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THE POSITION OF RURAL WOMEN IN NIGERIA

By

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Introduction

The position of rural women in the society has given many scholars and women movements most concern. Feminist advocates have particularly been disturbed with rural women's position and as a result have made deliberate attempts to redefine and change their roles. These efforts include the launching of various intervention and advocacy campaigns to sensitize and empower rural women to know their responsibilities both at home and at public levels. But it is important to note that though a change is required for most rural women, historical antecedents have shown that women have contributed in various ways to the economic, political, social and religious development of their societies. Awe (1992) referred to them as "saviours of our time". Meanwhile, the programmes tagged "women emancipation and liberation" have recorded partial success because change agents have at times failed to use the proper channels to effect complete change as they do not put into consideration rural women's attitudes, beliefs and practices.

However, it is worthy to note that the process of change amongst any people is gradual. Though men have most often been seen as the major stumbling blocks to women's upliftment, some socio-cultural and biological factors have been identified as contributing factors to women's position.

It is thus important for change agents to have an idea of the indigenous knowledge systems of the people under study. Such knowledge will equip them with the right approaches of relating to their audience. In essence, an appreciation of the behavioural patterns of rural women in relation to how they relate and adapt to their environment is vital to understanding them. To discuss the position of women in rural areas, we will assess them in terms of the way they have exploited their environments through their interaction

with the climate, topography and vegetation (Olutayo, 1997). We will also assess the type of roles they play in the society in fulfilling their responsibilities of procreation and production to complement the men.

It is assumed that rural women in some ways appreciate some of their roles but are always ready to take on more challenging tasks. To get a fuller grasp of their position, we will examine the theoretical explanations to gender stratification as we locate their position at home and society, as well as see how their position has contributed to making the rural area a comfortable place despite sex discrimination. The position of rural women will thus be discussed based on what they actually do in production and reproduction. An examination of the historical antecedent from the pre-colonial period, to the colonial period and the present state will highlight their political, religious and socio-cultural status in their communities.

Theories of Gender Stratification

Some theories have shown that the position of women is due to some determining factors, which have made the woman to "suffer" domination, subjugation and hold various responsibilities which are sex biased unlike their male folks. Two of these theories are the biological and cultural determinants of gender stratification. Lenski (1966) defines gender stratification as an attempt to describe differential power and privileges and to demonstrate how power brings about these privileges. It is a means of explaining the major hierarchical position and the source of power underlying inequality which can be manifested in differential possessions, prerogatives, freedom as well as honour, status and prestige (Onyenuchie, 1995). These differential privileges manifest in different forms, as we will see later in the position of rural women.

(1) Biological Determinants

The biological theorists hold that biology is destiny. They argue that human nature and society are largely dictated by the demands of human physiology showing the difference between masculinity and femininity, which

makes male supremacy and patriarchy inevitable. Firestone (1970) notes that the phenomena of menstruation, conception, childbirth, lactation, rearing, menopause, have encouraged women's dependence and subservience to men. Although women who struggle for emancipation have rejected biological determinism, they find it difficult to establish that unequal hierarchical and exploitative relationship has socio-historical factors.

(2) Cultural Determinants

The cultural approach attempts to locate differences within the framework of cultures. This explanation of the domination of women came as a result of failure of the biological theory to explain the social position of women. Oakely (1980) argues that culture, not biology, determines the behaviour of both sexes as his observation of the Mbuti pygmies of the Congo rain forest revealed. Among these people, both males and females took hunting as a shared activity and the care of children was also the responsibility of both husband and wife.

It should be noted however that both biological and cultural factors determine the role performed by rural women. Although we found out this difference with the Mbuti pygmies, there still exist other roles that women perform that the men can not venture into even if they wanted to. An example is conceiving which their biological make-up does not permit.

Historical Presentation of Rural Women's Position

The idea of women participating in the development of their community is not new in the Nigerian society. This historical framework is necessary to enable us know the extent to which women's contribution and position vary within historical periods – pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial. All phases have left footprints to show the political, economic, social and cultural aspects of rural women's position in the society.

1. The Pre-colonial Period

This is the traditional period marked by myths, customs and traditions of the people. It shows the awareness and appreciation of women's significant

roles in the society. This period emphasized the complementary role of women to men in the society, and community members recognized and acknowledged the importance of women's position.

