

# Culture and Changing Implications of Women in Contemporary Polytechnic Institutions, Ghana

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## ABSTRACT

Culture is an important aspect of sustainable development, as it refers to how people live and it makes us understand the interrelationship between female and male role performance. In the Ghanaian communities for example, women turn to play a lot of roles in whatever situations they find themselves. In combining the cultural and contemporary roles, many women find themselves playing the roles as wives, mothers, Lecturers among others. However in performing their roles as their contribution towards development in the Country, women's duties at the Polytechnic are based on socio-cultural considerations. Women at the Polytechnic since 1993 are performing a lot of roles to help sustain the educational development in the Country based on the vision and mission of the various Polytechnic institutions; there are some cultural perceptions that keep them from performing their leadership roles but they are not boarded. The study examines the complementary theory using the case study method. Women are working together with their male counterparts. They have been liberated from cultural dominance of seclusion to inclusion. To examine the issues, data was collected through primary and secondary sources and research was through observation, Case studies and in depth interviews and some key informants were interviewed. From observations, it was discovered that culture is dynamic and Ghanaian women have excelled.

**Key Words:** Culture; Sustainable Development; Ghanaian, Inclusion. Seclusion

## 1. Introduction

Polytechnic education plays a crucial role in national development. It serves as a platform for providing opportunities for skills development, applied research and publication for research findings. A nation can only thrive on well-educated and skilled workforce. Women at the polytechnic are playing contemporary roles due to social change in the world and in the African Society leading to sustainable development. The Accra Polytechnic for example, where the researcher teaches, is an institution of Ghana and it has a vision and a mission which all her members aspire to achieve. What the mission statement seeks to do is that it emphasize on women's inclusion in the educational growth and the development of the institution and the Ghanaian society as a whole.

The vision and mission of Accra Polytechnic state that '..... it is a centre of excellence for teaching, learning, and research and ..... it provides life-transforming opportunities and experiences for students through teaching, entrepreneurial skills development and research, in the fields of Applied Sciences, Engineering, Technology, Applied Arts and Business for the benefit of society' and the five year strategic plan (2013-2018), which aims at achieving the vision of the Polytechnic through thematic areas like '..... academic, research, innovation and publication, community and extension services, linkages and collaborations, human resource development, administration, institutional governance, revenue generation, infrastructure development and financial management....' includes women.

The Polytechnic's mission calls on the institution to involve women in the social, educational, health, and political aspects of life. Women have been performing a lot of roles at Accra Polytechnic since it attained the tertiary status in the 1990s. The system looks like an all inclusive role performance, one finds a link that women aspire to be lecturers. Heads of departments, deans, vice rectors etc. This research investigates the implications of women's activities and the cultural change that promotes development at the Polytechnic.

Women leaders are effectively performing their roles despite the socio-cultural construction of women's identity in the African society. Some Ghanaians continue to have cultural perceptions on the roles of women as assigned mainly to the domestic domain.

## 2.1 Theoretical Framework

This study examines the theory of complement as a theoretical frame using historical analysis. The existing structures in the Ghanaian society are such that men and women are intersecting. Unlike previously when the Ghanaian Society was very patriarchal and the structures turned to focus more on men than on women in the various sectors of life.

Oduyoye (1986) argues that women's experience should become an integral part of what goes into the definition of being human'. She argues that both men and women should be given equal opportunity to work together as partners in order to liberate the human community from entrenched attitudinal structures and to promote sustainable development.

Gender based segregation is largely evident in the socio-economic activities, patterns and roles set for women and men in traditional African societies. Thus, women were not only prevented from occupying certain societal positions in the society because of their sex but also assign different roles that centre on the home. Thus, (Oduyoye, 1986), argues that 'in Africa, women make pots which are sold cheaply; men make ritual objects and carvings. Women were not allowed to sell gunpowder but to sell garden eggs. All these cultural roles according to Sintim Adasi (2012) are now of the past.

Scholars like Mercy Amba Oduyoye, Brigid Sackey, Isabel Phiri, Elizabeth Amoah Emanuel Martey and the researcher (Grace Sintim Adasi) have written on topics like Women Leaders, Gender Politics and Social Change and Culture in the society in their books *New Directions in Gender and Religion, Hearing and Knowing, Beads and Strands, Women, Presbyterianism and Patriarchy: Religious Experience of Chewa women, Femaleness. Akan concepts and practices in women, Religion and Sexuality: Studies on the impact of Religious Teachings on women.*

## 2.2 African Women and Leadership Positions

Sackey (2006) , in her book titled *New Directions in Gender and Religion*, examines the new dimension in gender relations in African independent churches as concerns women in leadership positions in the church. She dwells on how women have managed to make a breakthrough or what she termed a 'reclaim' which is not new to the Ghanaian/African. Sintim Adasi (2012) talks about ordained women Clergy's outstanding roles in the Presbyterian Church of Ghana.

