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Review

Modernism and the Change of African Gender Relations: Historical Discourses

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Globally, cases of the so called gender inequality are on increase as social transformation towards modernity and liberal lives. This situation has seriously been contested and reported on matters related to land ownership, employment, education, gender-based violence, marriage lives, decision-making, power struggles, freedom of choice and so forth. Despite its existence, it has been evolving over time in terms of its manifestations, magnitudes and interpretations in Africa. This paper has surveyed literatures on its changing nature in Africa. It underscored the bounding discourses from pre to post-colonial Africa. Findings revealed that, what is contemporarily regarded as inequalities across gender lens among Africans is the new interpretations assigned by the westerners on the influences of liberalism and western democracies contrary to the deep rooted African traditions. As such, some Africans have been dancing the drum which has created economic, political and socio-cultural chaos in the continent. These new perceptions assigned on African gender relations have extensively eroded the African traditional lives based on mutual respect and agreement across gender lens. Africans and other gender actors should understand that, the trajectory of gender relations in African communities has been affected by the new interpretations triggered by the external influences and aspirations. Therefore, Africans should dance it on the benchmark of their long rooted ancestral traditional norms.

Key words: Modernism, Gender Relations, Africa, Historical Discourses.

INTRODUCTION

The current world of globalization, liberal ideas and capitalist individualism has impacted on both human insecurity and the fight which calls for individual rights (Caracciolo and Santeramo, 2013). This has opened up discussions, campaigns and calls for getting rid of the so called gender inequalities in Africa and at the global context (MacKinnon and Cumbers, 2011). Bourguignon (2018), inequalities across gender lens has been identified as one of the problems of the contemporary

global communities. Presently, it has drawn much attention to human rights watchers, activists, governmental and no-governmental organizations which actively engage in eliminating all vices related to it globally (Muchomba, 2015). Basically, what is said to be gender inequalities in all forms are rooted from social-economic traditions of the given community (Bourguignon, 2018). Be it Africa, Asia, America and Europe, different perceptions and interpretations of the

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social relations tied to the socio-cultural norms since the evolution of lives (Bourguignon, 2018).

Despite being felt worldwide, the question of unequal gender relations is however, pioneered more intensely in low-income countries as opposed to the developed world (Caracciolo and Santeramo, 2013). This is claimed to have been as a result of the varied nature of intellectual levels, magnitudes of people's awareness, exposures, perceptions, interactions and different cultural ties triggering the occurrence and the definitions imposed on the phenomenon across the planet (ISS, 2003)[1]. According to Kimani (2008), gender relations among Africans have been attached to their historical and traditional ties of the given communities. For example, Africa's land tenure system has pose contemporary acute discussions across gender lens in terms of its access, ownership and benefits where women considered as the victimized group (Byamugisha, 2016). These paradoxical discussions are centred on the newly interpreted gender relations imposed by the westerners on African societies which contradicts the long term cherished African realities, however, surprisingly danced by some Africans (Akinola, 2018).

Regardless of its intensity and attraction to critical discussions across disciplines at all levels, the new perceptions across unequal gender relations in the world, its taste to pose discussions among scholars is still promising and invaluable (Jacobsen, 2011). As such, this paper has surveyed gendered social relations and its changing trends across time in Africa.

THE HISTORICITY AND REALITIES OF GENDER RELATIONS IN AFRICA

The question of different social relations and organisations in Africa existed before colonial era (Moyo, 2017). History teaches us that, societies survived by making choices, rational and non-rational forms of survival (Goh, 1889). Basically, traditional societies in Africa were largely matrilineal[2], they loved and protected girls but at the same time gave the defence duties to boys, exposing them to harsh nature environment that dictated the life of pre capitalist communities (Tembo, 1988). In pre-colonial Africa, a woman had both teacher and parental roles over the children in the family settings. Despite assuming the significance of her family position, all decision making regarding family and clan matters were handled by men (Kajoba, 2002). This was how societies worked in traditional Africa to maintain the socio-cultural respect of the communities as they are wisely chosen rational beings (Tembo, 1988).

