

# Subordination of Women in 21<sup>st</sup> century Africa: Cultural Sustainability or a New Slavery? Implications for Educational Development

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## Abstract

United Nations facts and statistics indicate that women constitute more than half the world's population and do three-fourths of the world's work. Yet women earn just one-tenth of the world's income; own one percent of the world's property; three-fourths of women are starving, and above all, represent over two-thirds of non-literate adults. Critically examining the above facts with regard to Africa's educational development further reveals diminishing returns as well as an overall impediment to the politico-economic and socio-cultural transformation. In spite of recent token changes and appointments of women to political offices in many countries across Africa, girls and women remain relegated to a secondary human status in relation to boys and men. Against this background, this paper highlights the educational implications of the continued subordination of women to men.

**Keywords:** Women subordination, cultural sustainability, new slavery, educational development.

## 1. Introduction

All over the globe the population of women is currently experiencing an exponential growth. The United Nations (UN) (2013) population projections put the world's population at 7.2 billion people, with women constituting more than half of this number. This latest population report put it this way: 'high population growth rates prevail in many developing countries, most of which are on the UN's list of 49 least developed countries (LDCs).' (United Nations, 2013: 9). The population projections went further to state: 'between 2013 and 2100, the populations of 35 countries could increase at least five-fold by 2100' (United Nations, 2013: 9). This trend of population explosion including that of women signals a turning of the tides of the global workforce from the male to the female; which has started and will likely continue. This shift in the workforce further amplifies the indispensability of the womenfolk to the growth and development of the contemporary society.

Regrettably, this major shift in the workforce from over reliance on men to inclusion of women has not yet effectively transformed the image of womanhood prevalent in many patriarchal societies, including images from ancient Africa. Examples are such images of women as inferior, weakling, subordinate, mediocre, dependent and subsidiary which have lingered into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, largely on cultural and religious bases. Ironically as suggested by Author (2001: 28), some of the negative image and stereotypes attributed to African women are not indigenous to Africa but are rather imported alien views foisted on African women while a few are typically home grown pseudo-gender concepts. 'The negative portrayal of [Africa]/Igbo women's status is indicative of a lack of understanding of the nature of the original egalitarian Igbo tradition ...and a selective memory of [their] historical traditions.' Author (2001: 28). The objective of this paper is to explore some of the ramifications of the phenomenon of women's subordination to men in Africa and to highlight its educational implications with reference to development in Africa. To this end, the conceptual and theoretical frameworks are first established, the problem at hand analysed in context, and the educational implications drawn out, with recommendations for amelioration.

## 2.0 Conceptual and theoretical frameworks

The key words in the paper are women subordination, marginalization, cultural sustainability, slavery, educational development. These will be explained in turns.

### Women's subordination and marginalization

A subordinate is a person who is lower in rank or status than another or is of less importance in comparison to another. The word subordination is understood differently by various scholars. Some use the word subordination interchangeably with other terms such as subjugation, marginalization, subjection, suppression and the like. However, Author (2001 & 2002) maintains a distinction between subordination and other related concepts which emanate there from. 'Subordination refers to the situation whereby male human beings are taken as pre-eminent, and females as secondary human beings. It plays out mostly in the cultural and religious aspects of everyday life around issues of human identity.' Author (2001: 23) further explained women subordination in terms of: 'cultural claims and customs which maintain that men are primary and pre-eminent and that women are secondary, subordinates and under men.' It is a belief which excludes women from public leadership of family,

church and society, most especially from decision making and from officiating at cultic/ritual and political leadership positions.

The subordination of women to men can be seen very often in different situations. For example: irrespective of personal talents, women are usually not called to be heads of committees or chairpersons of social functions. At the most, they might be included as assistants or committee members for the sole purpose of organizing the cooking and serving of food for most occasions. Women's subordination is therefore the relegation, downgrading and demotion of women to a secondary position in relation to men (Author 2002: 23). The author went further to distinguish between subordination and marginalization as follows. 'Marginalization, on the other hand, is an experience of being omitted, rejected and discriminated against in the political, economic and social-cultural spheres of life.' (Author 2002: 23).

