THE INFLUENCE OF CULTURE AND RELIGION ON GENDER INEQUALITY AND IT IMPLICATIONS ON WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

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KEYWORDS
Culture, Religion, Gender Inequality, women empowerment, Africa

ABSTRACT
Gender is intrinsically linked to culture that is why culture has continued to be one of the major determinants of gender Inequality. Gender defines the norms and values regarding masculine and feminine roles and behaviour, which is a major threshold of gender inequality. Gender is not dependent on biological sex and sexual orientation, although it only has an unstable relationship with biological sex because it can influence how individual view and participate in gender roles. Culture has always been the main determinant in both domestic and communal activities. Religion focuses on patriarchy and androcentrism. Religion acts as an oppressive deceptive mechanism used by the patriarchal society to exploit women based on defined gender roles and not by biological differences. This paper sets out to differentiate gender and sex as two different entities, focusing on how gender is heavily influenced by cultural and religious expectations and not by biological differences, which in turn creates gender roles and these gender roles further energizes gender inequality. In the light of the above assertions, possible recommendations to eliminate or drastically reduce gender inequality were suggested.

Introduction

Gender Inequality is an extremely old phenomenon deeply rooted in many cultures across the world. It can be traced to a period in history when humans began to settle. The first inkling of gender Inequality started emerging when human societies decided to abandon their wanderlust in favor of agricultural settlements. In 1990s, historian Gerda Lerner discovered that gender inequalities were already rooted in middle eastern societies by the second century BCE. Gerda found out that the idea of valuing men over women was a cultural practice arising in pre-history before written records emerged. In order to justify her claims, Archaeologists Marta Cintas-Pena and Leonardo Garcia Sanjuan, from the University of Seville in Spain decided to dive into archaeological records to find out if she was sight. Their study was published by the European Journal of Archaeology. The result from their analysis of 500 graves on the Iberian Peninsula, estimated to be between 5000 to 8000 years old, showed that, although majority of the bodies exhumed were undetermined sex, many of which were children. However, of the 198 bodies whose sex were known, men were overrepresented.

It was observed that the number of male graves were far higher than the number of female graves. This could indicate that in the

Neolithic society, men were more likely to afford proper burials in comparison to women. Men were also more represented in cave art from the time. Items discovered in some graves showcased clear differences. In the male graves, weapons and other items of value were discovered whereas graves for females were more likely to have ceramics and pottery.

Nevertheless, some graves revealed some similarities in that the 'best' graves did not always belong to men. This shows that men did not always exhibit fundamental superiority over women, which further indicates that gender differences may have risen as a result of cultural development and practices rather than biological factors or differences as we have been led to believe.

These findings could help to answer certain questions and debates about whether gender inequalities are determined by biological differences or by human culture. According to Cintas-Pena;

If we say that gender inequality began in the Neolithic, or in the Copper Age or in any period, it means that it's something cultural and not something biologically determined. The emergence of gender differences was likely just one of many profound changes that took place in Neolithic society along with social inequalities that arose as people started to accumulate private property.

This means that gender has nothing to do with biology, rather, it is an indoctrination of humans into accepting a gender role formulated by society. This is done to best fit individuals into social structure. In other words, gender is a social structure and like a soul, it is fictional. Inasmuch as different cultures have different expectations of gender roles which are more closely tied to biological sex, it does not mean that gender is biologically determined. To say this in a different way, gender inequality originates from historical traditions and not from biological differences.

How Culture set the pace for Gender Inequality

Culture is a set of behavioral expectation society assigns to a sex. It acts as a mechanism in which gender roles, identity and stereotypes are built on as well as the parameters regarding sexual behavior. Variations in gender-related behaviors between individuals are affected by culture. The emphasis on culture is the reason there are many gender stereotypes in the world (Bigler & Liben, 2007). This emphasis is so strong that by age two or three, children are already aware of gender roles and can label others' gender. Most children are firmly entrenched in culturally appropriate gender roles at age four or five (Kane 1996). Gender Inequality is a social phenomenon where people are given prejudical treatment on the basis of their gender and it can be influenced by different cultural and religious beliefs. Gender inequality can take different forms like job segregation, lack of bodily autonomy, lack of political representation, lack of legal protection and religious freedom, etc. and these have a direct link to culture and religion. Culturally, it is believed that women are subordinate to their male counterparts and this can be seen in different sectors of the economy, politics, education, etc.

