

INTERNAL PROBLEMS OF WOMEN: A FORCE MILITATING AGAINST OVERCOMING WOMEN'S SUBORDINATION

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Introduction

Feminism, a collection of movements and ideologies connoting the conviction of the full humanity of women, aiming at reconstructing human society to reflect women's equality with men has received glaring attention in literature because of its important role for sustainable development in all cultures. Feminist issue have therefore, attracted a wide range of responses from all genders, men and women alike and from within and outside Africa. The issue of subordination of and injustices against womanhood and the girl child has been widely stressed. Women in diverse cultures and work places believe that the nature and power of women were initially, grossly marginalized and misinterpreted. The African culture to a large extent enhances the subordination of women and girl- child as a whole.

In Africa for instance, it is believed that this problem was incubated by some cultural instincts (Ezenweke, 2009), and heightened by religion. Scholars have observed that it is debatable whether or not the influence of Christianity has been beneficial to the socio-cultural transformation of Africa especially with its effect on women and the girl-child. It is further affirmed that the Western sexist element have greatly fuelled the cultural sexism of traditional Africa. Thus, it can be vividly stated that African men at home with androcentrism and the patriarchal order of the biblical cultures, have felt their views confirmed by Christianity (Oduyoye, 1995b; Rakoczy 2004).

Both the Islamic and Christian Scriptures document supportive stories of violence against women. For instance, the story of Dinah in Genesis 34, Tamar in 2 Samuel 13, the Levite's concubine in Judges 19, Jephthah's daughter in Judges 11, Vashti in Esther chapter 1 and Susannah in Daniel 13. More so, the right of chastisement was the enforcer of women's subordination in marriage. Bussert (1986) discovered that:

In the "Rules of Marriage" compiled by Friar Cherubino in the 15th century, we find the careful instruction to a husband to first reprimand his wife; "And if this still doesn't work . . . take up a stick and beat her soundly . . . for it is better to punish the body and correct the soul than to damage the soul and spare the body" (p. 13).

This doctrine confirms scriptural passages interpreted to support male dominance over women. Ephesians chapter 5 documents that:

Wives be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord, for the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church, the body of which he is the Savior. Just as the church is subject to Christ, so also wives ought to be, in everything, to their husbands (vs.22-24).

The church has too often, either by its silence or its instruction, communicated to battered women that they should stay in abusive relationships, try to be better wives, and "forgive and forget." To batterers, it has communicated that their efforts to control their wives or girlfriends are justified because women are to be subjects to men in all things. They have been permitted to "discipline" their wives and their children all for the "good of the family."

The story is not different in Islam too, whereby we also find texts and interpretations of texts that have been used by abusive men to justify their behavior against women. According to Muslim scholar and activist, Sharifa Alkhateeb (1999) the most abused verse is ayah 34 of Surah four: Men are the protectors and maintainers of women because Allah gave more to the one than the other, and because they support them from their means. So devout women are extremely careful and attentive in guarding what cannot be seen in that which Allah is extremely careful and attentive in guarding. Concerning women whose rebellious disloyalty (*nusbooz*) you fear, admonish them, then refuse to share their beds, and then hit them; but if they become obedient, do not seek means of annoyance against them. For Allah is Most High, Great (pp. 54-55).

However, recent documents on feminist issues center on the accusation of the exclusion of women from active participation in decision taken process, in politics and in social and religious spheres as a whole and the subjection of womanhood to obnoxious cultural practices that endangers the actualization of their self esteem. The paper notes and appreciates that womanhood has suffered unprintable damages in the hands of their male counterparts. It further notes that a lot of factors have been put in place to overcome women's subordination. However, the present paper, taking the forgoing as point of departure proffers that womanism contributes in slowing down the speed for overcoming women's subordination. In other words, who actually subordinates the feminist gender? Is there a feminist instinct that hinders the effect translating of the global agenda on womanhood? Or, is womanhood the incubator and perpetuator of her own problem? These questions call for study especially in Igbo land where it seems that women are the incubators and perpetuators of the obnoxious cultural practices and injustices against womanhood and girl-child, more so, whereby the current stand point seems not to have been sufficiently investigated. This paper therefore, using evidence from literature and participant observer method as secondary and primary sources

respectively, proffers that the problems of womanhood in actualizing their potentials is an internal problem. In other words, women are the perpetrators of their own problems. The remaining part of this paper will be discussed under the following sub-headings;

