

CARITAS UNIVERSITY AMORJI-NIKE, EMENE, ENUGU STATE**Caritas Journal of Management, Social Sciences and Humanities**

CJMSSH, Volume 2, Issue 1 (2023)

**STATUS OF WOMEN IN NIGERIA IN CONTEMPORARY TIMES:
CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS****Ugwu Stella Abel****Authors' Affiliation**

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Contemporary,

Colonialism,

Women,

Socialization Processes,

Structures,

Universal Declaration Of
Human Rights,

Development

ABSTRACT

Women are the central processing unit of every community, the central nervous system that controls and coordinates the social system. In Nigeria the issue of women marginalization, neglect, subservience, etc has been moving with the speed of an eagle against the wind after colonialism. Though male and female do have biological and structural differences peculiar to each; mental processes of both sexes are the same. One can be more active depending on the level of activation factored by both physical and social environments at each period. In Nigeria, the socialization processes that are unequally available for both sexes from birth through secondary socialization and the later processes of the social system especially after the coming of the British and his structures is not conducive to the female child. This paper argues that the colonial system such as patriarchy, lack of empowerment for females, family (nuclear family) etc are the chief causes of sexual inequality and subordination that still exists and has refused to abate to include women in the decision making sector. This paper therefore discusses the factors inherent in the colonial system that sustain the status quo. It used both historical and theoretical perspectives and guided by feminist theories. The paper suggests therefore that if colonial mentality of subduing women and retaining power through regulations, rules and socialization processes is strongly opposed through regulations in Nigeria and enforced with zero tolerance to male preference, it will encourage dispensing authority on merit. Then women who meet the desired requirements for each system will have equal chances with their male counterparts in contributing to the growth and development of every aspect of the social system.

INTRODUCTION

Sexuality definition is relative to societies but the general acceptance is that there are roles which society has ascribed to females and males driven by their biology (Ortner, 1974). It is also no news that women in Nigeria are still under their men folk in all ramifications of the community (Akpan, 2019). In the traditional African society the sex functions of a woman determines her function(s) at that particular period which faults the bio-grammar theorists' who emphasize that men by nature are strong and aggressive and women are affectionate, therefore since the woman is involved in child bearing and caring it is her duty to socialize the child at early and late childhood because the child is always close to her as a result of her role as a mother and be a caregiver to the husband while the man by his nature (aggressive) goes out in search of food and protects the family. The functions of African families before the British invasion are time bound and not gender bound. These roles were done in complementarity, without prejudices in the traditional African societies (Boserup, 1970).

During the period of pregnancy and weaning the African woman stays at home invariably she does the home chores that she is able to do at that point. At that period she is not expected to fend for the feeding of the home outside the home until after weaning the child. The man who maybe the husband is free to move at that period goes out to get food for the family because at that time the woman is indispensable with her biological functions. Today these roles are seen differently even though they are done arbitrarily, there are certain important fundamental biological, religious, social-cultural, economic, legal and political variables which influence sex role allocation in most Nigerian societies since Nigeria marriage with colonial culture. The status of Nigerian women in respect to their socially ascribed roles has not changed significantly since after independence in spite of modernization, industrialization, universal declaration of human rights, and other international, regional and local institutional policies and frameworks (Para-Mallam & Oloketuyi, 2011; Akpan, 2019). The reasons women are still undervalued and underrepresented in the economic, political and social aspects of the society is attributed to the systemic practices in Nigeria which is not far from patriarchy (Okafor & Akokuwebe, 2015).

WOMEN STATUS IN THE TRADITIONAL AFRICAN SOCIETIES

The traditional African society had the status of women complementing that of men, and were much respected and held in high regards. The African woman is known for her roles as a complete person with personal endowment, mental capability, and ingenuity of her own, who plays her roles well at each point as wife, mother, leader, warrior, family head, etc. The now known male exclusive social roles were not exclusive for males as shown in Ify Amadiume's work 'Male daughters, Female husbands. She performs any of these roles in collaboration with every member of the family or community according to one's ability not sex. Awefeso & Odeyemi (2014) noted that women were traditional rulers in pre-colonial days some even bore the now so called 'male titles' like Queen Amina of Zauzau of Zaria who bore the title Emir, Luwo Gbadiaya of Ife who bore the title Ooni of Ife, Jomijoim of Oyo who bore the title Alafin, etc.

