
**CULTURAL COMMUNICATION, GENDER INEQUALITY AND SUSTAINABLE
DEVELOPMENT IN AFRICA: A RE-APPRAISAL**

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ABSTRACT: *The perpetuation of gender inequality in Africa has remained prevalent and pervasive with costly implications (Azuh et al. 2017; African Human Development Report 2016). Against this background, the paper examined the critical role of cultural communication in achieving gender equality and sustainable development in Africa. The objectives of the study were to ascertain the reasons for the continued prevalence of gender inequality in Africa, identify the consequences of this practice for Africa's sustainable growth and proffer solutions for achieving gender equality and sustainable growth in Africa. The study was anchored on the Agenda setting as well as Gender and Development theories. The methodological approach followed the qualitative analyses of related literature and documents in tying the nexus between gender inequality, cultural communication and development in Africa. The study found that culture-induced gender inequalities still exist and greatly impede sustainable growth in Africa. The paper, therefore, recommended that the ministries of information and cultural reorientation at all levels of government in Africa, should seriously strengthen and use the complementariness of the indigenous media, the traditional mass media and new mass media systems to reorientate and facilitate a positive attitudinal change to gender issues in Africa.*

KEYWORDS: cultural communication, gender inequality and sustainable development, Africa

INTRODUCTION

In Umusam- Ogbe Community of Ndokwa West Local Government Area, Delta State, Nigeria, where the researcher hails from, it is a taboo to this day for women to enter the traditional village hall, 'Obiogwa', where men meet periodically to deliberate on every day Issues confronting the community. When issues of graver import are to be deliberated upon, the men retreat further into an ancestral spiritual grove, a vicinity where women are forbidden from venturing close to from the beginning of time. Such is the exclusion of women from participation in the determination of issues that, invariably, concern and affect them. In most African communities, these discriminatory practices, which are used to oppress and subjugate women (Gita and Piroaska, 2007), have remained pervasive. Incidentally, almost all such discriminations against women in Africa find expression and justification in cultural matters, traditional to additional belief systems and practices which Professor Dupe Onadeko, National president of Inter – Africa committee (IAC), Nigerian chapter

calls “Harmful Traditional Practices (HTP)” that often leave many African women mentally, physically, psychologically and emotionally damaged for life.

In obvious reaction to the plight of women in this regard, the world adopted the convention for the elimination of all forms of discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1979 (Azuh et al. 2017). The broad framework for women’s rights provided by CEDAW has since been operational, or purportedly so, in a number of countries to advance action at the national levels. Therefore, it is worrisome that 40 years after CEDAW, most Nigerian women are still burdened by the weight of traditional belief systems that suppress and subjugate them. Going by the submission of several scholars, and rightly too, the communication media possesses the potentials to effectively address the lingering challenge of gender in equality in Africa. (Okaka et al. 2016, Morna, 2002). They believe that the key challenge of achieving the goal of gender equality is in changing mindsets hardened by custom, culture and religion and that the media have a potentially huge role to play in this liberation of the mind. It is against this background that this study examined the critical role of cultural communication in achieving gender equality and sustainable development in Africa.

Statement of the Problem

The evidence of scholarly studies clearly indicate that gender inequality is negatively related to sustainable development efforts in Africa (Aina, 2011; Okaka et al., 2016; Azuh et al. 2017; Mukherjee et al., 2017). The graphic statistics by the African Human Development Report (2016) that gender inequality costs sub-saharan African an average of 95 billion dollars a year is mind boggling. It is even more worrisome when one puts in perspective all the international efforts, world conventions, human rights charters and government legislations at the level of nations that have been invested in curbing gender inequalities in the world. Given that the failure of these efforts have been blamed on the insensitivity and unyielding obstinacy of the African traditional belief systems, the researcher holds the opinion that solving a cultural problem requires an equally cultural solution.