Other scholars on the subject of women's subordination see it in terms of its wide scope of effect. For instance, Rayah (2007) sees women subordination as the subjection of women by men in all forms which make women suffer the impact of gender relations that often place them firmly in a position of political, economic and social disadvantage in the society. For Rayah (2007) women subordination refers to the marginalization and subjugation of females by their male counterparts in every facet of life in contemporary Africa on account of their gender. It includes acts of rejection, oppression, repression, suppression, omission, demotion, isolation, segregation, discrimination, and violence experienced by women for the simple reason that they are women.

On the whole, the preferred view in this paper is that subordination is a root issue that has to do with women's human identity in relation to men while marginalization is the off-shoot of subordination from which emanate all the symptoms of oppression which women suffer.

### **Cultural sustainability versus the new slavery**

Most African women have been politically, socially and economically oppressed, discriminated and repressed for so long that in these societies, they still encounter many impediments as they try to ascend to different positions apart from the ones "originally" reserved for or expected from them (African Development Forum, 2008). Attempts by women rights advocates to challenge the *status quo* have often met with stiff resistance from the men and even some women of such societies, who question their audacity and authority to alter nature and culture (Simona, 2010). A correlation of women subordination and slavery thus indicates that these continuous gender biased activities against the female gender are not different from the ones confronted by the black African race in the epoch of the slave trade. This therefore leaves one with the question as to whether all these do not amount to a newer form of slavery or whether they are just aimed at sustaining culture. In the subsequent paragraphs, we critically examine some of the socio-economic and political aspects of women subordination in modern Africa and how they have played out on the educational advancement of polities.

Some Western leaders of thought have been credited with degrading comments about women. Aristotle once wrote: 'the male is by nature fitter for command than the female.' (????). This was corroborated by Piper and Grudem (1991: 58) who were of the view that male authority and female submission were integral to the deeper differences, 'the underlying nature' and 'the true meaning' of manhood and womanhood. In religious circles, some church leaders of high historical repute similarly wrote degrading comments about women. Saints Augustine and Thomas Aquinas argued that women were not created in the image of God, and that they were defective and misbegotten males destined to live under men's influence (Amuluche, 2005). What they all meant was that men had inherent rights and responsibilities to direct the affairs of society, while women were supposed to be in total submission, and to have their affairs directed by men.

The United Nations and other related international organizations, in dispensing their functions of promoting global peace, inclusive societies, political, economic and social justice, and the promotion of human rights, have ensured the abolition of all forms of slavery and discrimination, especially against women. These have been done through the passage of gender-based anti discriminatory legislations such as: the 1948 universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1952 Convention on the Political Rights of Women, 1960 UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education, the Universal Declaration on Democracy, and most importantly the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, among others. Despite the existence of all these international legal instruments and their ratification by most member states, the philosophies of Aristotle, Piper and Grudem, Saints Augustine and Thomas cited above, are continually being practised full-scale in all the facets of most present day African societies, all in the name of cultural maintenance. Some of these acts of relegation and poor treatment of women are so dehumanizing and can only be compared to the treatment of slaves in the era of slavery and the slave trade. The overall fall-out of all the societies concerned is stagnation and subsequent retrogression of their politico-economic and social life. (????).

### **3.0 The nature of the problem**

The problem of women's subordination and consequent marginalization further can be examined under its various ramifications such as: the socio-cultural, economic and political marginalization of women.

### 3.1 Socio-cultural marginalization of women

Women are oppressed with humiliating and dangerous widowhood rites, relegated to low income jobs, denial of the right to own land or property, as well as denial of the right of daughters and widows to inheritance. Thus if women's marginalization is still a talking point in contemporary Africa, it is because culture, psycho-social, religious and social institutions in general remain the bases under which women are consistently subjugated. The majority and the most painful aspects of women's marginalization are experienced in the socio-cultural domain. Many have hidden behind the saying that: 'a man's culture is his identity' to perpetuate acts of injustice on women in the name of identifying with their culture. This has even become so serious that some of these victims of injustices (the women) have accepted their fate and see such oppressive culture into which they were born as immutable and sacrosanct. It is thus not surprising to see female advocates of gender equity being attacked or minimized by their own fellow women for attempting to "tamper" with the culture of the land.

