

Finding the Woman's Power in the Patriarchal Society through the Lens of Cultural Practices and Beliefs of the Kasena Nankana Municipality.

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Abstract

The study explores and assesses the impact of cultural practices and beliefs on the empowerment of women within the Kasena Nankana Municipality. The focus was to examine how these cultural practices and beliefs in the patriarchal society discriminate against women and female children. The study also investigates the perceptions of community members towards the empowerment of women. Under empowerment of women, the study narrowed on the decision making rights of women, how women effect their own desired outcome and women's accessibility and ownership of productive resources although the study acknowledge other forms of women empowerment. The study also investigated the perceptions held by the community members towards women empowerment and empowered women. During the conduct of the study, the study made a discovery of an interesting revelation about the belongingness of a woman in the communities of the research area.

The study adopted qualitative research strategy and the research tools were developed under cross sectional research design. Employing both convenient and simple random sampling techniques to select participants, data gathered from the fields were analysed thematically.

The significance of the study cannot be over emphasized because it has been pointed out by UNDP (2003) that attempting to achieve the MDGs without promoting women empowerment and gender equality will both raise the costs and decrease the likelihood of achieving the other goals. Hence, the study sought to ascertain the cultural obstacles that impeded the realization of Women Empowerment under the MDG 3. In this case, policy makers can put measures in place to tackle these obstacles for community development. According to CARE (2010) improving women with health, knowledge and skills is not enough to empower them, women must also contend with social structures, cultural traditions and personal relationships that affect their success.

The study's main findings were that; women in the study have inadequate sense of empowerment and this is due to cultural ascription of gender roles and the woman has no strong connection to any culture structure. The study further highlighted that, gender socialization perpetuates society's expectations of what a woman is supposed to do in the societies.

Keywords: Gender Equality and Equity, Women's Human Right, Gender Discrimination, Patriarchy, Culture

1. Introduction

Most information gathered from civil society organisations and development experts suggest that the debate on women empowerment, the third goal of the eight Millennium Development Goals of the UN has been a thorn in a flesh for nations and institutions to deal with. United Nation Development Program (UNDP, 2003) focuses on women's empowerment not only as human right, but also because it is a pathway to achieving the Millennium Development Goals and sustainable development.

In Ghana, some diverse cultural practices and beliefs among some ethnic groups especially those in the northern part of Ghana, pose a challenge in achieving empowerment of women. The patriarchal nature of families coupled with disadvantaged economic opportunities and extreme poverty deprive women of empowerment. The societies

in this part of the country also view these practices as normal issues making it difficult for women living in rural communities to break out of this deprivation

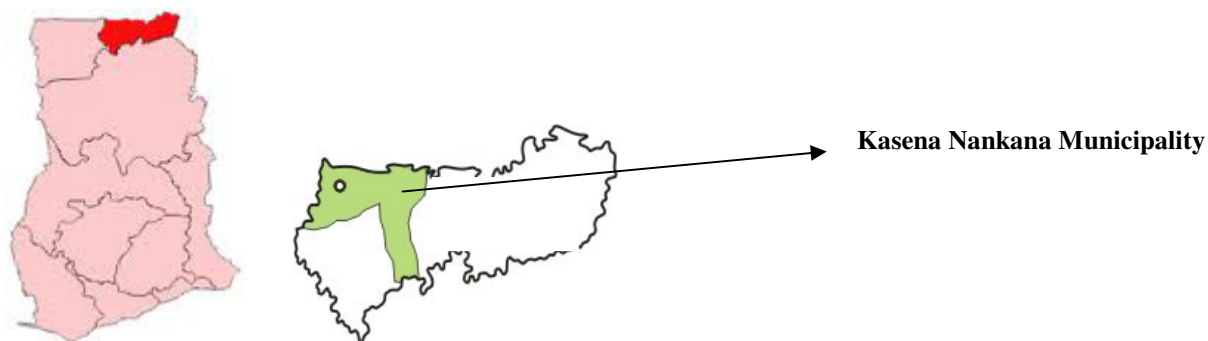
2. Brief Description of the Study Area

Kasena Nankana Municipality is a Bi-lingua area, Kasem and Nankam. The Kasem speaking communities dominate the western part of the municipality, while the latter dominates the southern part of the municipality. The municipal population is estimated at 157,000 people where 90% of them are rural inhabitants (NHDSS, 2013). The Populace are culturally oriented and “Fao” is the most celebrated festival in the municipality. Most of their farm products go into the preparation of traditional dishes during funerals, festivals and other important occasions.