The traditional African society is known for its' extended family system, the African woman finds it less burdensome because she worked hand in hand with the family members and that is how the community is structured and functioned as such, no sex issue involved expect in biological functions. For instance, in agriculture where she and her family work complementarily to ensure good yield nobody had any specific task (Boserup, 1970), it is a kind of communal labour where everyone is involved and sometimes in exchange work. In the traditional African society the woman does not work round the clock to keep her home (and is not restricted to the home front) by making provisions for firewood, water, washing, cleaning, etc in addition to working in the farm, this is because anyone can do any of these which includes any member of the extended family which includes her husband. The African child is taught sex function not as one being superior to the other but to prepare them for their biological functions; relatively the female child by nature of her biological functions is limited for certain periods but does not make her weak in any sense.

In decision making a lot of Nigerian women have held positions of leadership, in government, military, parliament, and judiciary. Mba (1982), Ezuma (2003) and Fadipe (1970), etc, noted that the African woman had political powers, she also expressed them openly. Nina looking at the position of women in southern Nigeria before 1900 was of the view that there were no separate and explicit

political institutions and roles between genders. She maintained that in Yoruba society for instance, that there was a period when women held the Obaship, quoting Smith (1965) she noted that in Ijesha, out of 38 Oba (kings) five were females. In Oyo Kingdom members of the Ogboni chiefs were also women who held some levels of both administrative and judicial powers. The Iya afins, Iyaba, etc also wielded much influence in the society, in fact they even contributed to the depose and crowning of an Oba or Alafin; these administrative functions even extended to taking care of dependent territories, markets, etc.

In Igbo land, among the river line areas of delta, there was a strong and independent institution of 'Omu' which was equivalent to 'Obi' institution. The Omu had political, religious and economic powers. For instance, she had to spiritually sanctify the market area before business resumes, she also had her court where she adjudicated on matters affecting women. In Okpanam, Delta State, Omu has been practiced back to the 15th century and at present the 'Omu' is Her Royal Majesty Obi Martha Dunkwu. In Onicha, Osomari in Ogburu the Omu and her councilors take title of ivory known as 'Igbo-odu' which is parallel to the men's 'Ozo' title and which symbolized their possession of great wealth. The procedure of accession of the Omu was similar to that of the Obi (The Guardian 2017). It was also noted that in Eze Mgbokwo Udo Mini Oke Nnachi of Aro kingdom reigned from 1799 to 1825. In fact in Onitsha, the last Omu Nwagboka Ekwuatu of Ogbetu died in 1886.

In the hinter land because of the absence of centralized government or a representative group the nature and structure of politics was quite different from those of the river line, that is why they are generally referred to as 'Igbo ewe-eze'. Even in this type of political system women participated to a great extent directly and indirectly in decision making, they formed associations like 'Umuada' and 'Uyomdi' which served as pressure groups to the political activities of the society (Amadiume, 1987). They also influenced the development of their communities and ensure social order through their activities (The Guardian, 2017). They were active in the three arms of government of traditional societies, the extent of involvement dependent on society. For instance as the Guardian (2017) quoting Onwuejeogwu (1972) noted the "Omu" performed political/executive, spiritual/judiciary and parliamentary functions. In Ebonyi state there was the 'Isuokoma' like the

"Umuada" they had both secular and spiritual adjudication roles and are involved in development projects.

In the North, there was the services of Queen Amina of Zaria as a leader, development director in the sense that she built walls to protect the city, introduced construction of roads, etc and was a war Lord who led and fought war and conquered many cities thereby expanded her empire.

