affects development at the macro level (national level). The way traditional socio-cultural religious ethics bind women inevitably affects development at national level. It also militates against the relevance of education. The paper examines higher education against the background of Zimbabweans who are grappling with socio-economic and political challenges whose negative effects often burden mostly women. This paper acknowledges the positive contributions made by higher educational institutions in Zimbabwe and Africa in general, especially after colonialism.

THE ROLE OF INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN ZIMBABWE

In spite of the positive contributions by institutions of higher learning and their impact on addressing gender gaps, most women remain at the periphery of society. Most leadership positions remain

in the hands of men despite the fact that women enjoy numerical strength. The UN report of 1991 acknowledges that women are poorly represented in ranks of power, policy and decision-making. The report notes that women make up less than 5% of the heads of state, heads of corporations and top positions in organisations. This is in spite of the fact that women are found in large numbers in low-level positions of public administration, political parties, trade unions and business. However, The Ministry of Education Sport and Culture module of 2002 concedes that women have made inroads in the past 20 years in parliament and middle management levels, even though their representation in these areas still averages less than 20%. This paper acknowledges the diversity that runs through Africa, but at the same time, does not overlook the unique experiences that African women rather than men, face, that amount to exclusion and marginalisation in the developmental process. This is in spite of many women attaining education from institutions of higher learning. When navigating the discourse of education for empowerment of women and sustainable development, Langure's (1997:21) thoughts are worth noting;

It is a common and somewhat unexamined belief that increased schooling for women will automatically bring about women' advancement. It is often assumed that it is lack of schooling which has been holding women back. Increased enrolment of women in schools is seen as a means to bring about gender equality in professional

occupations within government and ultimately within larger society. Women's lack of education becomes the legitimation of male supremacy, yet there is little or no evidence based on patriarchal explanation for women's subordination...

Langure (1997) brings out important issues that need to be noted: increased enrolment of women in schools and its significance, and the notions of patriarchy that have a bearing on the traditional socio-cultural religious ethics, which consequently impinge on developmental processes. The government and NGOs assume that by simply educating women, they are automatically advanced and should participate in the developmental processes. Yet, there are important underlying socio-cultural currents that need to be addressed. The paper argues that these socio-cultural factors help to keep women under the checks and balances of men, even if a woman attains a position of leadership. Cultural socialisation encourages women to consult and the myth that women need men by their side to excel is deeply embedded in many circles. The patriarchal society again perpetuates the myth that educating a woman means her advancement and independence. According to the patriarchal system, educated women become difficult to control. Yet, some women in leadership positions do not lead but continue to be guided by cultural conditionings of compliance and subservience to men's ideas. The evidence that validates this argument is the continued pleas for women's rights and empowerment. The question that may

be asked is why women are clamouring for empowerment, when increased numbers of women are enrolling and graduating from the institutions of higher learning in society? This question brings to the fore, the central underlying questions in this study:

- Why do we consider socio-cultural and religious dynamics in Zimbabwe in the quest for sustainable development against the backdrop of educating and empowering women?
- Does occupying leadership positions translate to leading and making decisions?

THE RELEVANCE OF INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN ZIMBABWE: AN APPRAISAL

Higher education is a necessity in Africa, especially after the post-colonial period. Several governments in Africa, including the government of Zimbabwe, have taken measures and implemented policies that ensure access to education by all citizens. Zimbabwe has a combination of private, government and church –related institutions of higher learning. Special attention has been paid to the enrolment of women and girls in these institutions of higher learning in order to empower them. This has resulted in the rise in numbers of women and girls who access education and those who attain qualifications from institutions of higher education. The study pre-supposes that higher education calls for and implies influence in developmental processes by all. The plight of women is a case to reckon if ever sustainable development is to be attained. This comes

in the wake of the Millennium Development Goals of 2020. While there are many institutions of higher learning in Zimbabwe, these institutions need to pay attention to the dynamics of socio-cultural religious ethics that seem to persist in the mindset of many people. This means that policies by all relevant stakeholders for economic and political development have to recognize, and factor in, the social and cultural institutions so that the ‘syndrome’ that prevents women from being ‘high fliers’ in society, despite going through institutions of higher education can be exorcised. While the discussion has noted the significance of institutions of higher learning in Zimbabwe, there is need to briefly examine the role of education and religion in Africa and their impact on the developmental process in society. That way, it will be possible to critique existing challenges towards and encourage sustainable development of institutions of higher learning.