According to Ghanadistrict.com, (2014), KNM municipality is one of the thirteen (13) municipalities and districts in the Upper East region. The municipal administrative capital is Navrongo, an important market town servicing as a hub to the surrounding districts and towns. Ghanadistrict states that, the KNM municipality lies within the Guinea Savannah woodlands and it falls approximately between latitude $11^{\circ}10'$ and $10^{\circ}3'$ north and longitude $1^{\circ}5'$ and $10^{\circ}1'$ west. The municipal assembly shares boundaries with Bongo district and Bolgatanga municipality to the east, West Mamprusi to the south and to the west with Builsa South District and Builsa Central District. Finally the KNM Assembly shares boundaries with Burkina Faso to the North.

Subsistence level of agriculture is the usual occupation of the populace in the wet seasons and in the dry seasons through irrigation. The rearing of goats, guinea fowls and cattle is also common in the municipality. The southern part of the municipal is densely vegetated around riverbanks and the forest reserves of Kologo and Naga. The commonest trees are the Dawadawa, the Baobab, the Shea tree and the Mango tree. The wet season starts from May to October and it is characterized by heavy rainfalls averaging 950 mm as myweather2.com puts it. There is a dry season spanning from November to April. Weather data reported by myweather2.com shows that, the local average high temperature per annum is 35.3°C and lowest average temperature per annum is 22.7°C , (Ghanadistrict.com, 2014)

Map 2.1: Map showing the location of Kasena Nankana Municipality



Source: Ghanadistrict.com

3. Data and Method

Given the priority of the topic under investigation, the study made use of a Cross sectional research design. Understanding the behaviours and attitudes of the respondents under different cases in the study was very paramount. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted with Women’s Groups Leaders, Beneficiaries of gender intervention programs, and Community Leaders (Assembly men or Assembly women or Chiefs), Coordinators of NGOs in gender equity and women empowerment, Social Welfare Officers in the Municipality and Gender Activists. These groups also formed the participants for the in-depth interviews; Women with formal education (above primary school), Grandmothers, Women without formal education and Household heads.

The municipal has been divided into five zones by Navrongo Health Demography Surveillances System (NDSS). Under the zones are communities and the system has further divided each zone into clusters. NHDSS monitors about 32,000 households under all the five zones. The sampling procedures combined both random and convenient sampling techniques. NHDSS was instrumental in the selection of participants for the interviews during the fieldwork. Three (3) of the five (5) zones were chosen for the fieldwork. The central zone was purposively sampled because it contained the urban communities; this was done to maximize the variability in the understanding of the research topic by the urban folks as against the rural folks. The South and West zones were also randomly selected, one from each group that is the Kasem speaking communities and the Nankam speaking communities. In all the three zones selected, 21 clusters were randomly picked for the interviews and discussions. Not more than one interview or discussion was done in a cluster. The idea was to have independent responses from respondents.

In all, 9 in-depth interviews were conducted where 2 interviews with women's group leaders, 2 interviews with community chiefs, 1 with an assembly man, 1 with an assembly woman, 1 interview with the municipal gender desk officer and 2 interviews with social work officers.

The minimum number of participants for a discussion was 6 and maximum was 8. In all 13 FGDs were held with 2 groups of men and 11 groups of women. Male respondents were grouped separately from female respondents.

Municipal gender desk officer, Community chiefs, Assembly man, Assembly woman, Social work officers, Women's group leaders were purposively selected from the Study area. Women with formal education (above primary school), Grandmothers, Women without formal education and Household heads on the other hand were randomly chosen.