Discrimination against women and girls is evident right from birth. As highlighted by Author (2001 and 2002) and Eya (2005) instances of socio-cultural subjugation of women abound in contemporary African societies. There is still a high preference of boys to girls and men to women. Consequently, some women have unconsciously lost a sense of their human identity and dignity right from birth. This issue of high preference of male to female children has brought a lot of conflicts and violence in matrimonial homes as the women involved are often maltreated and held responsible for 'changing the baby boys in their wombs to girls' in a situation where majority of the children happen to be girls. Furthermore, there is still a lot of sexual degradation and exploitation. Most societies especially in Africa believe that sexuality and women mean the same thing. Female sexuality is viewed as the property of men and the women have no control and right over their own sexuality. It is therefore not surprising to see a man battering his partner for refusing him "his right to sex" (even when the woman is not in a sexual mood). With this kind of mindset, it is not difficult to comprehend why and how some women easily become victims of prostitution. At present, there is a reasonable number of Nigerian girls who have been trafficked and are serving as prostitutes in many European countries, notably Italy and the Netherlands, as well as countries in the Middle East such as the United Arab Emirates. The National Agency for the prohibition of Trafficking in Persons and Related Matters (NAPTIP) supplied the following statistics:

There were 50,000 Nigerian girls working in the Italian sex industry ... 60-80% of female sex workers in Italy are Nigerians ... Thousands of Nigerian girls can also be found in Belgium, Ireland Denmark, UK, Saudi Arabia, Libya and Morocco etc. There are more than one million commercial sex workers in major urban cities like Lagos, Kano, Abuja, Enugu, Port Harcourt, Ibadan, Owerri. (Author 2014: 111).

Moreover, in some parts of the south east Nigeria women up to this day are often exposed to harmful and obnoxious cultural practices after the death of their spouse; ranging from ritual confinement, restriction of movement, deprivation of family property to expulsion from the family home. For instance, some widows are obliged to confine themselves in a dark room for a number of days as a way of mourning their husbands. In situations where the widow is suspected to be responsible for the death, she is sent to spend ten to fifteen days and nights in a forest where she is expected to shave her hair and be exposed to dangerous animals, mosquitoes and even sometimes beaten by rain; all in an attempt to prove her innocence.

In some cultures in the grassland regions of Cameroon especially the North West and Western regions, palace widows are expected to sit under the scorching sun bare-bodied, with their breasts exposed, as a way of mourning a *Fon* (an appellation for a traditional ruler) who is believed to have disappeared to join his ancestors. All these activities help in reducing women to tools in the hands of men.

One of the areas where women are socially discriminated and suppressed with great consequences on their individual futures and that of the society as a whole is education. Despite the massive global sensitization on gender equity in the provision of educational services, there are still societies where the education of the boy child is regarded as very much more important than that of the girl child. Consequently, the girls are sent to early marriages while their brothers are in schools. Meanwhile, girls who have succeeded in finding themselves in schools are also exposed to teachers, curricula, teaching methods and other school activities that reinforce negative gender stereotypes, discriminatory practices and even sexual harassment (Uchem, 2002). The World Bank in 2001 expressed worries that though the gender gap in education progressively narrowed through the 1990s, the pace of this narrowing has been too slow to expect a convergence by 2015. This view was corroborated by UNESCO (2008) that; the female-to-male ratio in school enrollment across Africa remained below 0.80 in more than half the countries, as there had instead been a reversal in the convergence process of the gender gap between boys and girls in enrollments with a declined from 82 in 1999 to 79 percent in 2004. This backward trend in the education of girls across Africa is a product of religious and cultural beliefs that see female education not only as a waste but also a crime. This therefore creates a huge challenge for most African countries; as the agenda of the UN through the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in closing gender gaps in education and other related domains within the projected time frame remains elusive.