THE ROLE OF RELIGION AND EDUCATION IN AFRICA

Religion forms the basis of African ways of life (Ayantayo, 2003). According to Mosala (1985), certain factors characterise African religion in a way that somewhat distinguishes it from other world religions, for example, African religion works more on a communal rather than individual basis. African ethics is basically religious ethics, intrinsically dependent on religion, the cultural norms flow from religious convictions (Ayantayo, 2003).

According to Oduyoye (1997), myths, folktales and proverbs restate themes that appear in ethical and moral teaching. Myths, folktales and proverbs are important in the moral formation. Some of these encourage women to bind themselves at home, leaving them with limited time to explore other areas of life. Gelfand (1973) says the concern of the Shona clansmen is directed at social justice, obligation and responsibility. Responsibilities have been placed on women and a typical African woman has the following roles: woman, mother and wife, apart from her responsibilities at work. The paper argues that all this is enshrined in patriarchy and places women within the checks and balance of men. No matter how high a woman might climb on the educational ladder, she is always reminded about her place and roles that tradition has assigned to her. The following examples from Zimbabwe and Zambia best demonstrate that there is need to go beyond offering higher education to women so that its relevance can be practical and manifest. One Shona proverb says, *Adzidzisa mwanasikana adzidzisa rudzi* (educating a woman is educating the whole nation). The proverb acknowledges the traditional role of women in socialising children and the young as they grow up. Women who are educationally empowered are most likely to perform this role more effectively than those without meaningful education. This can be achieved by providing supportive mechanisms that ensure that women's potential is explored to the best of their abilities. The corollary to this thinking is that educating the girl child enriches the family in that she will get married and increase the family network.

In addition to that, an educated girl is most likely to fetch a well-heeled suitor who will pay a good bride price in order to marry her.

Chiunduramoyo (1986) says:

Dzidzo chombo chako chemuchihwande, hachisi chinhu chekuti unofamba wakadengezera pamusoro...

(Education is your private weapon, not something to display to the public)

This traditional attitude and understanding of education, while plausible, somehow contradicts the purposes of education within the current global context. It is education for development, to compete on the global market and should not be confined to the individual. This also shows the shortcomings and limitations of traditional attitudes towards education with respect to women. They have to confine themselves to the home, if they cross the home boundary, they have trespassed. Gundani (1991) captures this very clearly, using the example of politics in Zimbabwe. Gundani points out that the exploits of Ruth Chinamano were heroic for most men to acknowledge. She had entered into politics, a domain that was generally perceived as men's. Ruth's achievements lie in encouraging other women to participate in domains perceived as men's. Also, it affirms the observations by Chiunduramoyo that education was important (formal and informal) for the empowerment of an individual to make exploits in society. Socio-cultural perceptions and socialisation need to be addressed in order for

women to break from their closets into the public domain with confidence. Lack of confidence means women cannot exploit their full potential, with the effect that education offered in institutions of higher learning becomes less appreciated.

WHY DO WE PAY ATTENTION TO SOCIO-CULTURAL RELIGIOUS ETHICS: GENDER ORGANISATIONAL: AN OVERVIEW

Neither institutions nor particular organisational settings are gender-neutral because specific organisations are connected to overall societal cultures, attitudes and systems and meaning through their structures and symbols and through the women and men who make them up (Woodford-Berger, 1998). Of importance is the fact that institutions are arenas wherein a particular kind of socialisation takes place, including re-enforcement of gendered perceptions through the allocation of work tasks, the relative positioning of men and women within an organisation, the distribution of authority and legitimate use of power, and the symbolic representations of gendered social relations manifested in, for example, language and metaphors, through regiment work practices, routines and processes. How does all this contribute to development? Gendered perceptions and habits inform organisational performance and development as structures and cultures and with respect to both formal and informal dimensions (Woodford-Berger, 1998:36). In actual fact, innumerable studies have shown that women and men may be assigned or considered qualified for very different work duties or benefits due to

their different positions in the organisation or in society in general. They may even be allocated duties and granted access to organisational resources in terms of what is considered to be “fitting” for their sex. It is not uncommon that even organisations composed of nearly all women are still controlled by men—women’s branches or wings of political parties or other state or parastatal organisations, or have men in their top managerial and decision-making echelons (Woodford-Berger 1998:37-39). All these lead to gender inequalities and imbalances of power and authority.