In-depth interviews (IDIs) were one-on-one basis between the researcher and a participant. Interviews were in the form of semi-structured instrument and detailed probes to guide the discussion. The interviews occurred mostly in respondents' homes and in the office setting (for the NGO advocate, Gender officer and the Social Work officers). Interviews lasted between 25 to 30 minutes.

Focus groups discussions were conducted with 6-8 participants each, typically gathered in a semi-circle around the interviewer. Questions were posed to the group, and the interviewer took responses from participants one by one, moving the hand-held microphone closer to the respondent who was speaking. FGDs also lasted between 45 to 50 minutes to complete.

All interviews and discussions were audio recorded, and notes were kept on verbal and non-verbal communication by a second field team member present at each interview. Interviews and discussions in communities were conducted in the respondent's native language (either Kasem or Nankana) and the rest in English.

Permission to conduct the study in the community was sought from compound or community leaders. Participants were consented, the purpose and objective of the study made known to them before interaction. Each participant was assigned a unique ID number for the purpose of the data. Participants were not offered any monetary incentive for participating in the study. However a cake of soap was given after the discussion.

All interviews and discussions including the pre-test ones were tape-recorded, transcribed verbatim into English and typed. After the transcription each interview was coded under the various themes that emerged during field work. In addition, field notes taken on the field were factored in analysis.

4. Results and Discussions

4.1. Demographic Data of Respondents

As part of the data collection exercise on the field, essential information about the respondents were collected. This gave sufficient information about the sampled population and it will also guide readers to know the sort of people that were studied as they explore the findings of the study. Information on occupation, marital status, age, sex, education and nativity / Domicile status were collected.

Out of the one-hundred and ten respondents, 18.8 percent of them were identified to be under 30–39 years whereas about 41.82 percent of remaining respondents were between 40–49 years old. A further 41.82 percent of respondents were between 50–59 old as compared with 12.73 percent of respondents identified to be between 60–69 years old.

The study also collected information concerning the marital status of the respondents in which about 18.8 percent of respondents were unmarried as compared with about 81.82 percent of remaining respondents who were married. Next, most of the respondents admitted that apart from their official occupation, farming also took most of their time. Ten (10) women responded that they were fully into “pito” brewing business while twenty (20) of the other women were engaged in petty-trading. Out of the ninety (19) grandmothers spoken to, twelve said they were not engaged in any activity whereas seven (7) said they help in panting and also collecting shea-fruit during the shea season.

4.1.1. Sex Composition

One major feature of the respondents in the study was their sex classification. Considering the research topic, it was necessary to explore the biological make-up of the respondents since sex classification was a pre-condition basis for gender status.

Table1. Sex Composition of Respondents

Sex	Frequency	Percentage
Male	25	22.73
Female	85	77.27
Total	110	100

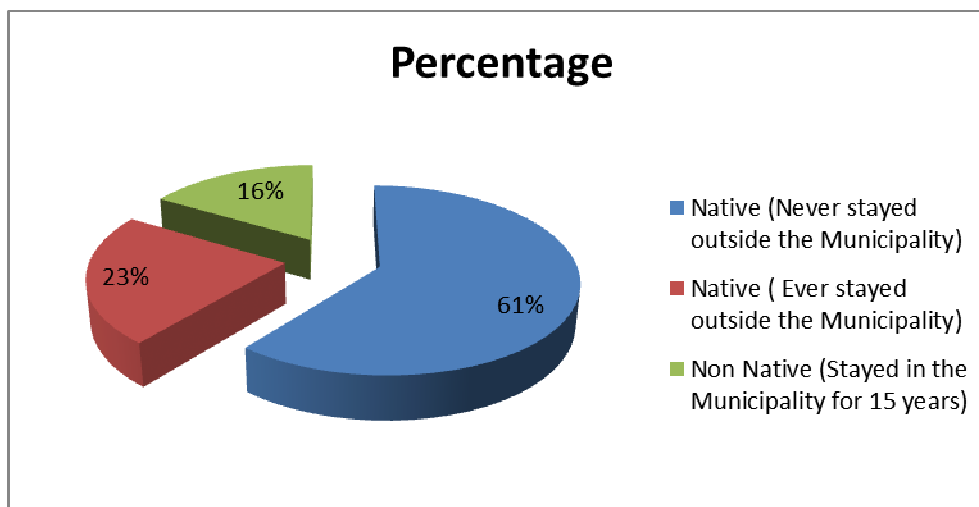
Source: Field Work, (2014)