TRADITIONAL AFRICAN WOMAN STATUS DURING COLONIALISM

The African woman is dedicated, diligent, faithful, dogged, and can fight with her last strength to ensure her constituency is secure. Women are endowed with intelligence, ability to judge rightly have foresight, with these virtues they foresaw the plans of the colonials, fought them through resisting their strategies. In their positions as heads of markets women fought to protect their jurisdiction and the colonial masters found it hard to breakthrough, so they (colonials) used African men who were greedy for power and with their sophisticated weapons to dispossess women of their leadership roles and sustained the victory with policies and other unequal structures of religion, education, agriculture, etc. In the West for instance the likes of Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti that formed the Egba Women's Union and Mama Aduni, fought against British taxation on farm produce. Also Madam Alimotu Pelewura who lead the market from 1920s to the 1940s formed the market women association fought the fascist colonial government that controlled trade and prices of food items. In the East the likes Margaret Ekpo who formed the Aba Market Women Association fought against taxation, for economic protection of women and their political rights.

For Ndukwe (2021) the actions of these women were not limited to challenging exploitation and oppressive rule; they were geared towards preventing cultural shifts which would disadvantage women leaving them with less and less influence and relevance than they have before to the takeover by the colonial administration. The missionaries and foreign traders came with their own structures that did not favour the African woman; they introduced new religions, new type of education and a new type of agricultural system which was gender biased and quite different from what the colonized used to know. For Akpan (2019) the major reason that affected women's involvement in

leadership position especially in politics during colonialism was their many acts of resistance especially their standing up against the colonial government on taxation. The introduction of Christianity and Islam severed the participation of women in societal processes and set up power relations that subordinated women. Symke (1991) maintained that the colonial system was so gender biased that the structures had inherent in them a system of internalizing the bias even among the females themselves by encouraging women to develop female culture of inferiority. This has become so toxic that women both educated and non-educated saw and still see the involvement of women in decision making field a taboo. Imagine a woman activist like Amuni Khadi in this century saying that a woman leading prayers is dishonorable.

Before the colonial period African women were highly involved in religious activities of their societies as priestesses, spirit mediums, etc offering sacrifices, performing from cleansing to burial rites, settling of disputes to health matters, etc and were held in high esteem. Most times they were selected on merit, others are on inheritance. In socialization African women were the custodians of knowledge as primary socialization were in their hands. Writing on the constraints of plight of women's education in Nigeria, Alao (1998) noted that the forces of religion are partly responsible for the present plight of women's education. The main stream Christianity does not endorse gender equality, for instance the Pauline doctrine in 1st Timothy 11:12 stated that the woman should learn in silence with all subjection. A woman should not teach nor usurp authority over the man but to be in silence.

The exemption of women from priesthood in most Christian denominations further confirms this submission. Likewise Islam, the practice of purdah makes it even more difficult for married Muslim women to fully benefit from educational system. The same Quran says women are forbidden to be rulers, law makers or judges. In agreement with Alao (1998), Udeagha and Nwamah, (2019) opined that the processes of Christianity and Islamic religions enshrine gender inequality and in variation with his rationality their findings have shown that in the case of traditional religion there were reasons which may be occasional why women were left out of the cult such as their biology of monthly flow which was believed to nullify the power of charms, also women at menopause who indicated interest

like the men if they met the conditions were admitted into such traditional religious bodies and allowed to function fully. The rationale being women's monthly flow that seems to nullify the powers of their deities and not that woman were incapable or lack intelligence. That is the reason Bernard (1982) and Friedan (1963) noted that all human beings have certain essential features like capacity to reason, moral agency and self-actualization, therefore women should be given equal chances like the men.

Inequality also existed in economic empowerment of both males and females in Africa during colonial rule as women were excluded from money making jobs which disempowered them. Marxist feminists like Mills (1970) and Empowerment theorists like Adekunle (2015), Ezumah (2000) and Symke (1991), maintained that due to the reproductive role of women, men became engaged fully in capitalist businesses and this gave them much edge over women even economically. Because men make the money from working in white/blue collar jobs women become dependent on them thereby lacking the ability to make decisions. This established sexual division of labour and sexual relations both at home and outside the home. Feminists look at patriarchy, lack of empowerment and family (nuclear family) as the causes of gender inequality and subordination. These were introduced into the system with the coming of the Europeans.

In Jessie Bernard's study "The future of marriage" (1982), she was of the view that marriage culturally is seen as the destiny and source of fulfillment for women a mixed blessing of domesticity, responsibility and constraint for men. They see marriage as an institution that gives the husband authority and freedom to go beyond the domestic level even through for them marriage is confining and burdensome still they enjoy the authority, independence and a right to independence and a right to domestic, emotional and sexual services by the wife while the wife sees herself as fulfilling her cultural roles and accepting her culturally mandated powerlessness and dependence which gradually erodes her independent life.