### 3.2 Economic marginalization

Women, like men, are able to make economic progress in any society when they have unlimited access to resources that could expose them to new business opportunities. It is true that a lot of progress has been made in laws and conventions that attempt to economically empower the African woman. However, laws and conventions that have been declared do not automatically result in women claiming the rights. This is because laws become useful when they are matched with action that is implementation. However, the non-implementation of these laws and conventions by most of the political office holders, who also happen to be mostly male, has changed little or nothing in the economic suppression of women. A number of men orchestrated actions have been identified which continuously render women economically dependent on the men in the African society:

One of the outrageous areas of women political suppression in modern Africa is the refutation of the moral right of daughters and widows to inheritance of immovable. Ownership of property and access to the control of resources are sources of political power; but after laboring with their husbands in the acquisition of whatever property they may possess, most of the women upon the death of their partners are deprived of all the family property (African Development Forum, 2008). In some societies, this situation is further aggravated by subjecting widows to varying degrees of humiliating and dangerous rites, aimed at celebrating the inferiority of the women and proving their innocence in the death of their husbands (Ogundipe, 2002).

It is interesting to know that women constitute the main agricultural labour force in Africa and other parts of the world. Yet funnily enough, most of them are denied the right to own land, obtain agricultural loans or to have access to any form of resource control. In some African societies women have been consistently deprived of their right to own property till date. This has been aggravated by women's lack of the right to inherit their husband's or parents' property in these societies. Even in a situation where a woman's deceased husband willed to her property they jointly acquired, the in-laws in the name of culture, often go against the will of the deceased spouse to share the property among themselves. Sometimes there is a bid to want to inherit the widow herself. As a consequence, the bases and possibilities of the widow initiating and sustaining any economic activity in such societies could be quite limited. This is what prevails in some parts of southeastern and southwestern Nigeria as indicated by Author (2001) and Ogundipe (2002), respectively.

As confided to one of the authors in an interview with a widow from the northwest region of Cameroon, her ordeal at the hands of her brothers-in-law after the death of her husband in 2010 was unimaginable. Her deceased husband had willed all his property in the village to his brothers and other relations, and the ones in the cities, precisely Doula, Bamenda and Buea, to his wife and their four teenage kids; the wife was not originally from their village. The unwillingness of the thirty-year old widow to remarry to the younger brother of the late husband triggered off a conflict which led to her home being invaded by some unknown gun men who demanded from the letters of administration for the late husband and an ultimatum to quit the family house within a month if she wished to remain alive. Today, this lady is taking refuge in a rented one-bedroom flat in Buea (Southwest region of Cameroon) with her four children while a women's right advocacy organization is arguing out her case in a Bamenda court (in the Northwest region of Cameroon).

Another way in which African women have continuously been economically oppressed by some men is the refusal of their right to gainful employment by some husbands. Some men see their wives only as reproductive machines, sex objects, food gatherers and domestic servants, and nothing else. As such, they frown at the possibility of their wives taking any gainful employment and some even go as far as destroying every attempt by their wives to support the income of their families. In some situations where the women are allowed to work, the men collect the salary from them whenever they receive their payment. All these are to render them economically powerless and dependent on the men so that the women may not have any chances of one day rising above their husbands.

Furthermore, contemporary economic marginalization of African women is manifested through the offering of low income jobs to women. An observation of the employment trends among women around the globe today and in Africa in particular reveal that even though women are in the majority in terms of population, they do the majority of the less paid jobs. For instance, secretarial duties, cleaning, washing, tailoring, house servants, catering, nursing, nursery and primary teachers etc have often been described as female terrains in the job market while the biomedical field, engineering, law, political science, business, the academia, geology and aviation fields etc are seen as male terrains. According to Akubue and Okoro (2010), existing statistics reveal that 75% of low income jobs in Africa today are in the hands of women while close to 90% of high income jobs are handled by men despite their majority population. No wonder gender activists have continually lobbied for the implementation of the 30% affirmative action agreed upon at the 1995 Beijing Conference. As the struggle to avert this situation among the women folk continues, the *status quo* remains largely unchanged, with culture and religion being the primary causes of this phenomenon, namely, women's economic discrimination by men.