Table 1. above shows the sex distribution of respondents involved in this study. The total number of respondents were 77.27 percent females as compared with 22.73 percent of remaining respondents been males. The trend in the sex disparity of respondents was based on the fact that the study wanted to investigate the assertion that “the prevalence of patrilineal customary system in the northern regions of Ghana has no protections for women’s right” (DISCAP, 2002). However, this was not done with any bias reservation against the sex of the respondents but as a demand of the study.

4.1.2. Native/ Domicile Status of Respondents

Information about native status or the number of years they resided in the community was taken as part of respondent’s vital information. The purpose of this information was to investigate respondent’s familiarity, knowledge and understanding of the social issues and cultural practices or beliefs in the community. There were varied responses or information concerning the number of years of domicile or native status in the community. Apparently, eighteen (18) of the respondents were not natives of the land (the municipality) but have stayed in the municipality for more than fifteen (15) years. Affiliation of eleven (11) of the non-natives were through marriage and the rest of the eighteen (18) was through their business engagement in the municipality. Twenty-five (25) of the respondents though natives of the land they have ever stayed outside the municipality. The third category was those who were natives of the land and have never lived outside the municipality since birth and they were sixty-seven (67) in number.

Figure 1. Native/Domicile Status of Participants



Sources: Field Work, (2014)

From figure 1, the greatest proportion of the study's participants were made of people who are natives of the study area who have never stayed outside the municipality before and they formed 61 percentage of the total number of participants. These natives supposed to be the true witnesses of the cultural practices and beliefs in the community. On the other hand, natives of the municipality who have ever stayed outside formed 23 percent of the study's participants. Finally, the third portion of the participants is made up of the participants who are not natives of the municipality but have stayed in the study area for some time and they represent 16 percent of the total number of the participants in the study.

4. 2. Women Empowerment in Kasena Nankana Municipal

The study investigated how these practices and beliefs were affecting the empowerment of women in the communities. Taking the explanation of women empowerment by Manson and Smith (2003), that, 'it is women's freedom from control by other family members and the ability to affect desired outcomes within the household', questions were posed to investigate how cultural practices affected the extent to which women or girls accessed education and resources, were free from the control of others and family members, and how women were able to affect their desired outcome within the household.

The question whether there were cultural practices in the communities hindering women empowerment had one-hundred and six (106) responses representing 96 percent of the study participants. Interestingly, all respondents agreed that cultural practices were hindering the empowerment of women in the communities. According to the responses gathered, there were cultural practices and beliefs that limited women's empowerment in the communities. These limitations were women's participations in decision making, ownership of properties and resources, women's involvement in funeral performance, access to education and taking decisions concerning the family.

4.2.1. Decision Making

The study gathered that heads of the family are responsible for taking decisions that concern the families. In a household setting, it is the father and in some few occasions both the father and the mother. The landlords or the chiefs who are heads of the communities are in-charge of taking decisions for the communities after consulting with the gods of the lands. The hierarchy is actually built from the household to the community level and it is mainly dominated by men. Issues are discussed by men in the house and women have no place there and then to the family level and finally to the community level and at all levels women do not partake in the deliberations.

This is what a women's group leader had to say in an interview:

“The woman cannot take decisions in the household. No matter how elderly the woman is, she cannot take decision, she is only consulted. The woman cannot take decision regarding the family.” (IDI-Women’s Group Leader-V-Nankam Community)

Respondents said women are not allowed to sit in family discussion or partake in any decision making process for various reasons already mentioned. It is also clear from the responses that women cannot take any decision without consulting their husbands, even in issues concerning the women themselves.