They noted that women were socialized to be dependent on men. Therefore, the inequality in decision making is a method men used to secure and maintain their power. Marxists like Mills (1970) and empowerment theorists like Adekunle (2015), Ezumah (2000) and Symke (1991), maintained that due to the reproductive role of women, men became

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Margaret Snyder and Mary Tadesse (1997) opined that colonialism brought negative changes in the economic processes and structures of the traditional African society, they wrote “profound changes came with colonialism and its attendant technologies, cash cropping and wage economy”. Colonial officials tended to visualize women in terms of a Victorian image of what a woman (lady) should be instead of observing women’s actual functions on ground. From that perspective they envisioned women’s responsibilities as limited largely to nurturing and conserving society at the private sphere, while men engaged in political and economic activities which is the public sphere. Colonials equated ‘male’ with breadwinning and as a result introduced technologies to men and recruited men for paying jobs which often took them off the farm and household. Marxist feminist like Mills (1970) maintained that due to the reproductive role of women, men became engaged fully in capitalist businesses and this gave them much edge over women even economically. Because men make the money from working in while/blue collar jobs women become dependent on them thereby lacking the ability to make decisions. This established sexual division of labour and sexual relations both at home and outside the home.

Boserup as quoted by Lourde and Gita (1977) believe that the deteriorating economic inequality between the sexes is as a result of land reforms, introduction of modern technology and cash crops which benefited the men rather than women because the education process were beneficial to men thereby creating a productive gap between them; women were therefore relegated to the subsistence sector of food production using traditional methods of cultivation that takes time, energy and yields very little comparatively.

ANALYSIS OF THE EFFECTS OF COLONIALISM ON THE STATUS OF NIGERIAN WOMEN TODAY

The colonial style caused men to migrate to areas where they worked in mines, factories, etc by force, persuasion or freewill which earned them more

money at little stress at a very short time and even gave them the space to improve themselves all round with the resultant effect of creating a wide gap between the sexes. Due to wage labour the African able bodied men of husbands and male children left home, also leaving subsistent agriculture to the women who usually had more than enough dependents especially children and the aged with non commensurate food availability because of lesser hands in the farm. The woman was left to supplement, that is to put food on the table and she does that by either engaging in petty trading or in any menial work (mason) in construction companies or sites or any other unskilled job which usually is a heavy work and that leaves her stressed and at risk health wise and/or otherwise, sometimes she sells food to mine, construction, etc workers at little gain.

Other factors that affect involvement and choice of work in formal sectors by women include age and marital status. The younger a woman is the more energetic and more chances of getting employment over an advanced woman. The single woman who likely do not have domestic responsibilities are likely to get employed easier than those married with husbands and children to cater for or singles with dependents such as children. Sexual division of labour in Nigeria is socially and consciously induced to keep women behind the scene, for instance quoting Beneria and Gita, Boserup (1997) comparing African and Latin America noted that involvement of gender in agriculture determines to a great extent the sex that migrated to urban centres for white or blue collar jobs. In Africa married and single men migrated and in Latin America married women migrated. In some cases for both regions single ladies with lesser qualifications and fewer choices migrated to the urban and industrial centres, because of their biology they find it frustrating as employers prefer strong males who will not demand leave allowances, maternity leaves and other allowances pertaining to the female sometimes they face sexual harassment and abuse without any security of any type. They are treated inhumanely not because they are not capable but because of their socially stereotyped biological roles. In desperation not to lose their paid jobs once they have it they put up with working conditions that expose them to a variety of dangers ranging from personal health to family relations disagreement, to self debasement, etc (Symke 1991).