### **3.3 Political marginalization**

The participation of all citizens in the management of public affairs is at the very heart of democracy. However, in most African countries, the political arena remains largely dominated by men, and is even an exclusively male terrain in some countries. Apart from very few and rare exceptions, women are often not allowed to express their feelings in political gatherings, hold leadership positions, participate in decision-making over important community issues, and are often asked to go out of gatherings when an important issue is to be deliberated upon in the conviction that women do not keep secrets (Author, 2002: 19). All these result from the continuous clinging to traditional practices and beliefs that prohibit women from involvement in the management of public affairs. For instance, the common belief about women in most African societies is that; they have no other societal role than serving as reproductive agents and home managers. As a result, women continue to hold a disproportionate share of household and family responsibilities which often keep them busy indoors and away from political gatherings (Norris and Inglehart, 2001).

Furthermore, it is a fact that the act of politicking demands some level of financial buoyancy on the part of the politician. So, the equitable participation of African women in the political life of society warrants that they be financially sound, but some men have intentionally and vehemently denied their wives the right to engage in income generating activities that could give them financial independence for any eventual political aspiration. Consequently, the income levels of many women remain perpetually low thereby destabilizing any ambition of ever participating in the political processes of the nation. All these acts of political marginalization according to Cool (2010) have made the women to often see themselves as unqualified for political offices even when they have the same qualification with the men running for such offices.

Generally, it is the economic and social status of an individual that determines his or her success in the political domain. There is no way a politician will achieve his or her goal with a limping financial status, poor educational achievement and an unpopular social background. Therefore, the economic and social marginalization experienced by African women are enough to put them out of the political stage of society. That is why the institution of gender-based anti discriminatory legislations can be seen to be largely based on the defense and protection of the political rights of women in our societies. Gaining their political rights and dues will automatically guarantee them political power which when acquired will take them out of economic and social marginalization.

Despite the existence of legislation guaranteeing women's right to vote and stand for election in virtually all African countries, majority of which were adopted prior to 1995, there have been very little positive changes in the situation of women. Investigations into the implementation of these rights draw attention to the fact that there is a theoretical absence of discrimination against women in political affairs, but a reverse in its practicality. Apart from the Republic of Rwanda where women are fully politically represented, the limited number of women Members of Parliament (MPs) in most Sub-Saharan African countries for instance demonstrates that the implementation of laws on women's political rights fall far short of what is required and shows serious cultural and religious obstacles to their practical implementation. In 1999, the overall percentages in parliamentary representation of women in Sub-Saharan Africa stood at 11.5% in the lower houses, 14.0% in the upper houses and 11.7% overall representation in both houses (Inter-parliamentary Union, 1999). By 2011, which is on the average three parliamentary mandates after, there has been very little increase in these percentages as the most recent stands at 20.4% in the lower house, 19.1% in the upper house, and an overall 20.5% for both house (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2011).

Even though some researchers argue that nowhere in the world has the rate of increase in the political representation of women been as fast as in Sub-Saharan Africa over the past four decades (Aili, 2003), we must say here that the practical achievements are very insignificant, compared to the amount of theoretical work done so far. As the fundamental principle of democracy in the Universal Declaration of Democracy puts it 'The achievement of democracy presupposes a genuine partnership between men and women in the conduct of the affairs of society in which they work in equality and complementarity, drawing mutual enrichment from their differences.' Consequently, any form of continues political suppression of women by men anywhere in Africa does not only contravene international agreements but equally stands as an obstacle to the effective political workability of the state.

### **4.0 Implications for educational development**

The provision of quality education to every citizen in any nation creates a firm foundation for future socio-economic and political development in such a state. This is because education provides the vehicle through which nations drive to prosperity and enhance national decorum through the training of quality human resource among their citizenry who will offer skillful services for the growth of the national economy. Consequently, the inability of any group of citizens to have access to these quality educational services creates a challenge on future growth and development. This clearly means that there is a correlation between women's marginalization and educational development, and this correlation unfortunately is a completely negative one.