This is what women’s group leader had to say concerning this when she was asked whether she could be called upon to answer questions concerning her during family discussions;

“ no, you are a woman and you cannot go out and discuss with them (the men), if there is something your husband has to come inside the room and tell you”(IDI-Women’s Group Leader-V-Nankam Community)

However, when participants were asked the things that a woman can do in the house and in the family, both men and women admitted that a woman can advise her husband in taking decisions. From the discussion we had on the field, it is a taboo to have a woman heading any traditional institution like the family, the house, clan and the community.

This was one of the responses from a woman;

“it is a taboo, it is never done that way right from the beginning. It is in our culture that a woman is never the head of the house” (FGD-Women with Empowerment-J-Nankam Community)

Apparently women in the communities have also formed groups for discussing issues concerning themselves but they do not have authority to implement whatever decisions they take. The men should be in support of it before those decisions taken by the women are implemented.

It is obvious that due to the male dominated decision making hierarchy, issues concerning women are even taken or discussed for them by the men. In cases where women own livestock for livelihood purpose, it is the men that decide when the woman can sell some of the livestock to support herself and how many of the livestock she can also sell. The woman can visit her parents only when the husband has agreed to it.

An assertion given by a social worker:

“a practical example is, in terms of how many children the family is supposed to have is determined by the man not the woman meanwhile it is the woman who will bear the children. The man determines the size of the family not the woman. Instead of the two of them coming together to decide, it is the man who says what he wants.... you understand, so they take decisions for the women” (IDI-Social Welfare Officer-1).

4.2.2. Women Effecting their Desired Outcome

There are several identified situations in the study area that exhibit women’s subordination. In the sphere of domestic empowerment, women, especially married women, lack the opportunity to initiate their desired outcome and they are under the control of their husbands. Whatever decisions the women take, the husbands must be in support or the women suffer the consequences of being disrespectful. In some cases women’s movements were controlled by culture beliefs. It is forbidden for a married woman to go to her father’s house when she arrives from a trip. She must go to her husband’s house first.

An elder in the community asserted that:

“ another one too is that, if you travel with your wife to another place to settle and one day she wants to come home and say hello to her parents, she has to arrive at her husband’s home before she can then go to her parent’s house” (FGD-Household Heads-G-Kasem Community)

These findings confirmed what Mason and Smith (2003) revealed in their argument. They argued that in most societies, men control at least some of the women of their social class within their household and families. This control mechanism is being propelled by cultural practices and beliefs. Njogu and orchardson (n a), are also of the view that in many subsistence economics, women work on farms with an intricate connection, but do not have ownership over the lands. This assessment is vividly displayed in the study findings.

Assessments made by Ngom et al (2003) about the Kasena Nankana Municipality are also reflected in the study. Married women cannot initiate anything without the prior notices of their husbands or head of the family, if the husband is indisposed. Women who will ignore this channel are considered disrespectful.

From the field, this is what a household head said;

“yes we have, like if you are there with your wife and the children and one of them is sick, as a sign of respect the woman should inform you before she takes the child to the hospital” (FGD-Household Heads-K-Nankam Community).

These practices put the men at the helm of affairs and the women remain subordinates to them, and theirs is to obey whatever the men say without any objections. The men said, for the fact that they have gone through the traditional marriage and brought the women home, the women must respect them by telling the men whatever they do. Some also said that by telling the man what the woman is doing enables the gods of the house to back them in whatever they are doing.

An assertion from a household head in the community:

“Yes, the woman cannot take the sick child to hospital without telling the husband even if he has not got money to give her and if the husband is not there, she still needs to let him know. This is so because there exist some spirits of the house that is protecting the family so when the woman consults the man these spirits will protect them and take them to the hospital and back.” (FGD-Household Heads-C-Kasem Community)

4.2.3. Productive Resource Accessibility and Ownership

According to responses from both the interviews and the discussions, women have access to economic resources but they do not have the right to ownership. In some cases women may have the ownership title but do not have control over the resources. In a nut shell, women have access to productive and non-productive resources and in some cases the women can own them but do not have complete control over these resources.