Politically, it was observed that some societies had both male and female cabinets who performed complementary functions despite difference in structure. Even where there existed division of labour by sex, the contribution of one sex was not seen as being more important than the other (Awe, 1989). For instance, among the Yakurr, Yoruba and Hausa, food processing, marketing and distribution were women's work while the men cultivated and harvested crops because of their physical bodily stature. But Awe (1989) points out the reverse as among the Guaris, the Tiv and some Igbo groups, where women tilled the ground and performed the hard work.

In decision-making, women also played a prominent role particularly at local levels. Personalities like Queen Amina of Zaria, Madam Tinubu of Lagos, Queen Idia of Benin who was noted for her political authority and leadership skills, and others, all had political power with significant contribution to their societies. Among the Yakurr people of Cross River State, reverence is still paid to "Mma Esukpa", the legendary mother and founder of the Yakurr community. The importance of the complementary roles of women is appreciated in all Yakurr communities as indicated in all erected statutes of a woman carrying a baby, and at the same time being positioned under the man. This brings out two points. Firstly, the woman is subject to the man but complements him in production to show that "behind every successful man is a woman".

The socio-cultural factors of a people also encourage the contribution women make to their society. For example because polygamous marriages were common to both traditional and Moslem households, it compelled women to fend for themselves and their children (Awe, 1989). Women were also seen as repertoires of people's cultures through the socialization of the children who were taught the culture of the society, and some women were custodians of deities. For the double-unilineal Yakurr, the matrilineage is highly valued

as the place of love, unity, care, peace, dependency, and so on. Among the Yorubas, women were in charge of preserving the lineage histories through the recitation of praise songs for their husband's families. Awe (1989) also submits that the traditional Nupe society produced distinguished female artists like Hajia Lolo who is a celebrated singer, dancer, and leader of groups in the society. This shows that women's contributions varied among societies and were appreciated by men.

2. *The Colonial Period*

Colonialism affected the women's position in rural areas by removing some of their social customs and practices like widowhood rites. They did not want women to have as much freedom using the position of native English women to define that of the Nigerian woman. Nigerian men heeded as they carefully selected and interpreted a model that relegated women to the kitchen, thus destroying the indigenous courage and capabilities displayed by their grandmothers in service to their community (Shokunbi et al, 1995). Despite the fact that they were relegated to the background, some women still fought for their rights and made the situation beneficial to their own interest, for instance, the Aba women's riot. Ogunseye et al (1982) note that in the process, market women widened their commercial horizon, female heads of houses in Delta areas grew rich, while some took advantage of education. But the introduction of western education prepared rural women for home and domestic activities and Awe (1989) concludes that the position that women occupied in the traditional society was weakened by British colonialism.

3. *Post-colonial Period*

Despite the place of women as defined by colonial masters, it is important to note that several structural changes have taken place that have put the woman in a better position in the society. Politically, women have taken up political posts and appointments and have excelled in them. In the First Republic, two women senators were elected and one in the Second Republic while three were for the Federal House of Representatives. Some chairpersons of local Government areas were also women. Though the number is minimal

as compared to men, it is important that rural women are taking up posts that make them partake in the decision-making process of the nation. At the moment, we have women commissioners and ministers, more women are also in school as compared to those days, though the situation is different in the North. Unlike those days when more men were sent to school because they were expected to carry on the family name, parents now send more women to equip them with skills and resources to enable them take care of themselves and their families, especially in cases where husbands are "irresponsible". This shows that rural women are not just beneficiaries of development, but are participants through equipping, and hard work for the economic sustenance and political stability of their community.

The Position of Women

Part of the position of women in rural areas has already been discussed but we will now examine it based on their prevalent occupation as producers, their reproductive roles as mothers, their family responsibilities and their place in the society towards political, economic, religious, social and cultural development.

Production position

A basic identified position of the rural woman is in her production capacity as the main source of her sustenance. Their source of production is predominantly agriculture and they are noted to be more engaged in agricultural practices than some men while food processing dominates their occupation. Women also produce the food and raw materials needed in the industrialized sector. Simmons (1990) notes that in a rural economy, women play very prominent roles as they mostly cultivate subsistence crops that can help them take care of their daily financial needs through sales. They sometimes assist the men to grow cash crops to supplement their own yields and also assist the men in production like fishing, hunting and crop farming. She reports that, in a rural area in Zaria, 86% of the interviewed women reported at least one food process or the other from whose proceeds they feed their families and sell for economic balance. These women take up

more than one occupation at a time but share their time to enable them meet all needs. This might be a possible reason why they do not take on full-time jobs except for their family activities. Some of these production occupations include food processing, agriculture, trading and craft which are all performed to meet the needs of their husbands, children and the community. The women thus exploit the land for survival purposes.