Therefore, the problem of this study is to show how cultural communication can be used to address the problem of gender inequality in Africa.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study were to:

1. Ascertain the reasons for the continued prevalence of gender inequality in Africa.
2. Identify the consequences of this practice for Africa’s sustainable growth
3. Proffer solutions for achieving gender equality and sustainable growth in Africa.

Theoretical Framework

This study was based on two theories namely, Agenda setting theory and Gender and Development (GAD) theory.

Gender and Development Theory

This theoretical approach focuses on the socially constructed differences between men and women, the need to challenge existing gender roles and relations and the creation and effects of class differences on development. According to Azuh et al., (2017) the theory emerged in the late 1980s as a pre-Beijing response to the failure of Women In Development (WID) approach to change the lives of women and influence broader development agenda. The authors go on to explain that GAD deals with social, economic, political and cultural forces that determine how men and women participate in, benefit from, and control project resources and activities differently. In other words, GAD seeks to make up for the short coming in the WID agenda which focused on women in isolation, ignoring unequal gender relation in various social and economic settings. In the final analysis, GAD is more embracing as it seeks to ensure that all decisions concerning development are reached through the equitable participation of men and women in the development process (Williams et al; In Azuh et al. 2017).

Agenda Setting Theory

The subject matter of this study derives its relevance from the theoretical framework of the Agenda setting theory. Proposed by Maxwell Mc Combs and Donald Shaw in 1976, the theory stipulates that the median may not tell us what to think, but they divert our mind to what to think about (Pate, in Nwabueze & Ebeze, 2013). In other words, agenda setting is the process through which the median create awareness and salience about public issues and by so doing, elevate them to the public consciousness and agenda.

This theory is very relevant to this topic because, by projecting the issues in the public domain, all stakeholders will be sensitized and galvanized to seek lasting solutions to the twin challenges of National security and sustainable national development.

Conceptual Clarifications

Harmful Traditional Practices against Women in Africa

According to the United Nations Millennium Report (2000), out of the more than 110 million children that are not in school, approximately 60% are girls while pregnancies and children related health problems take the lives of nearly 146,000 teenage girls each year in Sub-Saharan Africa. The report points out further that this scenario reflects the plight of the girl child in many developing parts of the world, including Africa; causing girls and women to routinely bear burdens and endure treatment that reflect their unequal status in terms of gender and sexuality. Such deprivation of the girl child has been continuously stimulated by the economic, social and political domination in both the home and the classroom. Gita & Piroška (2007) were more categorical. They aver that such processes of inequality and inequity are believed to be perpetuated by cultural norms, regulations, religious beliefs and practices which constitute some of the common conundrums that patriarchal male societies have used to oppress and subjugate women. Salaam (2003), asserts that tradition, culture and religion have dictated men and women relationship for centuries and entrenched male domination into the structure of social organization and institution at all levels of leadership. He further laments that patriarchy justifies the marginalization of women

in education, economy, labour, market, politics, business, family, domestic, matters, and inheritance.

Determined to address the issues surrounding the plight of third world women in development processes, world forums like CEDAW, the 1995 Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women and the 1995 Beijing declaration, enjoined member states to promote women's economic independence, including the creation of employment, access to resources and credit, the eradication of the persistent and increasing burdens of poverty, malnutrition, poor health and illiteracy. Unfortunately, despite these manifest efforts at arresting these elements of gender inequality and regardless of government legislations, traditional belief systems have ceaselessly established mechanisms for discrimination and violence against girls as well as their exclusion from entitlements, rights and equal opportunities. This litany of burdens of African woman has resulted in her characterisation with the metaphorical expression of carrying six mountains on her back among which are: oppression from outside (colonialism and neo colonialism); oppression from backwardness; inflicted pain, colour, race and herself (Omonubi-McDonnell, 2003).