Gender is intrinsically linked to culture that is why culture has continued to be one of the major determinants of gender Inequality. Gender defines the norms and values regarding masculine and feminine roles and behaviour, which is a major threshold of gender inequality. The more culture changes, the more gender norms change. For instance, in the olden days, men used to be the ones wearing high heels and grooming their Afro hair but that shifted to women in recent times. Pink used to be associated with boys but now it is a girl's colour. Super tight and thin tights like yoga pants used to be considered extremely masculine when it was a staple of men's wear, often paired with a codpiece but are now feminine garment. Today, we regard men who tilt towards this behavior as eccentric. This shows that gender performances and norms are cultural concepts. This norms and values contribute to the establishment of stereotypes that dictates the way women and men should act within their cultural context and how they should be treated. If gender is biologically determined them how does one determine his or her gender without being informed about it? Evidently, a human who grew up alone on an island would not have a clue about his or her gender. If such human does not have anyone to learn from about his or her colour, which clothes and behaviour are masculine and feminine, such human would be unaware of any boundaries or any gender norms. If the same human meets other humans with similar experiences, they will align as far as interests and behaviour is concerned. Whether a person's characteristics aligns more closely with other men or other women is innate and should not be linked to culture.

Technically, our bodies do not decide what dress are associated with girls, the society does. Gender expression is influenced by culture and society dictates culture. The idea that a girl should play with dolls and boys play sport are completely put in place by the society and not by our biological differences. This silent and subtle training into patriarchal and matriarchal conformity imprinted into African institution (Ozumba 2005) is a direct effect of culture. This training makes boys feel stronger, important and indispensable while girls on the other hand are groomed to see and accept themselves as weaker sex or even as accessory to the men (Ojukwu,2015). This idealogy makes the birth of a male child in an African family more celebrated than the female. Bello in Lewu (2015) describes this discriminatory action thus: "people come to facilitate and greet the birth of a girl child with less glee than that of a boy. Some people even respond to questions on the set of a new baby girl by saying it is another "asawo" that is "prostitute", especially if the mother had given birth to many female children in the past"(564). This often results in family crisis when a woman fails to give birth to a male child in spite of having several female children because culture has indoctrinated its participants to believe that only a male child can guarantee the continuation of the family lineage. This cultural brainwashing makes a male child gets more educational attention than the female, since girls do not need book knowledge to perform their traditional roles which include raising children, giving birth, cooking, cleaning, etc.

Gender is only an artifact of a socially accepted form of indoctrination. For example, in some culture, men are not expected to breastfeed infants because most men are incapable of doing so. But in rare medical cases, this can happen. Similarly, some cultures do not expect women to go to war, not because women are incapable of going to war, after all, we had seen many women fighters in war, such as Queen Moremi, etc. But traditionally, women have been expected to do the baby thing by default and not expected to war. Another example is in the area of cooking, which is a task culturally gendered and determined by default to be a woman's thing but have no biological reason. Before the production of modern food appliances and packaged food, cooking for a family was, most of the time an all-day task, coupled with the archaic system of preserving leftover with nothing. What this means is that, one needed to not work outside the home in order to cook. In culture where men worked outside the home in mines, manufacturing trades and field, women were at home doing both the baby and cooking thing. But in culture where women farm and men craft from home, men cook. Cooking is just one of the numerous cultural expectations, humans do not have real compelling reasons to follow them, but they do anyways. The heavy expectation that women should perform all or most reproductive labour, such as childbirth, cleaning, cooking and several other tasks necessary to support human life is the primary factor limiting them from participating in economic activity outside the home. This is not linked to biological differences or limitations.

It is important to emphatically state that gender has no link with gender roles. Gender roles are cultural expectations whereas gender is a consequence of perinatal neurodevelopment. It is an inner sense of maleness or femaleness that may or may not correspond to biological sex. It does not in any way show supremacy of men over women. Stereotype, discrimination, inequalities were put in place by culture either as a control mechanism or social orderliness. What this means is that gender and sexual orientation are unrelated because a man may be female-bodied and attracted to men. They are some exceptional men who are capable of breastfeeding. Some people can have the innate sense of being both male and female or neither because neurodevelopment is not binary or fixed.