The following are selected responses from an assembly man, a chief, a woman, a gender activist and a social worker respectively on the field;

“Traditionally, the woman cannot own a piece of land but for animals, yes, she can own them but how to dispose them off is in the hands of the man” (IDI-Assembly Man-N-Nankam Community)

“giving women empowerment such as allowing them to own properties like land, in our culture, i have never seen a woman who owns a piece of land. She can farm on it and use it but she cannot own it. If she wants to build, her husband can give her a piece of land to build on” (IDI-Chief-G-Nankam Community).

“Over here whatever you do, the man must approve of it. A woman cannot boast of anything, the woman does not own anything even a piece of land. It is the husband who gives her land to farm on, but she does not own the land” (FGD-Women with Empowerment-J-Nankam Community)

“There was a case where a widow was not allowed to inherit and own her husband’s land. The family took the land from her and used it for animal grazing, and she was beaten any time she tried to do something on the land. She developed a fracture out of beating so the case was sent to the police.” (IDI-Gender Activist)

“Because the culture says that the man owns the woman and everything that the woman has got. You understand. You have your wife and she has animals than you the husband has, but the husband can catch some of animals for sale without consulting the woman. Even if the man consults the woman and she does not agree, the man will still go ahead and sell the animals because he believes that all that the woman has, and including herself belong to him” (IDI-Social Welfare Officer-1)

Female children also suffer this fate, male children are given pieces of land to own and farm on and female children do not get this treatment. The reason is that the girl will one day get married and she will leave the house and go to her husband’s house and moreover, it is the boy who will inherit the father and build upon the family’s name. Even in the presence of the wife, a male child can claim ownership of a piece of land and the mother cannot.

4.3. Perceptions of Women Empowerment.

It was necessary to understand the perceptions of the community members in the direction of the idea of women empowerment. This question yielded 108 responses from all the respondents under the various discussions and interviews. Out of this figure, 74 responses of them said women’s empowerment was good because if women have any form of economic empowerment or girls are educated, they can support their husbands and families. Participants said women are more empathy, more patient and careful with things and for that matter in the

domestic sphere if they are empowered they are able to take good care of their children unlike the men who will spend their monies on alcohol and cigarette.

A household head in the community admitted that:

“ if we empower the women it will be good because, nowadays, it is our daughters who are taking care of us. I know a daughter who is married, but she makes sure that her mother and father do not starve. So if we do not discriminate against them, it will help us. We help the boys in education and they finish and do not help us. So for me women empowerment is a good thing” (FGD-Household Heads-K-Nankam Community).

However, a total of 34 responses 108 responses were of the view that women’s empowerment was going to bring destruction to culture, families and homes. What is of interest here is that there were some female respondents who did not like the idea of women empowerment. Respondents argued that women and men were not equal so women could not have the same power as men in society. An example was given from the Bible to back their argument. A household head mentioned that:

“let us look at when God created Adam and Eve, Adam was created first before Eve, so men and women cannot have the same powers, men are first and women follow. For men and women to be equal then God should have created Adam and Eve the same day” (FGD-Household Heads-K-Nankam Community)

Some of their arguments stated that, once women have some form of empowerment, they do not respect their husbands again, they become destructive, they tend to be autocratic and husbands cannot allow their wives to control them. For that matter giving women power will not work because it will bring turmoil in the up keep of their families. It was evident in the analyses that some of the women in the communities do not like the idea of women empowerment even though women were the beneficiaries. This section of the women said, if women were empowered, they were not going to respect their husbands.