In Nigeria, the 2012 Gender Report shows gender imbalance in education, health, property rights, violence, weak economic base, weak political representation and gender preference. In Nigeria's cultural and traditional environment, the male grows up to find out that sex confers something extra on him while women are deprived of basic rights, using cultural communication processes to perpetrate and justify the discrimination practices against women. Some examples of such practices and beliefs according to the report include the following:

- Husbands are the head of the family. Therefore, women must venerate, respect and obey their husbands at all times; most women are emotional and therefore not given to rationality like men; wholesale adoption of gender ideas from fundamentalists subordinating women to men; the strong traditional belief that for the continuity of the family lineage, preference of male children to female should be encouraged; and inheritance laws denying females any inheritance as they are considered to belong to their husbands on marriage. In rare cases, when she is considered for inheritance, she get less than her male siblings as well as the encouragement of early marriages of female children even though it truncates or postpones girls education.
- Widowhood practices that accuse most widows of being responsible for the death of their spouses and invariably deny them of their social and economic rights. In many instances, the family of a deceased husband will claim rights to the couple's property leaving the widow destitute.
- The practice of female genital mutilation in the belief that women's sexual role should be passive and hence the need for the operation to eschew promiscuity in women. Thus, her sexual need and enjoyment are taken for granted. She has no right to enjoy sex because her primary role in sexual intercourse is to satisfy her partner and for procreation.

And whereas these practices differ considerably from region to region in levels of practice, the fact is that Africa remains one of the epicenters of these unwholesome practices that are tantamount to the propagation and perpetuation of gender inequality in the world.

The Issue of Gender Inequality in Africa

Gender inequality is a social construct that has societal backing leading to gender disparity between the two sexes, with respect to functions, rights to resources, responsibility and positions (Azuh et al., 2017). Other fall outs of gender inequality are gender discrimination; unequal and unfair treatment against female counterparts in numerous spheres of life. These inequalities have become a central challenge for Africa and other regions of the world that practice them (Mukherjee et al., 2017). Documental evidences of international and regional concerns about issues of gender equality abound. The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights affirmed the rights to gender equality in its Article 2 (Aina, 2011). It states inter alia that: everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in the declaration without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status. Sequel to the declaration, there have been a litany of international efforts and world statutes aimed at promoting gender equality in the world. These include, Convention on the Political Rights of Women, 1952; Convention on the Nationality of Married Women 1957; Convention on the Consent to Marriage, 1962, the Mexico Plan of Action, 1975; Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), 1979, adopted by over 180 countries in the world; the Nairobi Conference, 1985; World Conference on Education for All, 1990; the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development that created Agenda 21, 1992; Conference on Human Rights, 1993; the Cairo International Conference on Population and Environment, 1994; fourth World Conference on Women, 1995, that produced the Beijing Declaration and Beijing Action Plan; Maputo Protocol, 2011 as well as the provisions of the Sustainable Development Goal-5 and the Millemium Development Goal-3 (Aina, 2011; Azuh et al., 2017).

Unfortunately, in spite of all the proclamations and acclaimed guarantee of human rights posted in the resolutions of the above stated conferences, conventions, Articles and Protocols, women rights have remained in the doldrums, unrecognized in most societies of the world, especially in developing economies (Aina, 2011). Azuh et al. (2017) lament that despite these international efforts, gender inequality still persists in Africa, leading to gaps between males and females in various life indicators such as economics constraint, low political participation and empowerment, low educational attainment and poor health, cultural and religious restrictions and injunctions, high burden of family responsibilities and poor exposure than their male counterparts. In a spectacular departure from the gloom in the preceding accounts, Mukherjee et al (2017) report that certain emerging facts about inequality, gender and human development in Africa indicate that Sub-Saharan Africa experienced more rapid growth in the Human Development Index between 2000 and 2010, rising at an annual average of 1.68 percent. The report further states that between 2010 and 2014, more than 90% of Sub-Saharan African countries reduced health inequality; close to 50% reduced education inequality and less than 40% reduced income inequality. Regardless the

authors acknowledge that the perpetuation of inequalities on income, health and education outcomes is linked to complex mixes of discriminatory social norms against women and a skewed distribution of service provisions. Okaka et al. (2016) corroborate this view by the assertion that gender perspective roles are still determined by the local cultures to define social-economic activities.