- Injustice and violence against womanhood
- New trends on feminist race
- The nature and virtues of womanhood
- The internal problems of women
- Conclusion

INJUSTICE AND VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMANHOOD

Violence against women as a term refers to any act of gender-based violence resulting in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life. It further encompasses, but not limited to, battering, sexual abuse of female children in and outside the household, dowry-related violence, marital rape, female genital mutilation, exploitation of all kinds, sexual harassment and trafficking in women and forced prostitution and other traditional obnoxious practices harmful to women. As earlier noted, violence and injustice is enshrined in many cultures and fuelled by religious texts, thus we talk of socio-religious limitations facing the women world.

Socio –religious limitations facing the famine gender therefore covers a wide range of gender based discrimination, purposeful exclusion from vital roles and dehumanizing practices facing the average woman, girl – child inclusive. In the context of this paper, and for clarity too, we shall limit our discussion with reference to only some of them. They include;

- Sexual degradation and exploitation
- Exclusion from access to and control over national and International resources
- Gender discrimination and pervasive projection of maleness
- Exclusion from decision – making and leadership
- Education disparity
- Obnoxious widowhood practices
- Genital mutilations.

We may expatiate some of these practices and use then to establish the main theory of this paper.

i. Sexual Degradation: It is a well known fact that human trafficking is a famine gender oriented phenomenon. Women and the girl – child are the victim or end rout of trafficking. UNICEF has once revealed that an approximate of 5,000 to 7,000 girls are

trafficked across the border each year, most of them end up as sex workers (Uchem,2001).

ii. *Exclusion from Access to and Control over National and International Resources:* It has been widely stressed that despite the enormous role of women and the girl – child in sustainable development in many cultures, yet, their voices are not heard in decision making arenas even when issues concerning them are being deliberated. In fact, there is a widespread agreement on the fact that women across cultures are excluded from access to and control over national and international resources with its harmful effects on the human well being and psyche (Snyder & Tadese, 1995). This view was later clearly reported by the then Secretary General of the United Nations in the person of Kofi Annan as cited in Uchem, 2001 that “ Women formed the main agricultural labor force in Africa and many other parts of the world, yet, most of them are still denied access to credit, land ownership and inheritance. Their labor goes unrecognized and unrewarded” p.14.

iii. *Gender Discrimination and Pervasive Projection of Maleness:* Gender discrimination and pervasive projection of maleness is another dangerous and dehumanizing phenomena facing the average African girl – child. The ever growing stress on maleness and its dehumanizing force on the girl – child cannot be overemphasized. Traditionally, this discrimination within the two genders starts from birth whereby the birth of girls is relatively less valued and welcomed as shown by the loudness of the herald. The herald of a new birth is louder when it is a boy and with much emphasises on 'it's a boy' except in certain cases where a girl is particularly desired. The pervasive maleness ideologies at the household and community level at large, often favour males over their female counterparts. It is also evident from the differential assignment of domestic roles, educational and employment opportunities available for the girl – child (Odaga & Heneveld, 2007). It is unfortunate that even among the elites of the society, one finds cases whereby given courses of study is sought for a boy to ensure he gets a good job after graduation to earn him livelihood while any course if good for a girl on the basis of 'she is a girl'.

iv. *Exclusion from Decision – Making and Leadership:* In 1999 for instance, women represented 11 percentage rate of parliaments globally. Over ten years later, the increase is still not satisfactory. According to the global Organization of Parliament (IPU) equal representation of men and women in parliament would hopefully be achieved in the next 20 years. The Secretary of the Inter –Parliamentary Union (IPU) Anders Johnson reported that in 2012, there was an increase in the percentage rate of women getting into parliament after years of minimal growth. In 2013, he added that there was a doubling of that rate. He, Johnson (2014) summarized that:

We actually saw 1.5 percentage increase globally in parliaments as a result of elections that took place in 2013,, If we were to continue with this rate of

increase of 1.5 it means that within 20 years we should be able to reach globally gender parity in parliament (p. 27).

