

THE LEADERSHIP POSITION OF THE GIRL-CHILD AND THE NIGERIAN SOCIO-CULTURAL ENVIRONMENT

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Introduction

Hornby (2000) defines culture as “the custom and art, way of life and social organization of a particular country or group”. Therefore, it is a way of life and social organization of any group of people. Anthropologically and sociologically, it involves all the things a particular set of people do such as building pattern, greetings, food, dressing, occupation etc. Such ways of doing things which are modified from time to time and passed on from generation to generation, sum-up the culture of a set of people. Tylor (1969: 17) quoted in Ezechukwu (2012: 2) says that; ‘culture does not only embrace human social life but human social life is learnt and acquired. Every society ... has norms, mores and values which they cherish and appreciate’. Nigeria has a lot of different cultural groups, each of them has cultural beliefs, norms and values which militate against the proper development of the girl-child in one way or another.

The importance of effective promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women has been at the forefront of international summits. If the goals of sustainable development are to be attained gender equality has to be promoted. “This was reinforced at the world summit on Social Development (Copenhagen, 1995), and the Beijing Platform for Action adopted at the fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW) in 1995”. (Landry, 2001: ii). All over the world, men have been found to dominate the economy and some social institutions. Potentials of women are often under-utilized and sometimes where they contribute, their contributions are undervalued. Gender is organized differently in different societies. As a result, the expectations for women and men vary throughout the world. There are areas reserved for women and some for men. In many parts of Africa like Nigeria (Northern part) for example, women are not encouraged to operate large scale animal farming like cattle rearing. It is an area preserved for men.

In the south eastern part of Nigeria, women are not equally encouraged to run transportation business to a high level. It is generally believed that men would either dupe them, or run their business down by not rendering accurate account of their trips. Consequently, their husbands, brothers or sons are encouraged to run such business on their behalf. Sustainable development, development that supports the security and regeneration of economic, natural, human social resources, cannot be achieved if women (girl-children), who make up half of Nigeria’s population are neglected. So, the girl-child in Nigeria, as the world-over, must be systematically included in the development efforts in order to change the

subordinate status in the society. Some research reports have shown that “countries that promote women’s rights and increase their access to resources and schooling not only have lower poverty rates but have faster economic growth. Investing in the girl-child-education, health, family planning, access to land, inputs and extension is an important part of development strategy as well as a matter of social justice.

Some negative cultural beliefs about the girl-child

In this present time, there are still some cultural groups in Nigeria who still uphold the erroneous belief that the only role of a woman (by implication the girl-child) is having pregnancy and giving birth to babies, cooking and doing other domestic works, some of such cultural groups could be found in the North East like Maiduguri, Adamawa and North West like Sokoto. This has in no small measure deterred and hindered the girl-child from manifesting her God-given other potentials. There are a lot of girl-children whom when trained, could be a world-class engineers, doctors, pharmacists, professors and the likes. Some of them are compelled by the antiquated culture, to be following their fathers and husband-nomads around the bushes, where they graze their cattle, so as to be meeting their needs in those bushes as they move their cattle around. Such is not promoting the educational development of the girl-child, and women in general, in the contemporary society.

Gender discrimination

Gender discrimination as regards the girl-child is the unfair treatment given to her because of her sex. In some Nigerian societies, the girl-child is not allowed to go to school. They believed that such a girl has no business going to school since she would be betrothed to a man as soon as she gets to for instance age fifteen and above. Many of them go about the markets selling and hawking marketable wares, while their male counterparts would be in school learning. In some other societies, the girl-child is allowed to go to school, but the choice of course of study would be limited to certain courses of study; while the males would be encouraged to go in for some courses like Engineering, Geology, and similar ones, the girls will be encouraged to see them as no go area for them.

The family members would advice such a girl-child not to go for such courses which they regard as exclusive reserve for men. They believe that if such a girl-child does such a course regarded as the male reserved area, getting a man to marry her may be difficult. This in no doubt is one of the reasons there are few women in certain professions in Nigeria like; professional Engineers, Sailors, Pilots and the likes. I could remember the time I was discussing with a friend in a bus, about a woman auto-mechanic engineer, who was reported by the Daily Sun as the “Queen of auto mechanics”. A man who was sitting close to us said; Nwanyi nke a o na-anukwa di? O ga – atukwa ime? (This woman is she married to a man? Can she have pregnancy).

Such statement came as a result of culturally formed images and views about the role of the girl-child and women generally. To that man, any decent lady should not go into the business of auto-mechanic, and also, if any lady wants to have babies, she should not take up the job of auto-mechanic.

The daily Sun reported that this lady:

Sandra Aguebor-Ekperuoh became a global celebrity when she became the first lady motor mechanic to operate her own workshop in the country. The greasy job of a motor mechanic, often seen as an occupation for dumb-ass young men, won her love, when she was barely 14. Initially, her father wanted to pull down the roof on her daughter when she confided in him her plan for the future.

This lady's father's initial refusal of her becoming what she wanted to be in the future is born out of such erroneous belief that some jobs are preserved for men, while some which have some links with the household are preserved for women. Thanks to God that this lady eventually manifested the potential in her, and has become a celebrity. Now she has over one hundred (100) female apprentices working with her. She has not only carved a niche for herself, as the first Nigerian Lady Mechanic, she is also a nation-builder, who has created job and means of livelihood for over 100 female apprentices, who could have been otherwise jobless. If this now shining destiny was able to be suppressed at the early stage, her story would have been a different case, plus that of over 100 other female apprentices under her.