In the colonial period, the woman had to face the job as a wife and as a mother but post colonialism she has to include the job of an employee, a working wife, mother and colleague {drudgery}. In these roles there are so many expectations from her children, husband, in-laws, boss, subordinates, colleagues, etc which is conflicting making her face conflict of roles. Looking at the drudgery, subordination that women suffer Symke noted that it is internalized into members as depicted by this Anglo-Saxon song as sang by children when they play, the song says:

*This is the way we wash our clothes
Wash our clothes, wash our clothes
This is the way we wash our clothes
Wash our clothes, wash our clothes
Early in the morning*

In Anglo-Saxon parlance according to Symke “we” mean women and the song shows the time women start work. The traditional jobs of working in the fields collecting fuel, fetching water, cooking, washing and preparing the children for school, she also prepares for her husband, put the house in order, etc and then she is expected to go to work early. At the close of formal job she is expected to run the school for the children make lunch, dinner and also expected to fulfill her wifely role and when she does not as a result of stress the society tags it in-subordination, taboo and then she is made to face the social consequences of being reported to the family, separation from her husband, sexual abuse (intimate rape), denial of food money, accusation of infidelity, beating, her husband refusing to eat her food. She may also face the social stigma attached and the psychological stress which invariably affects her job in the formal sector. This is what the Nigerian woman faces today.

Ezumah (2000) in her findings on the consequences women receive for insubordination which includes denial of sex from their husbands and family members and according to custom the only exception to the denial is sickness. In spite of these unpaid, unrecognized, unrecorded, stressful informal work she does at home, she is expected to perform her duty in the formal sector with diligence and expertise and to her co-workers she has to show acceptance, low temperament even when she is over loaded with work. To her boss who usually is a male, she is supposed to be obedient and at his beck and call, a sex object to be taunted with either in gestures looks, touching and/or in words. It is

accepted, normal, if not she gets no promotions to increase her pay purse, or some of the benefits elude her, as a result some of the women have to do what normally they would not think of in order to or help foot bills of all categories and to be independent financially from their husbands. Unfortunately, she might also face such harassment from male colleagues, even taunts such as caused Hajiya Rabi to be determined to vie for a political post, which she eventually won (Alamin, 1999 as quoted by Ezumah, 2002).

Unfortunately with national, regional and international conventions, laws, etc and Nigeria being a signatory with the promise of domesticating the conventions the rate at which these changes are recorded is very insignificant and in certain places such as in the leadership level at all levels whether formal or informal dormant. Decision making is vital in any relationship and if decisions are made for another then that other is in a subservient position since he/she works at the caprice of the other. The Nigerian woman is in that position, where the norms and laws have clandestinely positioned her. Patrilineal structure being naturalized in Nigeria in spite of increase in education, acculturation, technology transfer, the socio-cultural attachment of women to house-work, child-care, amendment of constitutions, etc still remains the same since colonial days and these affect the type of work women do, or even prevent them from engaging at all in any type of work in the public sphere. Sometimes the distance to place of work matters and affects choice of work. Career women are advised to change their jobs or relocate to join husband and the rational being to keep their husbands from attaching elsewhere.

Today in Nigeria cultural ideologies still influence employers’ attitude concerning the type or nature of work they feel is appropriate for female workers. For instance women are stereotyped gentle, careful, caring, etc therefore employers prefer to employ women in domestic jobs that the nature needs carefulness and articulate attention (Anderson, 1992) like secretarial and clerical jobs, messengers, cooks, cleaners, etc. In fact majority of teachers are female especially at childhood and adolescent stages and the value is less attracting equivalent low salary but where the value is high majority are male with high payment (Anderson, 1983).

The disappearance of certain African social structures with the introduction of Elizabethan structures such as Christian religion has an enormous social disadvantage to the African

woman and particular Nigerian woman and by effect on the entire society. For instance research findings show that women in formal sectors encounter a higher degree of role conflict between their domestic chores and office work while those in service sectors such as food production, marketing, processing, etc find it easier. The reason for this role conflict could be attributed to the disappearance of extended family system which includes polygyny and common residence where everybody helps as a matter of duty, obligation as a biological and/or social father, mother, uncle, etc and extensive involvement in neo-locality.