v. *Obnoxious Widowhood Practices*: One major obnoxious practice in Africa especially Igbo land is the widowhood practice. The degree of severe of this practice varies across cultures. In many cases, widows are being accused of being responsible for the death of their husbands while bereaved husbands were rarely responsible for the death of their wives. Bereaved women are often subjected to harmful and inhuman acts (Uchem, 2001; Emeka, 2010). Some are even kicked out of their matrimonial homes without ones personal belongings. The case is more severe where one has no surviving male child.

vi. *Genital Mutilation*: Genital mutilation is a traditional practice that is believed to control feminine excessive sexual desires thereby ensuring ones fidelity to her husband alone. Throughout history, this practise is performed by older woman who acquired the technique. However, with enhanced education and knowledge, the phenomenon of genital mutilation is becoming obsolete. This is further supported by the global fight against Female Genital mutilation by feminist social empowerment studies (**Igenoza, A. (2004)**).

It is noteworthy to mention that many of these practices are witnessed in varied degrees in various places and many of them are being contested now by feminists movements individually and collectively and even by their male counterpart. In the coming unit, we shall take a look at the changes these practises have experienced due to new insights.

NEW TRENDS IN FEMINIST RACE

There is abundance and undoubted literature that the feminine gender suffered gross dehumanizing and oppressive social structures especially in the past. A great percentage of these structures still exist in varied degrees across culture. Their cries may be summarized with the observation of the United Nations that women form one-half of the world's population, do three- fourths of the world's work, receive one-tenth of the world's salary, and own one-hundredth of the world's land. Two- thirds of illiterate adults are women. Over three fourth of starving people are women and their dependent children (United Nations Statistical Department, 2000; Uchem, 2001). Yet, there is no doubt that remarkable changes have been witnessed in the status of the feminine gender.

These changes are evident from the fact that women's voices have started to be heard at both local and national levels. Many organizations have been set out to discuss the issues of womanhood. For instance, the impact of the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 cannot be overemphasized whereby it was determined to advance the goals of equality and peace of humanity. Following the Beijing conference

was the women conference in New York in the year 2000 to review the progress of the outcome of Beijing conference. Since then, much positive changes in the status of women and the girl-child have been noticed, though, much is still desired.

However, before we deal with the main thrust of this paper which is to articulate how the feminine gender herself contributes in slowing down the rate of overcoming women's subordination, it is necessary to cast light on the nature and virtues of womanhood which is believed will help appreciate the stance of this paper.

THE NATURE AND VIRTUES OF WOMANHOOD

For a fuller understanding of the thrust of this unit, it is deemed necessary to refresh on the concept and nature of womanhood so as to translate her divinely make up. This will in a large measure expose the virtues womanhood enjoy that would be instrumental in overcoming their subordination if appropriately directed.

From the creation story in the book of Genesis, God, after the work of creation, looked at what He has created and observed a gap. The gap was the absence of the woman, God's agent of procreation and the joy of the man. When a woman was eventually created, the man woke up, saw her and screamed for joy, his heart gladdened. The presence of the woman is thus the perfection of God' creation in man. Womanhood is therefore, the symbol of the fullness of creation.

God in his infinite wisdom knew what remained to perfect His work and therefore deposited it on the woman as the last of his creation. The presence of the woman filled the lack the man had experienced. Thus, woman brought about the first change experienced by man and so remains the divinely endowed instrument and enforcer of change.

Logically, the potency of virtue is deposited in the heart and a woman was made from the rib of the man. The rib is very close to the heart. Invariably, the substance of the heart is the main component of a woman. In the words of Shakespeare, a woman is filled with the milk of human kindness. Biblically, does a woman forget her child? By mere fact that God Himself asked this question confirms the heart of the woman to do well and to seek for the common good.

Biblical passages confirm that women are curious and inquisitive in nature. For instance, Gen 3-5-6 documents that:

The woman saw that the tree was good to eat and pleasing to the eye, that it was enticing for the wisdom that it could give. So she took some of its fruits and ate it. She also gave same to her husband, he ate. The eyes of two of them opened.

The episode which men initially interpreted with biased cultural background, as the fall of man and blame the woman for the fall. Jerome biblical commentary observed that behind the story lies conviction about woman's curiosity and her ability to care for man, it does not concern the basic truths of the account. This is the beginning of wisdom, intellectual development and discovery.