There is, however, no need to blanket women’s experiences. This paper acknowledges some women who have acquired higher education and who also occupy ‘free space’. However, these are just a handful as most women are bound by traditional societal norms. The incorporation into higher education curriculum of socio-religious ethics for all, including men, will cultivate a spirit of partnership between male and females in order to strengthen the relevance of higher education in their lives. In order to create a vicious cycle of strengthening institutions of higher learning and promoting sustainable development, it would be necessary to tackle the socio-cultural and religious challenges that have prescribed on women, certain norms, values and perspectives. Strengthening institutions of higher learning is a long process that needs to be multi-dimensional in approach by taking into cognisance, the most central issues for sustainable development. Women need a sustainable and enabling environment that ‘releases’ them into the

public domain confidently so that they can perform and this performance will lead to development. This way, it is possible to measure institutional relevance against the backdrop of changes and how they are affecting the excluded and marginalised.

Globalisation in the economic sense means that all countries increasingly find themselves part of intense worldwide economic competition. Investment in education as a means to improve productivity is considered crucial by most governments today. Internally, most African countries have moved away from a centrally planned economic system and consolidation of the nation state towards pluralism, a market economy and democratization of the political system. Planning of education can no longer be seen as a technical and linear process but a gradual process of negotiation and consensus building between different actors (Gustafsson, 1998:138). Therefore this paper calls for negotiation with social and religious institutions as platforms that can effectively initiate ‘the release of women’ to their domains of interest, which may lead to positive development.

Factors affecting sustainable development and empowerment of women are a contested area, as there is lack of cohesion because of the fragmentation of ideologies, perspectives and attitudes. Contradictions naturally remain between modern and traditional forms and institutions of governance, and between the state and the people, leading to discussion on how to integrate the traditional and the modern into one African style state (Dia, 1993). Yet the

developmental process depends on the strength of the link between work carried out at the micro level and growth and development at national level and it is not unreasonable to assume that good results at national level (macro level) are as a result of what goes on at the micro level (Carlsson, 1998:14). But why does education appear irrelevant at times and does not seem to change the lives of women much? Organisational development and change are not a matter of simply transferring one model - the Western model - to an African setting (Carlsson, 1998:21). It is a matter of paying attention to the socio-cultural religious dimensions in Africa that largely define and dictate the space for women and what they should achieve in life. The success and relevance of Higher Education Institutions will depend on whether or not they ensure that individuals (women) do not become isolated islands but are integrated into a larger context of development work.

How can this resistance to change be explained? The experiences from organisational development work in Africa are not very encouraging. The continent probably offers one of the most difficult administrative environments imaginable. But the need for change is great. At the same time, the resistance to change is just as great (Carlsson, 1998).

EXPLORING THE ISSUES: CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS

Strengthening Higher Education Institutions relies on the availability of committed motivated, competent and dedicated people. In order to substantiate the point that the mere provision of education does not translate to relevance of institutions of higher learning and development, below are some examples. Zimbabwe got its independence in 1980. It also embarked on programmes that were designed to empower women. There has been a rise in the number of women going through colleges and universities. Female politicians rank among the most educated, yet there is a lot of exclusion and marginalisation. Entry points at institutions of higher learning are lowered in order to make sure that these institutions include many female students. However, in spite of the good intention in some circles, it translates to the inferiority of women because they cannot compete with male students. As an example, both male and female students can pursue the same degree programme with female students being accepted into these programmes with inferior points to those of the male student. This has been described as affirmative action, whose objective is to increase the number of females in areas that were dominated by men. Areas that easily come to mind are Engineering, Architecture and Veterinary Science. In spite of all the large numbers, women are still clamouring for change and empowerment. The writers' experiences as lecturers at university show that some married female students go through painful experiences with their newly acquired qualifications. After completing their degrees, they are told by their husbands that their place is in the home, not in the public sector. This view emanates

from the traditional patriarchal notion of the role and place of a woman that is 'written within the hearts and minds of Africans' but poses challenges in this current global system. Such decisions are blind to global socio-economic dynamics because, for higher education to become relevant in the contemporary world, we need to locate it within the broader context of the world system. There is, therefore, need for transformation of mentality that places women within a closet innovation in order to make the higher education that they acquire relevant; there is need for creativity in order to make sound female intellectual scholarship that initiate sustainable development.