Therefore, gender is not dependent on biological sex and sexual orientation. Gender only has an unstable relationship with biological sex because it can influence how individual view and participate in gender roles. Culture has always been the main determinant in both domestic and communal activities. The society uses several methods to enforce gender roles. The use of proverbs in daily conversation to portray and emphasize stereotype among male and female in order to ensure that both gender acknowledge and revere their gender stance in the society (Adomako-Ampofo,2001; Boateng et al,2006). Girls are taught to look up to boys while boys are taught to lead and control women. These assigned roles exist in community norms to maintain social influence and authority over women (Nukunya 1992; Abu, 1991). This shows that culture is a tool used by society to maintain social hierarchy leading to gender inequality. Therefore, gender inequality is fueled by the patriarchal societal construction of gender assigned roles and supported by religion. Culture

and religion have always been the major determinants of gender inequality and these are man-made factors. In an African society, patriarchal concept and gender individualities remain the cause of misery to women across all works of life. The total dependency on men has further exposed women to offensive and odious practices in the name of culture, such as Female Genital Mutilation rites in Yourba and Efik land, the 'Kule' or 'Bashiga' system in Hausa, Widowhood rites in Igbo. In Hausa land for instance, there is the 'Purdah' system or Bashiga which stops Hausa women and girls between the age of puberty from leaving the house unaccompanied and socializing. The widowhood rites exposed widows to dehumanizing treatments of unprintable things (Ebo,2015).

According to (Reeves & Baden,2000), defending certain culture and tradition is often a ploy used by the patriarchal society to justify practices that restricts women's life chances and outcomes. Any effort to dispute with power imbalance or to change gender roles are often defended and denounced as westernization. These traditions and custom that encourage division of gender roles and these practices are passed from one generation to another (Boateng et al.2006) making it almost impossible to alter and women are often expected to strictly comply to cultural customs and traditions than men(Women Manifesto for Ghana,2004). The supremacy men have over women exposes women to sudden fear and intimidation. Sometimes when they decide to resist these cultural norms and values, they usually face harsh consequences.

With the increasing global debates and conferences targeted at enforcing and protecting women's right, diverse studies have disclosed that women are still confronted with severe restrictions (Adekile,2010; Folarin&Udoh,2014; Aluka,2015; Chaves,2018). It is in light of the above that the International Treaties under the protection of the United Nations were provided. Examples of such treaties is 1979 Convention for the Elimination of all forms of discrimination against women (CEDAW). Regardless of all the efforts at exterminating gender inequality, women are still marginalized (Stitches&Parpart,2019) because we are yet to come to terms with the fact that gender and gender roles are two separate entities. The denial and restriction of this knowledge will continue to fuel gender inequality in our society and in turn increased the level of poverty among women. As long as women are left with fewer opportunities to enhance their economic conditions(Zuckeman,2002) gender inequality will continue to thrive and the agenda for sustain Development in 2030 would become impossible (United Nations 2018).

The Link between Religion and Gender dominance

In a situation where gender hierarchy and fixed roles control the social landscape, we cannot deny the role of religion in creating and maintaining social, economic and gender inequality in the society. Religion dictates the status of women and has continually been a foundation upon which gender inequality rests on. It is assumed that gender roles are constructed through culture, religion and upbringing (King 1995). Modern data provided evidence that religion affect gender roles in the home (Ellison and Bartkowski, 2002; Read 2004). Women in religion have been conditioned to see themselves as subordinates to men because it is the divine will of the All-knowing God. This conditioning of the mind puts women at a disadvantaged both domestically, economically and professionally.

According to Woodhead, 2004, religion is a systematic distribution of power engaging directly with the power source (God/sacred power). This is why most religious followers, especially women, are more inclined to believing or obeying their religious leaders more than any other because they are supposedly the representative of the sacred power(God). So whatever instruction passed out by these leaders are being followed to the latter by their followers. The iconography and language of most religion portrayed God as male and by extension, men are viewed as masters by divine right and this further promotes sex segregation because hypothetically, since God who controls the whole universe Is a "Man", then it is only natural for men to control women. The fear of God will therefore not allow women to revolt against this injustice.

Some emerging patriarchal dispositions of religion, have stifled some of the changes in the status of women which means that the status of women in religion is the same with the status of women in the society. Most religion focuses on patriarchy and androcentrism. Patriarchy means an all-male power structure that favours men over women. Traditional religious texts are exclusively the creation and experience of men, taken as normative while experiences of women

are relegated to subordinate roles and excluded from significant religious rites. Androcentrism, on the other hand, is the privilege of the male, both in language and thought. It also means that male experience is one-sidedly equated with all human experience. This experience has been taken to be a universal norm by men and women alike, without equal recognition to women's experience. This is seen in the use of "man" as a universal generically "human", which makes it exclusionary because it erases women as subjects (Juschka 2001, pp.2-3).