A critical study of the book of Judith will reveal the wisdom, tact and patience of a woman. With these qualities, Judith brought the head of Holofernes to Bethulia to his people and thus destroyed their enemies and brought joy and life to her people. What the contemporary men of her time could have destroyed with impatience and anger.

The book of Judith, chapter 8 verses 9, documents the lamentation of Judith against the decision of the men of her time. She said:

Listen to me leaders of the people of Bethulia. You were wrong to speak to the people as you did today and to bind yourselves by oath in defiance of God, to surrender the town to our enemies if the Lord did not come to your help within a set number of days. Who are you to put God to the test today, you, of all people to set yourselves above him? You do not understand anything and will never will....For God is not to be threatened....Rather, as we wait patiently for God to save, let us plead with him to help us.

In the book of Esther, a woman (Esther) with wisdom and tact came up with a plan to save the whole Jewish nation from the snare of death that had already been signed by the king. She prayed, bravely walked to the king, without the king's invitation, which as the law prescribed will cost one her life. What did the king do? Chapter 5 verses 1-4 documents that:

God changed the king's heart, inducing a milder spirit. He sprang from his throne and took her in his arms, comforting her with soothing words.... I am your brother, take heart, you are not going to die....Tell me what you want; even if it is half of my kingdom, I will grant to you

The book of Judges also portrays the nature of womanhood. Chapter 16-15-18 documents how a woman (Delilah) used her woman instinct to weaken Samson, the most powerful man of his time:

Delilah said to him, how can you say that you love me, when your heart is not for me? Three times now, you have lied to me and have not told me where your great strength comes from. And day after day she pestered him with her talk ... After, he confided

everything to her ... she lulled Samson to sleep in her lap, summoned a man and had him shaved off the seven locks from his head and his strength left him...

More so, God's dealing with Mary confirms the great value God places on womanhood. In her, womanhood is glorified and exalted into the very presence of God (Igenozu, 2004). In a nutshell, the traditional African woman is deeply religious more than men and is intimately related to the gods of her land (Mohammed, 1995). The creator endowed women with natural attributes and instincts which are strictly hers, or which she possesses to a different degree from men (Aquino, 1996). Women are the backbone of rural development, they are found in agriculture and outside it, they hold an unassailable pre-eminence, tending the children and even the husbands (Ijere, 1991).

Women have proved to possess concealed ability even under very difficult and stressful situations. They have contributed immensely in policy making and governance. Many Nigerian women have proved to be more than mere bench-warming spectators even in the midst of the male-dominated professional congregation. For instance, three of such male dominated professions; the Nigerian Medical Association, Nigerian Bar Association and the Institute of Chartered Accountants of Nigeria have been led in recent times by female presidents and they made remarkable changes in their various fields (Olubi, 2002).

Even before the pre-colonial era, Nigerian women participated effectively in the economy of their time. Apart from being mothers and wives and taking charge of the domestic sector, women contributed substantially to the production and distribution of goods and services. Women also officiated as priestesses, diviners, healers, traditional birth attendants, and oftentimes as custodians of sanctuaries for gods and goddesses (Ogbajie, 1995).

Remarkably, the modern city of Zaria was founded by a woman called Queen Bakwa Turuku. Her daughter Amina later succeeded her as the Queen of Zaria. Queen Amina was a great and powerful warrior. She built a high wall around Zaria in order to protect the city from invasion and extended the boundaries of her territory beyond Bauchi. The people of Kano and Katsina paid tributes to her. She turned Zaria into a very prominent commercial centre (Attoe, 2011). The situation is also similar in Yoruba land, the Oba ruled with the assistance of a number of women referred to as the ladies of the palace. The significant role played by prominent women such as Moremi of Ife, Emotan of Benin and Omu Okwel of Ossomari, Chief (Mrs) Margaret Ekpo and Mrs. Janet N. Mokelu in the history of Nigeria cannot be ignored (Attoe, 2011).

In the recent past too, there were outstanding Nigerian women who were not lacking in vision and knowledge who participated remarkably in the political, economic and social activities in the prevailing rigid male dominated society under which they lived and made remarkable contributions to the welfare of their communities. Apart from many of the sung heroes like Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, Oby Ezekwesili, Dora Akunyili to mention a few, there were and still are many Nigerian female unsung heroes in various corners of Nigeria, Igboland in particular. These women brought positive changes in various sphere of life especially as it concerns women. These women, though not state figures, engraved indelible marks on the sand of their various communities. Today, such women still live in various rural communities.