According to Shokunbi et al (1995), in the economic sphere, Nigerian rural women have been traditionally a force to reckon with. Historically, women have worked side by side with men in the division of agricultural labour. While the men performed arduous tasks of felling trees, gathering and burning of bush, making ridges and climbing trees, the women undertook planting of seeds, harvesting, transporting, processing and selling of farm products. They worked not only to support their immediate families but also to supplement the resources of the extended family.

The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO, 1982) observe that, rural women perform the work of food processing, 60% in livestock and animal production and more than 70% in food crop farming. Green et al (1964) also note in a study of Agbaje women of Owerri that out of the 20 crops grown in the community, women grew 19. The production burden of work coupled with excessive family responsibility sometimes affect the physical, mental and reproductive health of rural woman and the health of her children. But despite the fact that she takes so much responsibilities, she receives no wages for her work.

In Northern Nigeria, each woman served as the owner/operator of her own "firm", by producing foodstuff or craft articles, performing services or trading. Some women did employ others to assist in buying and selling products but none of them worked for the other for a regular salary. All equipment used in production solely depends on the strength and stamina of the producer. Women's motivation to work is also influenced by social norms and conditions other than monetary needs. They do this because they feel a married woman should have an occupation to establish herself as a reputable

adult in the community. This is intensified by the belief that a woman should not solely depend financially on her husband especially in polygamous marriages. Each woman developed her business skill independently or through experience, while new skills were learned through observation (Simmons, 1990).

Reproduction

As it has been earlier pointed out, the biological physiology of the woman makes her to hold the position of "life-giver" of new ones to the society through the process of conception and delivery. It is her duty to nurse, wean, socialize and transmit the societal values to her children. She fulfils her roles in the daily provision and upliftment of the image and wellbeing of her children. In most cultures, when the child turns out good and successful, the society appreciates the man's effort but when the child turns out bad and irresponsible, blame goes to the woman as they will say that the child took after the mother. This is just a subtle way of portraying that the mother has the major responsibility of ensuring that the child is properly groomed and trained to societal standards. The process of breastfeeding makes the child to be biologically and physically attached to the mother. The woman continues in nursing and nurturing the child until he is mature enough to have his own home.

Family Responsibilities

The position of the rural woman can also be discussed based on her family responsibilities and the role she plays for the survival of her home. She is a wife, a mother, a caretaker, a breadwinner, a homemaker and a supplier of goods and services needed for the upkeep of its members. Basically, she is subordinate to her husband as a wife but complements his efforts as we have earlier pointed out. In the home, women take on roles of procreation, socialization and home management. Beitek (1966) describes her as sweeper, cook, dishwasher, cultivator, storekeeper, builder, and runner of errands, cart, lorry and donkey. All these roles are combined to ensure effective functioning of the home and a pointer to the fact that women are strong

physically, emotionally, mentally, and industrious, a reason why they do not break despite the combination of all these roles.

Women have also tried to be good providers for their children with the hope that at old age and/or widowhood, the child may serve as a woman's only form of social security. Because her husband's house is not regarded as hers in most patrilineal settings, a woman can leave home without the children at any point when there is friction between her and her husband and can come back at any convenient point since she already has children for the man. Considering the patriarchal society, women play a minor role in decision-making since the final decision is the man's responsibility except at instances where he listens to what the woman has to offer. The situation is now better as both men and women have come to the consciousness of the importance and need of both in development. But in cases where the man's decision is final, it may adversely affect the woman in various ways like reproductive health when she has no say over the number of children to.

Her responsibilities become more in the absence of her husband. While men migrate to urban centres for job opportunities, women remain in the rural areas to look after the family - properties, children, and resources and as a result have heavier burdens and increased workload. Rural-urban shift of men therefore leaves the bulk of family responsibilities to women in that they combine their roles with that of their husbands'. The migration tendencies of the man thus help in expounding the task of rural women. On this note Ogunseyi (1982) points out that women are the principal producers of food because men migrate to urban areas in search of wage employment. The migration of men can have both negative and positive impact on the situation of women and children. The increased household income has beneficial implications for health, nutrition and educational opportunities of family members. It may also provide a source of funds for farm improvement and also pave the way for the woman to absolutely handle the authority of the family as well as make independent decisions concerning her home. But this absence has negative impact on the workload and responsibilities undertaken

by the woman.