If these culture induced inequalities were without consequences, it would have been pardonable. Unfortunately, this is not case. The African Human Development Report (2016) states categorically that gender inequality is costing Sub-Saharan Africa an average of 95 billion US dollars a year, thereby endangering the continents efforts for inclusive human development and economic growth. It is against this background that it has become imperative that efforts are not spared in redressing the costly practice of perpetuating gender inequality in Africa.

Conceptualising Cultural Communication

Goman (2011) defines culture, basically, as a set of shared values that a group of people hold. To Danesi (2000), it is the arts, beliefs, languages, institutions, rituals etc. practised by a specific group of people, while communication is the exchange of messages through some channels and in some media. These definitions provide insight into the meaning of the more complex concept known as cultural Communication. According to Covarrubias (2018), Cultural Communication is the social enactment of learned systems of symbolic resources, premises, rules, emotions, spatial orientations and motions of time that groups of people use to shape distinctive and meaningful communal identities, relationships, and ways of living and being. That is, cultural communication entails the communicative means and codes, linguistic and non-linguistic, by which humans beings coordinate and create meanings in their actions and inactions within the framework of groups and societies. Inherent in the nature of culture is the manner of its communication within a society. Hence, culture can be communicated consciously or unconsciously. Goman (2011), explains that some carriers of cultural attributes are not even aware of their own cultural biases because cultural imprinting is begun at a very early age. Invariably, while some cultural knowledge, rules, beliefs, values, Phobias, anxieties and practices are communicated explicitly, others are silently communicated and subconsciously absorbed.

Assessing the relationship between communication and culture, Ruben (2019) describes both concepts as complex and intimate. According to him, culture is created through communication. That is, communication is the means of human interaction through which cultural characteristics are created and shared. This is so much so that, without communication and communication media, it is impossible to preserve and pass along cultural characteristics through place, space and time. Interestingly, and in an ironical sense, communication practices are largely created, shaped and transmitted by culture. [In Africa, the symbiotic relationship between communication and culture is not different. In his submission on this relationship, Moemeka (1984) observes that culture determines the code, context and meaning of communication which is the lifewire of any culture. He concludes emphatically that, without communication, no culture can survive. From the

foregoing arguments, the following facts emerge: one, without communication, it would be impossible to preserve culture across space and time; two, culture changes over time; and three, without communication, no culture can survive.

Cultural Communication and Gender Inequality in Africa: Implications for Sustainable Development

One obvious fact that has emerged from the foregoing presentations about cultural communication and gender inequality is that the former is a causative factor in the perpetuation of the latter: Azuh et al., (2017) opine that gender inequality is a social construct that thrives on societal backing; Mukherjee et al., (2017) aver that the perpetuation of inequalities in income, health and education are linked to complex mixes of discriminatory social norms against women; while Okaka et al., (2016) assert that gender perspective roles are still determined by the dictates of local cultures. More worrisome are the consequent implications of the perpetuation of gender inequality for sustainable development in Africa. The evidence of scholarly studies show that gender inequality is negatively related to sustainable development efforts in Africa (Aina, 2011; Okaka et al., 2016; Azuh et al., 2017; Mukherjee et al., 2017). This point was statistically captured in the Africa Human Development Report (2016) that gender inequality is costing Sub-Sahara Africa an average of 95 billion dollars a year, thereby endangering the continent's efforts for inclusive human development and economic growth. As Iwelumor et al., (2014) observe, every culture has something negative. Indeed, there are good, existential and bad sides of every culture, be it African, European or American. The only difference is in the particular society's choice of the cultures to promote and the ones to jettison in the space of place and time. The problem with Africa is that it has continued to retain bad cultural practices against women especially in the localities of our cultural homes despite the counter productive and unproductive nature of such cultural practices.