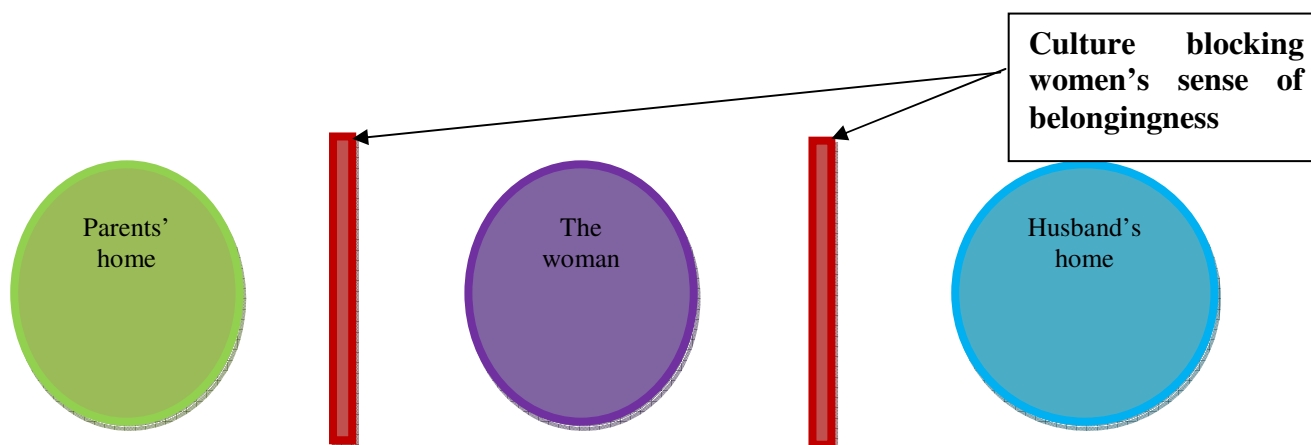
4.4. The Status or Right of Belongingness of the Kasena Nankana Woman

What is also interesting in this study’s findings had to do the sense of belongingness of the women in the municipality. It is clear that a married woman has no strong connections to her husband’s family until she has given birth to at least three children. Notwithstanding this, women are also segregated in many activities in the family. Women are not allowed to partake in discussion concerning the family issues. On the other hand, female children are also being restricted when it came to family issues. Boys are favored over girls in terms of education because they believe that the girl will one day get married and go to her husband’s house. Females are not allowed to own lands in their father’s home for the same reason. The irony here is that, parents claim that their daughters belong to their husband’s family and when the girls finally get married their husbands also see them not to belong to their family. So where does the woman of Kasena Nankana municipality belong?

This question also came out in an interview with the municipal gender officer and this is his assertion:

“so as a woman, you cannot own family land. When you are in your husband’s house they said you do not belong to the house because you came from somewhere and when you also get back home, your brothers will say you will not stay in the house forever, you will one day get married so you do not belong there. This does not give the woman any sense of belonging; she does not belong to the husband’s house and at the same time does not belong to her father’s house. Why does she then belong?” (IDI-Gender Activist-KNM).

Figure 2.0 The Disconnected Belongingness of Women in KNM



Source: Field Work, (2014)

From the figure 2 above, the green circle, the deep blue circle and the light blue circle represents the woman parents' home, the woman herself and the woman's husband home respectively. The two red rectangle pillars are representing the cultural practices and beliefs in the communities that are preventing the woman's belongingness either to her parents' home or her husband's home.

Conclusion

Undoubtedly, cultural practices and beliefs are major challenges in the development of women issues. Most importantly in the patrilineal family system, it becomes a bottle neck in the liberation of women's right. In the case of KNM, a pure patrilineal system, male supremacy and dominance is paramount and the fact that these gender powers are rooted in the culture practices and beliefs it is extremely difficult for emancipation.

However, in this era of globalization, women can see liberation from cultural practices and beliefs but this may not come as fast as possible since culture is more or less attitudinal and it takes time to change people's attitude and perceptions. Societies can experience development if this development is a holistic and all-inclusive one.

Culture emancipation is necessary for the development of women in the face of sustainable development. Policies and programs should involve all the stakeholders in the communities including women. However in KNM communities, cultural practices and beliefs are impeding the participation of women in decision making process, hence making policies not all inclusive.

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