As earlier seen in the prologue of this paper, women at present constitute the majority of the global population and are thus gradually taking control of the global societal work force. However, Wolf and Odonkor (1997) argue that women constitute more than two-thirds of the world's approximately 800 million illiterate adults. This projection leaves concerned global citizens to ponder how the future of national economies will look like with the ongoing opposition to girls' education. This therefore makes the importance of gender and equality in education a serious issue. The education of girls and women has very important positive aftermaths such as lower childbearing rates, improved health for women and their families, increased participation in household decision-making, and increased community and societal participation. Women's education is thus critical to individual and national development, which reiterates the need to redress issues of women subordination and marginalization particularly in the developing African societies.

According to UNESCO (2006), more than 60 million school-aged girls around the globe are currently not enrolled in school. This situation remains troubling particularly in sub-Saharan Africa as a result of the continuous educational discrimination suffered by these women in the hands of some men. This scenario paints a bleak picture of future human resource development, and the socio-economic and political development of Africa and the global society.

The exclusion of these women from education as seen earlier basically emanates from the socio-economic, cultural and religious subjugation of women, and these continue to act as impediments to ongoing efforts by the international community, local governments and NGOs to mitigate the situation. The beliefs that women are; intelligently weak as compared to men, potential and future housewives and not major actors in society, has even created a negative mindset about female education among women themselves and some educational stakeholders thereby negatively affecting the education of girls who already find themselves within an educational setting. For instance, since independence from French colonial rule in 1960, the Republic of Benin has been plagued with an education system that has routinely underserved its school-aged population especially the girls largely because of cultural and religious beliefs on girl child education. In an attempt to address this malaise, the World Bank in collaboration with the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (MEPS) has undertaken ambitious reforms to increase participation of girls and other marginalized groups in primary and secondary education. Efforts have been made to raise teachers' awareness on gender bias in the curricula and in their interactions with students. Worthy of mention is the development of a series of "equity in the classroom" (EIC) training modules with the aim of equipping teachers with pedagogical strategies that will foster gender-equity, and "girl-friendly" classrooms (Moulton and Mundy, 2002). However, the impact of these efforts remains unclear as negative cultural and religious ideologies on girls' education in this society have eaten deep into the understanding of its citizenry; thereby forestalling progress in this domain.

Unfortunately, those in opposition to female education have failed to realize that women also badly need education to efficiently and effectively serve even as nursing mothers, housewives and domestic servants if that is what they consider the only contributions women can make towards the growth of a society. They have simply allowed archaic cultures and misinterpreted religious injunctions to blind their commonsense. A glance at the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) reveals that education is the revolving factor and guiding principle towards the attainment of all these goals and global development. Consequently, there is a high demand for a reconsideration and revision of cultural and religious practices in our societies that impede the education of the girl child. All these can only be achieved generally through the full enforcement of the numerous existing anti gender-based discriminatory legislations, increase education and enlightenment of the individual woman, mass civic awareness and a robust inclusive educational system. By so doing, only then shall we be sure of a prudent socio-economic and political future where the women folk will be fully, confidently and fearlessly involved, if not in charge.

## 5.0 Conclusion

Having examined some aspects of the socio-economic and political subordination of women in 21<sup>st</sup> century Africa, there is every reason to conclude that the inferiorisation and demonization of women is not very much different from a new form of slavery. Despite the spirit of hard work displayed by most of these women (especially the rural women), they are still faced with domination and discrimination in every facet of life, and are often subjected to demoralizing acts against their own will. These acts of subordination go a long way in creating an atmosphere of disillusionment, low self-esteem and self-pity among some women, thereby subjecting them to a continuous life of fear. The effect of all these on education is not only diminishing returns and subsequent stagnation in Africa's educational development, but also an overall impediment to the political-economic and socio-cultural transformation of Africa. There is therefore need for enlightenment for women and other stakeholders to take proactive measures to re-examine and redress the continued subordination of women.

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