The study conducted by Mihanjo (2011) among the Kisi in Northern Tanzania on their households' production,

gender relations in that community was clearly seen. This community engaged in pottery since late 1880s as their principal economic activity. Commoditisation made pots significant items for sell at the market. Kisi households were thus engaging in pot production on a scale previously unknown in the area. For example, in Ikombe village and Lumbira wards, 90% of the households depended on pottery for their survival and for their incomes (Samanta, 2016). In other communities of Tanzania, this means that, consolidation of exchange relations and decline in incomes puts pressure on both members of the community where both men and women were highly concerned about the welfare of their households, for example the case among the Kisi community. Despite women producing over 60% of the pots as the trade commodity, families and households decisions and leadership depended on men (Wilson, 1996). Therefore, division of labour was an acceptable social relation despite the fact that men had the final decision on the outputs on the pottery business (Mihanjo, 2017). As such, by what came to be interpreted as gender inequality in African societies especially in the issue of resource access and decision making was just attached to modernity and western perceptions which had nothing on the traditional African families prior to capitalist interactions.

Gender diversity in Kisi just defined social roles to be assumed by different individuals in economic productions (Mihanjo, 1997). The logic on gender relations including decisions on income spending from pottery sales took angle following capitalist interactions from 1890s (Baunach, 2001). Commoditisation of pots stimulated gender and age specific roles as well as decision making in the households. Economic and survival problems have made decision making broad and a diversified process. It is a complex negotiated individualistic, paternalistic and collective process. Conjectural conditions and processes indicate that female dominated pottery and petty business trading activities play a major commanding role in the Kisi household. However a number of other intervening historical and social factors play an important role in the shaping of social relationships and power relations in the communities (Dancer, 2017). Similarly, on the other hand, though women income among the Kisi solved most of the households needs, it was small compared to men's income from fishing which was bigger though unreliable and seasonal (ibid). This situation developed internal well-knit interdependencies that bind men and women together in searching for incomes for survival (Ehlers, 1991). Women's daily and weekly income helped households' subsistence needs, and men income was for other family matters (Mihanjo, 1997). Clearly, despite the serious poverty among the Kisi community, families' households survived through integrative efforts of all members; husbands and wives, parents and children, boys and girls, and the related kins in the households (ibid).

However, from Kisi realities, it can be concluded that,

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[1] Netherland Institute of Social Studies, Proceedings from international expert seminar, 2003

[2] Matriarchy is a social organization where descents and relationships reckoned to female line, Peters, 2013

the integration in international capitalist system African households and gender relations have never remained the same (Scott, 1999). Africans have been wiped away from their deep rooted social relations by the modernity and new perceptions which are contemporarily cemented on the ideas of rights, equality and discriminations by the westerners (Sundet, 2004). As such, some Africans have currently changed their perceptions in response to this western philosophical inclination by adapting to changes from external influence (Laiser, 2016). Therefore, in order to clearly understand African gender relations, historicizing their household social relations, as a site characterized by multiple economic, historic, demographic and diverse geographical setting will be the proper lens (Osborn, 2011). Households in this regard are not simply social units, but are as well proper historical, demographic, economic and geographical unit of gender relations analysis on African settings (Sow, 1997). This implies there was no gender equality in Africa as per liberal and western perceptions and interpretations which call for mutual decision making in the communities' matter. However, in the African traditional setting, this was considered normal and there was adherence to division of duties and specialisation across members of the communities (Muchomba, 2015). For example, a study conducted by Knowles (1991) in South Africa showed that, land resource was primarily controlled by elderly men in the clan on behalf of the entire community. These male elders were responsible for land allocation across community members, including women. The study further depicted that, land was not only the economic resource but also attached to security, religious and other cultural matters of the communities. As such, male clan elders were accountable for its protection and could not easily distribute across gender lens (Hallam, 2004).. Therefore, this argument explains the wisdom of the African traditional norms in protecting communities contrary to the new modern perceptions assigned by the westerns on the issue of male-female land access (Dorius, 2010)..

Likewise the structure and content of pre- colonial African education depicted the so called westerners' unequal social relation by African communities. This king of education was gender oriented in terms of its skills and knowledge acquisitions (Rodney, 1973). There was no overleaping learnings across sex, for example, female were taught all households related matters including taking care of their husbands whereas male skills were devoted to economic, defence and security of the families and communities, economic activities and other teachings towards their manhood (ibid). These justifications cement the idea that, African gender relation was characterised by mutual and traditional respect, agreement, humility, honesty, endurance and has thereby created stable African families and communities with the clearly defined social roles across members of the communities (Madueke, 2014).