In view of the above, one may say without serious contradiction if any that womanhood has all it takes to bring about the desired changes for their full actualization. What hinders them then? What are those internal problems of women that hinders the full actualization of their goals? These questions will form the main thrust of the next unit.

THE INTERNAL PROBLEMS OF WOMEN

In the preceding unit, we expounded the nature and virtues of women in general and used it as a standpoint to ask - why has womanhood been unable to actualize her goals in this period of globalization and new insights despite the conceited efforts of individuals, groups and government, locally, nationally and internationally? In other words, what are the negative instincts of womanhood that hinders the effective overcoming of her subordination? The answer to these questions which reflects the internal problems of women is demonstrated with the popular saying that narrates how a how a group of girls went to fetch fire wood and some made remarkable achievements more than their peers. When they were being praised, those that did not fetch good firewood complained that others fetched better firewood because they fetched from the evil forest that is forbidden to fetch from. Whether this story is a fact or fallacy, it illuminates the picture of the internal problems of women. We shall use this as a referent for the remaining part of our discussion.

Firstly, earlier in this paper, we talked about exclusion of women from decision-making and leadership. If I may ask, who hinders women from active participation in politics? Surely, not men and not the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria or any other country but women themselves. With their tongues, they discourage interested female contestants. Those that braved it and dammed the consequence are negatively labeled. If such a brave female politician is unfortunate to be a widow, she killed her husband to be free to hand out with men. Instead of getting support from their fellow women they are rather labeled in made light. Such negative labeling has negative impacts for self actualization.

Secondly, we cited widowhood practices as one of the areas of concern for feminism. I also ask – who subjects women to those dehumanizing conditions at the death of their husbands? In truth, not men but fellow women. In all the studied cases, these widows were maltreated by their fellow women. The same women, mostly the *umu ada* (daughters born into a given family or kindred) were the enforcer and perpetrators of these obnoxious practices.

Thirdly, in the case of genital mutilation, men are not the enforcers but women themselves. In many traditional societies, it is even an abomination for men to perform the mutilation or in some cases, witness the scene of the act. It is a purely feminine role. In their numbers and with their virtues as agents of change as herein reiterated, they have all it takes to put a stop to it. If the biblical women succeeded as cited earlier in this paper, why not the contemporary women.

Furthermore, women and girl-child project the emphasis on maleness. For instance, despite encouragements given to the female students to vie for the presidency position in the departmental associations or Students Union Government in Nigerian Universities proved abortive because they believe that vice president post is for the female while president position is for the male. This assumption is not constitutional but it is already in the female psyche.

In a nut shell, even when the women are not directly involved in incubating and perpetuating of socio-religious limitations, they are indirectly at the background. Or at least, it is believed that if they join their voices together, feminist voices must be heard.

CONCLUSION

This paper appreciates the unprintable harms women suffered in the past and still suffer today though in varied degrees. Kanyoro (2001) noted that:

African women have guarded cultural prescriptions that are strictly governed by the fear of breaking taboos. Many aspects that diminish women continue to be practiced to various degrees, often making women objects of cultural preservation. Harmful traditional practices are passed on as 'cultural values' and therefore are not to be discussed, challenged or changed. P159.

However, women have shown that they have all it demands to take back what was taken from them. This was made manifest on the result of the roles of women in Latin America that led to the birth of feminist theology (Maher, 2012). Feminist theology will continue to be seen as an encouraging rock on which every other woman should stand to seek for all-round justice for the voiceless.

In Egypt too, a reasonable number of Islamic women activist reprinted their presence in the mainstream of Islamic discourse and challenged their male counterparts for misinterpreting Islam (George, 2011).

The paper therefore argues that in view of the population of women and in consideration of their virtues, women are divinely endowed bring about the much desired parity with men they are crying for. If they can come together, agree and speak with one voice against those dehumanizing treatments, their voices must be heard. If they can afford to pull their resources together and support the election of a woman to any elected position, they must win. The problem is whether they can agree with one voice for the advancement of a common goal? Can they give credence to fellow women who fetched firewood remarkably without accusing them that they fetched from the evil forest? Unless this problem is treated, the effective actualization of parity with men is doubted.

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