According to Sackey, women are not new when it comes to leadership positions in West Africa. Citing examples from Akan women in Ghana, and Igbo and Yoruba women in Nigeria, she recounted that women have, over the years, enjoyed a high status of authority in socio-political and economic realms. According to Sackey, (2006), women particularly in Africa, for example, have been involved in issues affecting the nation which have brought them into 'the high echelons of decision-making bodies'. Today, some women members, she observed, are directly involved in political decision-making in their capacity as members of parliament, negating the common ideas that women are generally apolitical. In spite of all these achievements, the statuses of women leaders in the various institutions have been challenged.

## 2.3 The status of Women

Women are prevented from occupying certain hierarchical positions because of their sex also due to the socio-cultural situations in which they find themselves. In her book *Beads and Strands*, Mercy Amba Oduyoye reflects on the position of the African woman and the roles they play in the society. According to her, "the position of women in Africa today within the wider society is normally prescribed by what is deemed to be beneficial to the welfare of the whole community of women and men". According to (Oduyoye, 2002), issues of equality cannot be adequately spoken of in terms of African culture. The culture, she said, is replete of gender equality and fairness. This is particularly so because, according to her, role differentiations in Africa are clear and are not meant to be valued hierarchically. To her, even though the African culture from its very beginning, has allowed women to be in charge of shrines and cultic centres, it is also observable that there are more women in the secondary roles of mediums and cultic dancers, than there are women who serve as high priestesses of shrines or as healers. What is even more noisome, she observes, is that there are more women who serve as clients of the divinities of the cults. Such cultural or traditional notions of women's "religious responsibility" are canned into the institutions. Women, notwithstanding their equal or transcendent" potentials are made to play second to men. Women who rise up and challenge or take up the challenge are resisted not only by men but even by their own colleague women due to the dominant socio-cultural sexual differentiations.

Some scholars argue that within the African socio-cultural context patriarchal system is men centred. Labeodan (2007) argues that;

The patriarchal system is held in high esteem in most African Societies. As a result of this, women... are to be seen and not heard... there is so much suppression and oppression of women by men who are supported by the cultures..... They used certain facts about the physiology of man and woman as the basis for constituting a set of identities that work to empower men and disempower women.

She explains that the roles assigned to women are very much related to the cultural and historical traditions that try to place women in the domestic domain that they are supposed to be home makers and nurturers of the family including husband and children. Martey (1998) stated the fact that women's roles are basically restricted to the home as a type of injustice and restriction against women in society. Adeoti (1998), like Labeodan, also holds a similar view that 'In many societies be it Africa or elsewhere, a woman is seen as the burden bearer with no rights whatsoever to equality with man. She is even seen as an irrational being not capable of reasoning; therefore, she is to be seen and not to be head.

Again, Martey (1998) continues that 'the history of African culture is patriarchal. Women in Africa have not been treated equal to men in opportunity, dignity and power'. He says the cultural restrictions and discrimination against African women is..... Most societies in Africa prefer having male children, especially, as the first born. A wife may be divorced for not having male children, or at best, the man may look elsewhere for male children. Industrial revolution and scientific advancement have pushed women into new/ contemporary roles and they are contributing to a new view of the part that women could play at work and in the society. Some women only need to acquire certain skills which will enable them to do their work effectively. Women who intend to be involved in the decision making positions need a thorough academic and administrative training by upgrading themselves in order to qualify at all levels.

Generally speaking, in Ghana and in most African societies a lot is expected of married women. Dolphyne (1991) says women are supposed to be solely in charge of the kitchen, the children, marketing and the general running of the home. Hired helps in most homes, however, ease the amount of actual work they would have to do. However, some men insist that their wives personally do certain chores, for instance, preparing their food. According to her, some aspects of African culture have a particular bearing on issues of women's emancipation which affects sustainable development. Her thoughts are consistent with (Martey, 1998; Oduyoye, 2002 and Sackey, 2006) that these customs, traditions and beliefs have, over the years, helped to keep women under subjugation and make them feel generally inferior to men and incapable of operating at the same level as men in society. Marriage is one of such institutions. (Sackey, 2006).

Sackey (2006), has also refuted a review of the theory of inequality that revealed that 'evolutionary anthropologists used the concept of adaptation and division of labour to propose that the size and strength of men made them adapted for different jobs while the biological make up of women kept them at home as only careers of husbands and children'. She says 'Marxist anthropologists attribute this subordination of women to the domestic and public dichotomy and sexual division of labour, arguing that women's subsequent relegation to reproductive labour is the main cause of inequality. Her observation is true of the African woman because her biological make-up has been traditionally and culturally used as a hindrance to her potentials. She is barred from undertaking/combining certain duties (wife, mother, and lecturer) and as such women like these women leaders who go beyond their 'gender specified' roles are usually challenged. One generalization is that, African society expects childbearing and homemaking of its women and this is more or less a truism that has usually been accepted by African women, (Oduyoye, 1996). Such statements to her are not just outrageous, but they are dangerous because they are sometimes used to form discriminating laws against women.