Furthermore, Madueke (2014) on the study conducted in Nigeria called 'Equality or Complementarity: Gender Relations Seen through African Eyes' concluded that, gender was neither a fundamental organizing principle nor a major defining factor in African socio-cultural relations in the studied community. Being a man or a woman was generally irrelevant to individuals' social roles and relationships. Therefore, this community lived amicably with clear social defining roles and responsibilities across gender. This in turn strengthened the stability and mutual respect within both the families and community with no discrimination sentiments attached to sexes. This marks the fact that, proper studying of African gender relations should be lensed on African perspective and not through western paradigms as the two believe and inclined to different philosophical interpretations (Weisgram, 2016).

Colonial encroachment from 1890s completely transformed African gender relations (Walby, 2003). Colonial demands executed by the colonial state compelled the divergence of gender roles in African colonies contrary to its long cherished setting under traditional ties (Boone, 2015). During colonial era for example, all households' duties were assumed by women especially when men were taken as labourers to colonial projects (Oluwole, 1997). In Tanzania for instance the German colonial government established sisal plantations in Morogoro, Tanga and some parts in Kilimanjaro region whose labourers depended highly in many parts of the continent such as Mozambique and South Africa (Vernet, 2009; Laiser, 2016). This situation caused family and traditional dissolutions in the areas created as labour reserve in Africa (Muthaka et. al, 2017). Capitalist changed lives of the Africans to comply with their demands (Mihanjo, 1999). These capitalist processes had impacted on traditional societies overtly and covertly in their socio-economic and political lives in the pre-colonial African societies as they transformed into modernity (Waane, 1797). This process is superficially explained in anthropological and sociological perspective (Oluwole, 1997). The global intercontinental interactions created modernity in Africa, where many aspects completely changed including gender relations and thereby creating intense socio-cultural confusions (Komu, 2003). Despite modernization which is experienced in the world, activist points fingers to cultural roots being the sole cause of gendered problems in Africa (Muthaka et. al, 2014). It has been quoted for instance that women in Africa battles against persecutions and are subjected to systematic sexual violence where rural communities take the lead (The Independent, 2018). Besides, traditions too often contribute to their subservient positions and therefore subject them into serious gender discrimination in many facets of lives (The Independent, 2018:10). Paradoxically, these arguments leave many unanswered questions about historical changes around societies. In actual fact it confirms that, consolidation in the

transformation of traditional societies related to commodity relations and liberal economic impact (Atkinson and Errington, 1990). Therefore, side lining social transformations and modernity in Africa as the stimuli to the change in gender roles is the confusions brought by the westerners (Hyden, 1980). For example, Africa's rural household production, specifically how commodification enhanced the position and condition of gender relations, is largely linked with integration in international capitalist system (Mbilinyi, 1997). Therefore, the newly brought capitalist system of commoditization completely reshaped different gender roles in the rural communities in Africa. Besides, Alavi et al. (1982) argued that, the peasantry was largely captured and thus was critically broken down on various fronts of social relations including gender. This cement the opinion that households including gender relations in Africa have been transformed throughout, from colonial to post-colonial era, where modernity being the key factor to the said contemporary voiced inequality across gender lens in the continent (Thomson, 1881).

In the context of modernism, many non-governmental organizations have largely contributed to the discussions on gender inequality issues in Africa (Ruparelia, et.al.2017; Schuurman, 2000). The human rights groups and NGOs from the west discussed the matter under the assumption that they are more knowledgeable and well-funded to do so. By so doing they neglect the real facts of history that it is the change and socio-political transformations which has modernised, monetised, ruralised, urbanized and proletariatized African societies and made them too fragile to cope (Commins, 2018), which account for much of the so called present day gender inequalities in Africa (Risman, 2017).. Gender campaigners in the western world take note of African gender and other forms of social relations in western perspectives (Desposato and Norrander, 2009). Thus, picking up from this model of understanding, interpretation and analysis, their campaigns tend to generalise the underdeveloped world especially Africa by simply locating its traditionalism to have horrible impact on gender relations (Jayachandran, 2015; Rose, 2017). They also do not see the history in view of the moves of state to consolidate world capitalist liberal economy and its impact on global society, especially to the mainly pre capitalist societies of Africa (Inglehart et.al, 2003). This can be refuted by the fact that African realities across gender were living amicably long before modernisations. Therefore, modernisation and its aftermath have created socio-cultural genocide where marriage institution, family disintegration and their socio-cultural problems are common in the continent (Kimani, 2008; Schiff, 2010). It can therefore be concluded that, the westerners have historically contributed much in sharpening and eroding the nature of African social relations in order to fulfil their economic interests (Shivji, 1996). For example, during colonial times, men and boys were being uprooted for imperial economies in provision of labour and therefore