As an illustration, Zambia got its independence in 1964. The government embarked on educating women in order to empower them and to develop their nation. Educating women and empowering them was part of the national agenda designed to negate the ills of the colonial system. Educating women is a positive step in the direction of empowering and developing them.

THE CONTRIBUTION OF RELIGION AND CULTURE

Pentecostals are seen as people who encourage empowerment and leadership of all people regardless of gender (Kalu 2008). They advocate for empowerment through education. Soothill's (2010) analysis of Ghanaian Charismatic churches resonates well with the situation in Zimbabwe. She correctly points out that in Zimbabwean Pentecostalism, God is not a democrat, but has his dictates that have

to be followed. There are no rights, hence, a complex trajectory they have sourced from both biblical patriarch and the traditional paradigm of male supremacy. This acts as a hindrance towards development of women. The religious models presented to women militate against the quest for upward mobility in zones that are generally referred to as male domains. All this has a negative impact on the developmental process of women because it translates to exclusion and marginalisation. Women are also disempowered through inheritance. Inheritance within the Zimbabwean culture means that women are like property; when their husbands die, they are passed on to the brothers. The traditional Zimbabwean culture does not allow women to inherit any property from their deceased husbands; this makes them economically powerless. This cultural arrangement seems to shape female identity within the Shona society, and the custom is very strong among traditional as well as modern Zimbabwean men. This cultural practice, while it holds the people together, is retrogressive as it works against women's empowerment.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Having established that putting women through university education is no guarantee for women's empowerment, the paper argues that there is need for deliberate creation for opportunities for women. The quarter system is a case in point where a certain number of positions in political as well as administrative duties are deliberately set aside for women so that they are not in competition with men.

Perhaps more important than setting aside positions of responsibility for women is the drive to sensitise men on the need to take women as their equals at workplaces. As already suggested elsewhere in the paper, this is the biggest hurdle that stands in the way of women empowerment because of the fact that such attitudes are entrenched in people's culture.

CONCLUSION

Several factors that militate against the empowerment of women as well as their meaningful participation in national issues have been discussed. These include deep-seated traditional beliefs, the small number of females with higher education when compared to men, and the lack of opportunities for women to prove themselves. Because of these factors, the provision of higher education to women is not a guarantee for sustainable development. This is in light of the existence of traditional socio-cultural religious ethics that limit, confine and designate specific space for women who have attained higher education. These socio-cultural and religious ethics militate against women, leading to their exclusion and marginalisation, much to the detriment of the developmental process.

REFERENCES

- Ayantayo, J. K.; 2003. *African traditional ethics and transformation: Innovation and ambivalence involved and modification necessary for sound 21st Century African intellectual scholarship*. Ibadan: University of Ibadan.
- Chiunduramoyo, A.; 1986. *Ziva Kwawakabva*. Gweru: Mambo Press.
- Dia, M. A.; 1993. Governance approach to civil service reform in Sub-Saharan Africa. World Bank Technical Paper No 25, Washington: World Bank.
- Ministry of Education Sport and Culture; 2002. *Gender Equality in Education*. Harare: UNESCO Office.
- Oduyoye, M. A.; 1997. *Daughters of Anowa: African Woman and Patriarchy*. Town: Publishers.
- Gelfand, M.; 1973. *The Genuine Shona*. Gweru: Mambo Press.
- Gustafsson, I.; 1998. Basic-education management of an extremely complex system. In L. Wohlgemuth, J. Carlsson and H. Kifle (eds.) *Institution Building in Africa*. Nordiska Afrikainstitutet: Uppsala.
- Johnston, A.; 1998. On Developing Institutions in Africa. In: Wohlgemuth, L., Carlsson, J. and Kifle, H. (Eds.) *Institution Building in Africa*. Nordiska Afrikainstitutet: Uppsala.
- Langure, S. H.; 1997. Education for women's empowerment or schooling for women's subordination. In: Medel, C. (Ed). *Negotiating and creating spaces of power*. Anonuevo: UNESCO Institution for Education, Hamburg.
- Woodford-Berger, P.; 1998. Organisational cultures and institutional development. In: Wohlgemuth, L., Carlsson, J. and Kifle, H., (Eds.) *Institution Building and Leadership in Africa*. Nordiska Afrikainstitutet: Uppsala.