CONCLUSION

There is ample evidence of the prevalence and pervasiveness of anachronistic traditional beliefs and cultural practices that still promote gender inequality in Africa (Omonubi-McDonnell 2003; Salaam, 2003; Gita & Pirooska, 2007), with the implication of costing Africa a whopping 95 billion dollars a year (Africa Human Development Report, 2016), negating inclusive human development and sustainable growth. Going by the accounts of communication scholars, cultural practices cannot survive without communication (Moemeka, 1984; Okaka et al, 2016; Mukherjee et al 2017; Azuh et al. 2017). Therefore, in a dialectical sense, Africans can use cultural communication to determine the fate of our cultures by retaining those aspects that are worth retaining and discarding those that do not represent us well. In this instance, a well-planned and coordinated cultural communication system to discourage and "kill" those cultural practices that promote gender inequality in Africa. Therein, lies the essence of cultural communication and the responsibility of communication media and scholars.

Recommendations

- i. A crucial point of emphasis to start in redressing this problem should be the institution and promotion of cultural re-orientation programmes and campaigns targeted at the grassroots of every African community. The ministries of information and cultural re-orientation at the different levels of governments in Africa should begin to work assiduously towards this cultural re-orientation process. They should work in synergy with structures such as Village Development Committees (VDCs) and District Development Committees (DDCs) in the rural communities where the issues of cultural tenacity are more prevalent. Such reorientation campaign programmes should emphasize the concept of cultural dynamism. Indeed, there is no better place to exact attitudinal change in the modes and styles of Africa's cultural communication than the traditional settings through channels like interpersonal communication, village square meetings, gender roles within the family, gender roles during communal labour, commercial festivals etc.
- ii. Beyond the village traditional settings, our elites in the cities are complicit perpetrators of gender inequality. Despite education and exposure to some redemptive western values in this regard, there are still traces of these unwholesome cultural discriminations against women among the elites in African cities. (Aina, 2011). Put simply, traditional gender stereotypes, often detrimental to women, could only be amenable to positive change by building mutual trust across gender groups. There is also the need for a cultural revolution that will make such male elites begin to relinquish their stronghold on cultural values that do not promote equity and equitable distribution of gender opportunities perpetrated in the family, business, politics etc. what is required is a cultural reorientation that can be transmitted through public enlightenment and other cultural communication campaign programmes. Afterall, culture is dynamic and changes overtime. Therefore the onus is on the people to change.
- iii. Also, African governments should take the lead in the use of cultural communication to achieve gender equity in their nations. Much more than establishing culture policies, like the 1988 culture policy of Nigeria, governments should implement the provisions of such policy documents in the letter and spirit of such provisions. It is worrisome that despite world statutes, human rights charters and conventions to which African governments are signatories, gender inequality still persists in Africa (Azuh et al., 2017). African governments should leave no one in doubt about their commitment to gender equality through the enforcement of strict compliance with the provisions of its culture policy documents, national constitutions as well as all the international agreements signed to protect women's right and promote gender equality. All that is required is the political will to do so.
- iv. Finally, most African societies operate a media ecology that combines the African communication media system, the traditional mass media system and the new media system. All three systems possess the complementariness of working together for a more comprehensive and effective cultural communication system. The ministries of information and cultural reorientation at all levels of government should coordinate the activities of the indigenous communications

systems as well as those of the traditional and new mass media channels like the radio, television, newspapers, magazines, the internet etc. for a more purpose driven and result oriented communication. Such coordination should be based on the philosophy of a cultural communication and orientation that is gender equality biased. This approach is in tandem with the position of communication scholars that without communication, no culture can survive (Moemeka, 1984).

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