burdened the household and community to women, girls and Children (Sheriff, 1987; Sweet, 2013). This situation consolidated and the trend gendered social relations started for the sake of facilitating colonial exploitation (Dodson et al., 2008). Therefore, blaming African gender relations under western lens, approaches and paradigms are not well suited to place traditional Africans into their proper context but rather label and explain different unsuited perceptions to the Africans traditional lives (IBRD, 2020; Plagnol et.al, 2009).

The western paradigms and approaches used to interpret gender relations in Africa seem to misconceive the phenomenon (Madueka, 2014). This is in the same line with Schuurman (2000) who asserted that, the philosophies clearly see African culture totally at fault or wrong even without inclining to its valid historical evidences and justifications (Samanta, 2016).. Such conceptions cement the west supremacist ideology that African culture is inferior and gender insensitive and therefore must be corrected (Miller et al. 2018; Mteti, 2016; OECD, 2015). These perceptions are subscribing to the anthropological and sociological approaches in late 19th century and early 20th century which mediated African societies on premises of western cultural superiority (Schuurman, 2000).

CONTEMPORARY SITUATION ON AFRICA GENDER RELATIONS AND THE DILEMMA TO AFRICANISATION

Since the dawn of man, African gender relations were not a problem among Africans. People collectively lived with their specified divisions of labour and specialisations within the households, where men were in charge of all family matters (Madueke, 2014). Under traditional African families, both men and women had different roles to play in their households (Lindsey, 2020). Lives were tied and agreed by the traditional African socio-cultural norms for centuries (Ngubane, 2010). As the basis of this paper depicts, African traditional lives were clearly defined by gender relations in all aspects of human existence (Jafry and Sulaiman, 2013). For example, economically, despite the collective production efforts at the family levels, men still remained principal decision makers of the families on how to use, allocate and maintain the resources, therefore assuming leadership roles in African context (Ngubane, 2010). Division of labour and specialisations maintained and strengthened social relations across gender lens which in turn brought strong families, clans and communities with high mutual respect, honesty, humility and understandings (ibid). As such, diversified roles in social, economic and political condition in African traditional setting has never been the cause of problems and hence was not interpreted as discriminations, persecutions and marginalisation of across gender (Maddox, 1990).

The campaigns for gender equality have brought

serious problems in African traditional setting (Ngohengo, 2021). What is interpreted as unequal gender relation in Africa was the product of western interpretations caused by the transformations brought to Africa by the colonial relations and western liberal democracies (Ruparelia et al., 2011). Indicators used are typically of western sense and are not sufficient in understanding African communities, history and culture (Mihanjo, 1989). As a result of misinterpretations of the real African lives from its historical perspectives, modernity and new perceptions implanted to African societies through western educations, democracies, and activism, liberty and freedom concepts have seriously contributed to African dissolutions, conflicts and chaos at all levels (Mihanjo and Mpuya, 1998). This has pioneered the grounds of women emancipation in Africa from the so claimed patriarchal decision and operation in all aspects (Mihanjo, 2011). This situation has therefore put African generations at the crossroads particularly in upholding their long cherished traditions as they have strongly been opposed and absorbed by modernity and western gender equality conceptions (Valantine and Sandborg, 2013).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Several conclusions can be deduced from this article. More importantly is an inference that African societies are undergoing serious and significant historical transformation carried since colonial time till date, which have had serious implication on social communities and cultural lives. These changes have indeed brought about consolidation of liberalization and commodity production. This process need to be captured through a historical analysis. The rural communities are changing and becoming modernized, commoditized and urbanized. This had impact generally to society including gender relations. The mode of life and survivorship is rather complex and unpredictable. Societies are prone to human insecurities that survival under contemporary time need to be negotiated and mediated. It is only with a historical approach can one successfully address African social relations in its proper context. Therefore, African gender sensitive actors and organizations should take African benchmark to properly analyze the nature and historicity of the African gender relations across time. As such, Africans should not be swayed away by the western perceptions and interpretations assigned to African gender settings.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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