According to Simmons (1990), northern women work to earn their money because they seek to acquire independent financial resources. The woman is expected by her husband to provide for her own personal needs like toiletries, clothing, cosmetics, room decoration, etc. They are also expected to supply part of the dowry for their daughters, particularly enamel, brass pots, clothing, etc. It is these same women that provide part of their daily meals and that of their children. This also shows that the woman is at the home front to ensure the success of her family and all its members.

Societal Expectations

Women's roles, according to Makinwa (1987), are often seen as insignificant, less important and regarded as non-economical. This makes the bulk of work they do in the society unrecognized. Awe (1992) points out that women in historical times played star roles in the development of their communities. They participated politically as they brought new dynasties and governments into power. They also displayed a tremendous sense of patriotism, sacrificed their possessions, and saved their societies from disaster and hardships. But in some societies, women can not express their opinion in public except through their husbands. They are also not allowed to inherit lands despite their laudable contribution in farm work and the expectation that they should take absolute care of feeding the entire family. Women are also subject to every sort of humiliation upon the death of their husbands. Cutrufelli (1983) notes that a woman could not work on the farm any longer nor gather the crops because her husband's people will inherit it all. Mothers here have no chance to fight against the system.

Following the customary law in a matrilineal place in Ghana, it has been observed that widowhood is an unsafe position. The woman has no right whatever to the deceased husband's property despite the fact that her unpaid house work contributed to making the home comfortable for her husband (Cutrufelli, 1983). She has been left destitute with insecure rights to live and thus lives at the mercy of her husband's successor. The reverse is the case

with the man after the death of his wife as he inherits two-thirds of the whole patrimony. In a traditionally patrilineal society, a woman has no inheritance right. She is neither entitled to own any land nor is she allowed to participate in any debate or negotiation concerning property. But in the contemporary society, these rules are giving way to development as some women now have a say about their husband's properties though this is frowned at by most people.

We have thus seen that rural women have played important roles in the political, economic, and the religious aspects of their communities. Politically, women, like Queen Amina, Queen Idia and Madam Tinuba, are remembered for their contributions. Others like Inkpi, a princess of Igala royal family, Moremi of Ile-Ife, Queen of Daura, all attracted the supernatural when all else seemed impossible, while in early Hausa society, women were the rulers of Magajiyi (Awe, 1992). According to Abubakar (1992), in Borno, they had women officials such as Magira (Queen mother), who wielded tremendous power and influence right from the time of the establishment of the Sefawa dynasty. It is recorded that the most famous Sefawu ruler in Borno, Mai Idris Aloma, received his political science education from his mother. In early Hausaland, women appear to have been the early political masters. Also, the rulers of Daura before the 9th century are said to have been women, the Magajiyas (Queens). Among the Yorubas, we have women like "Yeye Oba", the king's mother who had the power to advise the king and change public decisions. Culturally, "Yeye Osun" is the custodian of the shrine and ensures continuity of the priestly beliefs and culture of the people. Women also added unto the rural economy as they planted and sold both subsistent and cash crops. Again, the Itsekiri and Urhobo women became economically independent because they were highly industrious.

Conclusion

The position of women in rural areas is diversified as we have noted earlier. We have seen women as farm workers, women as cultivators of land, processors and traders of food. They prepare food both as household

obligation and as a means of earning cash to satisfy other needs. This serves as the most remunerative occupation and an important part of the cash economy. We have also seen their multiple roles as producers and reproductive channels at home and community levels, and how their various contributions have led to development. Most of these roles are performed to complement men's activities and the position the women occupy are either biologically or/and culturally determined. Under the historical background to their position, we looked at the three phases of pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial periods to see how historical periods have influenced their roles and societal positioning of the woman. But despite the fact that most women suffer sex discrimination, subordination, and arduous responsibilities, we have also noted their great achievements and contribution to the economic, political, religious and cultural upliftment of their societies.

Thus, women's position in development is a most important one and no nation should ignore it. Khotel and Frost (1968) in Dadirep (1995) note that women are as vital to a nation's progress as its minerals, its rivers, its agriculture, and should thus be treated with respect. Rural women therefore present a great powerful force which can be used to the benefit and progress of the nation as they have exploited their environment for everybody's survival.

It is important to note that culture is not static but changes with time. So the position of rural women, though encouraging, will never remain at this point, but will change, especially with their new levels of exposure and awareness through enlightenment programmes, education, and the movement of the time.

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