Today though there is the system of day care centers and paid house helps, to an extent this system is helpful but expensive to maintain considering the status of women, their inability to afford these things (Bishnoi, Malik, & Yadav, 2020). In fact the 2019 analysis of study carried out among workers of Amazon by Schochet (2019) shows that child care crises are driving parents especially women out of work. The findings also reveal that lack of affordable child care has prevented talented women from progressing in their careers. At present from 2014 to 2022 as shown in Forbes magazine the economic inequality between the sexes in Nigeria is increasing and remains in the male favour except for Folorunsho Alakija who ranked twentieth in the female African Billionaires ranking and 17th in the ranking of richest people in Nigeria.

The system which wrote off the traditional system that was inclusive of all sexes is still making waves even with modernization, universal declaration of human rights, conventions, rule of law, etc making women subservient in all sectors of the social system. In 2000 the united nations security council adopted resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security that called for the increased participation of women and the incorporation of gender perspectives in all UN peace and security efforts (including participation of women in decision making and peace processes, gender perspectives in training and peacekeeping and gender mainstreaming in UN reporting systems) (UN, 2019). Nigeria a signatory to this convention is yet to even achieve the 35% affirmative action. In the formal sector only a few women hold positions of authority or leadership (Okafor & Akokuwebe, 2015)

Finally, patriarchy perpetuated women's insubordination in Muslim states where married women are in purdah. Even voting during elections is a taboo for the women, in fact till date the distorted Nigerian political system is yet to recuperate in the sense that women are not represented in elected positions as regards to the traditional political system but positions where they are found in negligent number they are appointed and have little or no portfolio, they are still used by men thereby maintaining the second class position accredited to them by colonial masters. According to Ezumah (2002),

“Men are usually those nominated for elections as governors, senators, members of house of senate, federal House of Representatives, Chairpersons of Local Government areas and Councilors. It has also been pointed out that party leadership which is the most powerful caucus that takes major decisions about party issues is male dominated. The female absence at that level provides part of the explanation why women are not nominated for elective positions. Besides party programmes are drawn without a consideration of women's interests and needs”. Nwankwor, and Ekereuwen (2019) noted that in today's federal elections) presidency, Senate and House of Representatives) women's candidature is unimpressive. They noted that the number of women who vied for presidential posts were six who later withdrew from the race as against 73 male aspirants including Oby Ezekwesili who every other person was hoping will liberate women from their redundant inactivity in the power sector. Looking at the rate of women involvement at the legislative level only 763 women vied for seats out of 6563 seats that were available Nwankwor, and Ekereuwen (2019) concluded that the prospects for gender equality in Nigeria remains a mirage.

The traditional Nigerian woman today is intimidated and inferior, loses who she is (her being), developed low self esteem and inferiority complex and is living a life of shadow behind the male and that is why no matter the level a Nigerian woman attains today and she is not married people including women pity her and she is worth nothing. Corroborating the feminists' assertion that marriage is an honour to the female and a disturbance to the male.

CONCLUSION

Though the distorted situations of women in Nigeria are beginning to take shape again in a

different pattern looking at (since 1960) the employment growth of women even in political offices which was absolutely male oriented has increased. Also laws and decrees have been made by both civilian and military governments in Nigeria at different epochs protecting the rights of women to education, bridging the gap between male oriented courses and women who are talented to do that. Including the efforts of the governments of Nigeria, international organizations and Non-Governmental organizations are struggling to influence government policies on the rights of women in all areas. It is to be noted that the rate these changes are being made is slow compared to the various strategies put in place and this is because colonialism reduced the power of the woman in the market, religion, politics, economy, family, etc due to gender bias in the indirect rule system which was systematically sustained.

Colonialism encourage transfer of knowledge and technology, therefore the key positions that women occupied were no longer relevant and were expunged from the system through legislations and policies.

To uproot this giant seed of sex inequality in the nascent religious, educational, political and economic systems, it is important that the various Nigerian governments make revolutionary mandatory policy statements with active backups against violation so that women will have more rights to access and exercise their potentials and overcome low self esteem, inferiority complex, etc. this should be in line with the communities autochthonous culture that is women inclusive.

Conducive conditions under which women can meet their needs such as being in charge of the processes and structures in marriage and nuclear family which reproduce women's subordinating position should be institutionalized. Women themselves should encourage class consciousness for a revolution to take place and until women come together, recognize their needs and advance a change as they did during colonial rule they would continue to be subordinates to males.

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