Religion enforces and normalises patriarchal Institutions presenting men's superior status in society as 'God's will', thereby making women to accept their inferior status as good Christian behaviour, not because women are biologically weaker than men. This has a direct influence on a country's economic development (Dollar and Gatti,1990) because in reality, when you empower women, you empower a nation.

From the mid-20th century, there has been a lot of criticism of the conventional gender roles that religions like Christianity and Islam have imposed. Many radical feminists argued that Christianity, Islam, Judaism, etc promote patriarchal societies by using religious texts and dogmas to justify their superior status over women in the society. Other feminists opined that some religions were originally women-focused but men found a way to twist the doctrines and used it for their own advantage throughout history. According to (Sait&Lim, 2006) religion preaches equality of all human whether male or female, interms of sex, race or nationality. El Saadawi (1980) supported this claim that religion may not be inherently patriarchal, it just happened to be in a world where social structures are extremely patriarchal and men shaped its doctrines over history to make it justify their superior status in the society. Religion has nothing to do with biological differences but societal status.

Simone de Beauvoir (1949), a French feminist, identified religion as a tool of deception and direct control in society. She used the working class in Marxist theory to compare the religious deception of women. This deception can be understood by (Holm1994) as normative conditionality and practical conditionality. Holm defined normative conditionality as equality of men and women before God and practical conditionality describes and allocates roles to women in religious community. Most religion emphasizes equality of men and women before God but in practicality, this is not so. There are multiple deceptions to show how the male perspective had dominated the meaning of religious myths which have had adverse effects on gender roles. We can see from the unequal laws and imbalanced enforcement in religious texts only used to regulate women;

- The Quran instructs both men and women to be stoned to death but in several cases men escape this punishment as we saw in the Biblical case of the adulterous woman whereas her partner in crime, the man, was exonerated.

- Most religion allowed men to have more than one wife but women are not allowed to have more than one husband. Many prominent religious patriarchs had more than one wives, examples, Abraham, Jacob, Esau, King David, King Solomon, Mohammed, etc. Even the story of Adam and Eve have been told from a patriarchal perspective throughout history.

- In Islam, the religion forbides women during their periods of mensuration and pregnancy from touching the Quran or entering the mosque (Holm 1994) because they are considered unclean.

- Christianity, Islamic and even Judaism instruct women to desist from mounting the pulpit to preach nor lead in prayers in the gathering of men (1Corinthians14:34-35, Al-Muhalla2/167).

All these are oppressive deceptive mechanism used by the patriarchal society to exploit women based on defined gender roles and not by biological differences.

Religion is used as a compensation for women for occupying a second-class status in society. Traditional religions indoctrinate women to view their motherhood position as a divine status, thereby making them think that staying home and out of public life is the best choice for them. Inarguably, the role of mothers and housewives is considered the most oppressive because it comes with total financial dependency on men. This can lead to exploitation through unpaid domestic labour. The only way to break patriarchal control is to reject the false compensation of religion which makes women live in a 'planetary sexual caste system built on exploitation (Mary Daly, 1968). Daly criticized Christianity for removing historical religions with

powerful female gods thereby creating a set of myths based on male superiority. She further argued that Christianity downplayed the role of important female figures, citing the example of Mary Magdalene, who played a significant role in spreading Christianity.

Another feminist theologian, Carol Christ (1994) tried to move away from the patriarchal perspective of religion by introducing female spirituality. Christ called it embodied spirituality. Embodied spirituality is an idealogy that there is a Goddesss who is omnipresent and connects the universe. The representation of this Goddess has been in existence for centuries. Examples are the Venus of Willendorf, the Macha Earth Goddess from ancient Ireland, the Goddess Anansa from the Efik kingdom of Calabar people in Cross River State, Nigeria, etc. These Goddesses were both worshipped for their fertility and nourishment and they have been present in folklore and other mythological stories of almost all cultures and nations. But the patriarchal doctrines of traditional religions coupled with the patriarchal society play a part in diminishing the popularity of these powerful female Gods.

Recommendations

Access and participation in culture should be seen as a fundamental right, knowing that this right is applicable to everyone without distinction of any kind, including gender. In agreement to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights(UDHR) approved by United Nations General Assembly in 1948 made it known that "everyone has the right to freely participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and it benefits"(Article 27, paragraph 7). The Declaration further pointed out in Article 2 that "everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedom set forth in this Declaration". Everyone referred to include all individuals, all humans regardless of race, sex, colour, language, political, religion, property, birth or status. By judiciously abiding to this principle, cultural or human rights for everyone, whether women or men will be safeguard.