Oduyoye (2000), again says 'women's experience of being persons primarily in relation to others, as mother or as wife predominates in Africa and a woman's social status depends on these relationships and not on any qualities or achievements of her own. The traditional norm within which women are expected to earn an income and to provide for at least part of their own as well as their children's needs is perpetuated. So is the norm that makes housework the exclusive responsibility of women and the modernization of women's work is viewed with suspicion that African women still grind and pound the hours away. We think the wider society is not yet ready to see any change in the present domestic arrangements.

### 3. Discussion of results

In the Ghanaian communities women turn to play varied roles in whatever situations they find themselves. In combining the traditional and contemporary roles, many women find themselves playing the roles as wives, mothers, and lecturers among others. At the Polytechnic, women have been Registrars, Heads of Departments, Lecturers, Auditors, Public Relations Officers, Heads of Academic and Admissions etc. It is not uncommon to find a woman playing multiple roles, a woman being a mother, wife, lecturer, etc at the same time. This implies that women leaders at the Polytechnic like their counterparts in the other sectors of life find themselves as mothers, wives, single parents, etc. Thus the female leaders do not neglect their predominant female duties using their position as an excuse despite the demands each of these peculiar roles places on the women.

One problem facing the Polytechnic women leaders who are wives is the ability to efficiently perform their roles of being wives which demand cooking, washing, nurturing, making sure food is ready and cleaning the house. With the role of a woman leader which includes preparing lecture notes, marking, teaching full time/ part time

evening school, performing administrative duties/ public relations/ auditing literally being on duty for 24 hours as a leader.

In the Ghanaian society, it is a challenge when women still combine old traditional roles with new roles. This affects married women leaders in the Polytechnic because elsewhere in Europe, roles are differential and most women would not agree that men are the heads in their homes. However, the researcher is of the view that with the technological advancement these women now have a lot of gadgets at their disposal to aid their duties in housing keep. Examples are to mention a few include hovers, microwaves, blenders etc. In response to the question whether respondents think the Ghanaian expectations of women affect women leaders? Some claim it is difficult for women leaders to balance their lives carefully to be able to perform their roles as wives, mothers and leaders. A female lecturer in an interview remarked 'her husband is very supportive and he does not leave her alone to go about the house chores and he eats whatever is available'

Dolphyne (1991) writes on 'who does what in the home,' and to Dolphyne:

Every African woman grows up knowing that it is the woman who cooks the meals and generally sees to it that the house is clean and well kept, and that everything is in its proper place. Whatever her level of education or professional status she does not normally expect her husband to share the household chores.

Dolphyne thinks 'if the husband enjoys cooking and chooses to cook breakfast or dinner one day, she appreciates the fact that he is being helpful, but she does not expect him to do so as a matter of compulsion' (Dolphyne, 1991, p. 5). She continues further that husbands who have lived in Europe before used to help their wives in the house chores but when they are in Ghana they do not help their wives. Professional female leaders said they employ house helps and pay their salary, thinking the house helps do their jobs for them. Sarpong also affirms Dolphyne's point that 'a good wife is obedient to her husband, faithful, hardworking, and helpful and she sees to it that all that he wants is forthcoming without him having to ask first, as for example, clean clothes, hot water for baths and food' (Sarpong, 1974, p. 69). Motherliness requires a woman to provide by way of preparation of adequate food and shelter for her own children, others and strangers.

Majority of the married women leaders were of the view that they perform their duties perfectly and they think they are doing same as other women in other leadership and challenging positions like reverend ministers, bankers, lawyers, judges, police, soldiers, doctors, engineers, architects among others. As to how the male leaders combine their duties, fatherly and husbandly duties, they said that they plan with their wives to allocate time and days to their job activities as well as to the family and this is based on discipline, determination and dedication. He claims they apportion their time and see to it that none of their roles suffers by ensuring that they spend their leisure times with their family. He remarked that they share their time between their job and family life.

Our findings and other similar studies speak not only of men's' resistance to women's success in male-dominated occupations, but also to the resistance of the institution. Compared to other European employed women, African employed women seem to face a prejudice of greater intensity, since the African culture model promote gender differentiation both as a matter of practice and policy.

Socially, the issue of women's rights has been affirmed by secular society and women's ability to perform well in a number of traditionally male occupations stands as a visible affirmation of these rights. Male stereotypes about women are present in all cultures of the world. The point being made is that culture decides what women's work is and what men's work is. As girls grow up they are taught at home what women's work is. Cultural demands are interpreted. The place of a woman is in the home and her major roles are child-bearing and child-rearing. There are also the assumptions that in culture, under no circumstance do women have power over men (Cody-Rydzewski, Accessed, 24/09/2011). The female leaders of the Polytechnic have managed to make a breakthrough in the institution and in the society.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

The women discussed in this work have demonstrated their enterprising capabilities beyond the acknowledged physical boundaries of the Polytechnic. They have penetrated profoundly into the educational domain and challenged the prejudices of the arguments against their roles, testified that there lies an inert dynamism in women which, when given the appropriate recognition, would rekindle and be employed for the benefit of mankind in other dimensions. The accomplishments of the Polytechnic women should be lauded. They should be honored as having preserved a valuable women heritage. We have so far. Showed that tradition and culture affects development.

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