In our contemporary Nigerian society, there are still some cultural groups who still prefer male children to female. The boys are regarded as heirs of the family, while the girls are not, because they would be married out. As a result, some of them are denied education, especially the university education and would be married off after secondary school education, so as to have less load and then concentrate on the boys. Such does not promote the girl-child proper development. Also, certain careers like politics are seen as male-domain. In some cultural communities, ladies who engage in politics are seen as wild and anti-cultural set of women, who cannot be controlled by their husbands. They see them as ones who would not be able to be controlled by the male-folks, no wonder there are still few women in Nigeria occupying top political offices like the presidency, governorship and many other top political positions. Few women who are striving to fight gender discrimination are still seen as those challenging men under the umbrella of 'women liberation'.

The girl-child and the influence of cultural contact

Nothing is as constant as change. As the wind of development blows across our nation and beyond, people migrate to places far away from their native homes and cultural setting for better life style. As this happens people from different cultures meet and unconsciously start borrowing from one another. When this happens, many cultural behaviours are lost to newly acquired ones. This can be seen in the aspect of language, dressing and chastity, which the traditional Igbo society for example cherishes a lot, to mention but a few.

When an Hausa speaking family, Igbo speaking one and Yoruba speaking co-habit in a place like the Army or Police Barracks, or any other government residential quarters, the tendency of speaking a common language which everyone would understand would be there. At times, a pidgin would emerge. Over time, if the parents do not take care of the language of their home, pidgin would equally creep in and overtake the language of the home. In this situation, the girl-child who is looked upon as a future mother may not have a native

language culture to pass down to her own children, as language is the number one in aspects of culture. She would not be able to teach her own children the language she grew up with. It is often said that a people without their own language is a people without identity. Igbo language and so many other African languages have suffered a lot in the area of culture (language) in contact.

A lot of girl-children today are no longer dressing in the cultural way fit for girls. In Igbo land in particular, and in Nigeria generally, girls no longer put on what fits them. Many wear short pants, sleeveless tops and other wears that expose their body parts meant to be covered. This is erroneous and anti-cultural. In the words of Obafemi cited in Adeoye (2009: 21), the 'Arts... have all become affected by immense material and conceptual challenges due to technological changes'. This is true of our cultural mode of dressing meant for the girl-child. The influence of films and movies our young ones watch, almost on a daily basis have greatly eroded the cultural mode of dressing meant for them, especially the girl-child.

This has a negative implication on the girls chastity value. When a girl-child is dressed half-naked, the tendency for men to look at her inordinately would be there. If not checked, it could lead to rape, which in turn could bring in other psychological and physical damage to the girl-child and thereby affect her future. The girl-child in African society is trained to be decent in behaviour and in out-look, have self control and be reserved. The modern trend of things is taking them to a different direction entirely, and it poses danger, if not checked.

The place of the family/society in the development of the girl-child

The family: The family is the first place of socialization of the girl-child. It is in the family that she is nurtured and packaged on how and what she would be. The parents, and other elders in the family are her character molders. Each family is supposed to have norms and values according to their cultural beliefs, which would be inculcated in the girl children. Durant cited in Ezechukwu (2012:5) says;

The family has been the ultimate foundation of every civilization known to history. It is the economic and productive unity of the society. It was (sic) the political unit of society, with the parental authority. It was (sic) the cultural unit, transmitting letter and arts, rearing and teaching the young; it is the moral unit, inculcating through cooperative work and discipline, those social dispositions which are the psychological basic and cement of civilization.

From this excerpt, it is obvious that the family is the first unit of socialization, socializing the girl-child into being a useful member of the larger society, having respect for constituted authorities and good morals. These would help to make her develop into a functional woman. Psychologist have said that motivation is one of the ways of causing a change in an individual's character. In that same line, a girl-child who may not be doing well could be motivated in a little way to encourage a change. Following Rogers (1961), "the individual has within himself the capacity and the tendency, latent if not evident, to move forward towards maturity. In a suitable psychological climate, this tendency is released, and becomes actual rather than potential.

The society: In conjunction with the family, the society has a role to play in the development of the girl-child. It has to do this by way of providing security for the girl-child. In this present time, where crimes of all sorts are meted out to the girl-child, ranging from rape, human trafficking, child labour and many more. The society has to provide a secured environment where the girl-child can thrive and then develop her potentials, that will in turn promote the development of the nation and the economy.

Conclusion/recommendations

The place of the girl-child in the life of every nation is enormous, as she is the tomorrow's mother, who is looked upon to bring up sound children that will sustain what the heroes of Nigerian nation have laboured for. When the girl-child is not cared for properly, the chances of her nation failing in the near-future is not lacking. This popular saying that 'train – up' a girl-child, and you have trained a nation's is not a mere saying, it is a reality. Therefore, this paper is of the opinion that; gender discrimination which is a bane to the proper development of the girl-child should be made to go into extinction so that Nigeria would be moved forward via the development of the girl-child. Also, looking at the law of social justice which states that "the available means for the satisfaction of needs ought to be shared..." (Ryan, 1993: 120), one can rightly say also that family resources for educational upbringing of children be shared among all the children in the family irrespective of their gender status.

Again some people that see the girl-child as one who would not be useful to the family, because he would eventually be married out, and so would not give her proper upbringing, should desist. No child is better than the other. A girl-child who is properly trained and packaged can do better than her boy-child counter-part in the future. Again, girl-children should be encouraged to go into occupations or careers of their choice. This could be a very good way to their stardom, and also becoming world-class rated in their various careers. Furthermore, the dignity and value of chastity should be promoted among the girl-children. Indecent dressing which wrongly places the young girl-child on the same level with a prostitute, should be condemned and decent-dressed girl-children should be encouraged and rewarded. This would make others to know that there are more positive rewards in dressing decently than not.

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