Evidently, culture is dynamic and it is constantly evolving. Many cultural activities evolved continuously and a lot of these activities have also been discarded as knowledge increases, alternatives are pursued. It is crucial to adopt a reflective analytical view in order to comprehend and expound on the power links that corrobate discriminatory activities embedded in many societies and institutions beginning with the family, since that is the first agent of change. Also, since there is no way to undeniably show that only one or more groups should exercise authority over the other, or that one or more groups should have no or little right to communicate, then it is better to give everyone a chance to assist in defining their community's collective structure, which should not in any way be harmful to one group, in particular women in the community. In UNESCO Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural right, Farida Shaheed reiterates that when taking a human right stance, it is not in our place to ascertain "if culture and tradition dominate over women's human rights and to what degree but focus should be on ensuring that women are allowed to posses their culture, inclusive of religion and tradition as well as their human rights(UNESCO report, p.5). This is not about imposing a new culture of a new hierarchy, nor is it about putting women's right above tradition but instead, it is to ensure that women have as much say as the men in the definition of what makes tradition. This means that in the making of tradition and culture, women should be part of the discussion leading to the validation of the practice, agree to it, subscribe to it and listen to, as seriously as their male counterpart.

In addition, women should be given the right to ascertain and decipher cultural heritage, choose which cultural practices are to be retained without modification and which to be modified as well as the ones to be eliminated. In cases where women themselves agree and encourage discriminatory practices that is apparently harming them,(UNESCO report, p.53) states that "while it is vital to tackle social norms and taboos that result in discrimination and recognize that victims may often conspire in their victimization for many reasons, communities also need to be aware of what these are in order to address them appropriately and in terms acceptable to the people involved".

To change or mimimise patriarchal system of religion, women should adopt a religious language that is different from the male-centered standard used by all traditional reigions. Women need to start looking for spirituality from within themselves rather than looking for religious guidance above. Carol Christ (1997) called it embodied spirituality because there cannot be one interpretation of spirituality. Sexism and Patriarchy must not be used as yardstick for evaluating creativity and

leadership because sexismisrootedintheideathatcertainbehaviorora bilitiesareinherenttowomenormenand this forms thebasics for discriminationagainstwomen.

Female religion scholars should develop a practical "participatory hermeneutics" which involves advocacy and personal engagement and also a theoretical "hermeneutics of suspicion" which examines all traditional practices of religion. June O'Connor (1989) had simplify this task as "rereading, reconceiving and reconstructing religious traditions. By 'rereading', it means religious phenomenon must be critically studied with consideration to women's presence and absence, words and silences. "Reconceiving" needs the collection and recovery of lost sources and suppressed visions while "reconstructing" focuses on linking the past happenings to new paradigms for thinking, understanding and evaluation. This will enable a dynamic transformation, showing that a profound change is social structures and thought patterns is deliberately sought and worked for.

Finally, at this stage of humanity's global presence, it is no more possible to work with exclusively hegemonic models of thought drawn from only one gender. It is imperative to consider all genders and their differences in any historical analysis and theories.

Conclusion

Gender has no relation with biological difference. Gender is a product of culture while sex is a product of nature. Since gender is a social construct, it depends on how a culture or society configures it. The fact that gender roles vary in time and place illustrates their true nature as constructs. Something that gradually evolved, reinvented and upgraded cannot be a product of an important human characteristics. Gender roles are a social technology (customs, traditions, etc) that help societies function smoothly and efficiently. As societies perfect themselves, they can afford to permit more social latitude, as they declined, personal freedom also decline. Culture is reflected in every aspect of who we are as human being. It creates gender expression to conform to gender identity. Culture dictates the norm, not biological differences because there is no biological criteria for women to have long hair and men to have short, nor men to wear pants and women to wear dresses and skirts.

Culture and religion continue to be the dominant determinants of gender inequality. Dorminant religious teachings have heavily influenced gender, as many religious teachings, scriptural statements, religious rites and beliefs are patterned by gender differences, even when gender remains unacknowledged. Religion and gender do not function independently of each other but they are embedded within each other in all religious worlds and experiences. This deep embeddedness of gender in religion makes it difficult to separate the two from each other. Until culture and religion are completely alienated from gender, gender inequality will continue to take root in our society. In order to mimimise patriarchal system of religion, women should adopt a religious language that is different from the male-centered standard used by all traditional reigions. Also, in the making of tradition and culture, women should be part of the discussion leading to the validation of the practice, agree to it, subscribe to it and listen to, as seriously as their male counterpart.

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