



GENDER, CULTURE AND DEVELOPMENT IN AFRICA

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Abstract

Africa is endowed with both human and natural resources that does not reflect the level of development as most countries on the continent are among the poorest countries in the world. Gender roles as prescribed by culture contribute significantly to the state of development in Africa. Although there are cultural practices that impact the continent positively, there are some practices that favour men and deprive women of freedom, dignity and basic necessities of life resulting in the high rate of poverty among women. The paper examines some of these cultural practices which undermine gender roles in Africa and its implications for development using secondary sources of data that were content analysed. Findings reveal that these cultural practises have made it impossible for both genders to achieve their potentials and significantly contribute to the growth and development of their localities. Ensuring the freedom, dignity and wellbeing of all citizens will not only enhance personal growth but will also promote national development. Governments should continue to strengthen institutions that implement policies and programmes that guarantee the protection of the human rights of all citizens while community leaders should be re-oriented on the dangers of these harmful practices and their implications to development.

Keywords: *Africa, Culture, Gender, Gender Roles, Development*

Introduction

Africa as a continent has a lot of resources as well as cultural values but these do not truly reflect in the level of development as poverty abound on the continent even though some countries have made significant progress. Culture determines the roles performed by both the male and female gender in society. African culture is to the advantage of men as most societies are

patriarchal in nature (Obasala, 2013; Falola, 2018). It is a society where men dominate in almost all spheres of life. Men feature more prominently at home, work, in the community, and in governance signifying their level of superiority over women.

In the home, the woman is expected to do the greater part of household chores. Her primary obligation according to tradition is to take care of her husband and children. Even in modern times where women work outside the home to support their families, and while most of women's labour is concentrated in the informal sectors, they are still expected to perform these traditional roles in addition. Men on the other hand are the "heads of the family" and work mainly in the formal sector where they occupy key positions that attract better pay and benefits. With these positions in society, men dominate in both public and private spheres. This continues to foster gender inequality.

Gender is the socially constructed characteristics of women and men such as norms, roles and relationships of and between groups of women and men. Gender concerns men and women and addresses the inequalities between males and females. It goes beyond biological sex, focusing on social identity, behaviour and preferences. It can vary within cultures, from one culture to another, and changes over time. Deviation from these characteristics may attract stigmatization and discriminatory practices or social exclusion which can adversely affect development (World Health Organization, 2018)

Culture refers to the way of life of a people in terms of their food, dressing, religious beliefs, greeting and the way they interact socially. Culture includes knowledge, beliefs, arts, morals, customs and other capabilities acquired by man as a member of society (Adeleke, Nwamuo and Ayanlowo, 2017). Culture is the totality of traits and characteristics which are peculiar to a people and differentiate them from others. These traits include language, dressing, work, music, arts, religion, dancing as well as norms, taboos and values (Idang, 2015).

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization defines culture as "that complex whole which includes knowledge, beliefs, arts, morals, laws, customs, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by (a human) as a member of society" (United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2017). Like gender roles, culture is passed on from one generation to another through the process of

socialization. The roles and responsibilities of women and men are concurrently socially constructed and culturally determined.

Development is “is a multidimensional process involving major changes in social structures, population attitudes and national institutions, as well as the acceleration of economic growth, the reduction of inequality, and the eradication of poverty” (Todaro and Smith, 2004: 17). It describes how desirable a society is, the social changes that occur over a long period of time as a result of unavoidable processes, and the deliberate efforts to make things work better (Allan, 2000).. UNESCO on the other hand sees development as a “means to achieve a more satisfactory intellectual, emotional, moral and spiritual existence” (UNESCO, 2017).

Culture has been described as the fourth pillar of sustainable development along with social, environmental and economic pillars as it binds the society together through significant influence in people’s rights, health and quality of life (United Cities and Local Governments, 2010; Cvejic, 2015; and Sabatini, 2019), yet there are cultural practices in Africa that undermine the progress of women and make it impossible for them to contribute meaningfully to the development of the continent. The resultant effect of these dangerous practices is the denial of their fundamental human rights and freedoms. .

Although countries including those in Africa have made efforts to protect the fundamental humans rights of both women and men by making provisions for the rights and privileges of every citizen in the constitution and signing and ratifying several human rights instruments such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations 1948), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) (Scholz and Gomez, 2005: 3). The rate at which prejudicial traditional practices and customs that legislate women’s inequality occur (Ssenyonjo, 2007: 41) makes it impossible to achieve the provisions of these instruments. There is also the African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights (1981) which guarantees equal rights between men and women, and the AU’s 2003 Maputo Protocol, specifically for women. These practices need to change if Africa must develop as it hinders the success of developmental efforts in many parts of Africa. This paper therefore examines cultural practices that undermine gender roles in Africa and implications for development in

Africa. The study adopts the qualitative method of data collection where secondary sources of data were content analysed.

African Cultural Practices and Gender

Across Africa, there exist practices that help shape its cultures. These practices are usually passed from one generation to another and have positively or negatively affected the wellbeing of the people and societies on the continent. Cultural practices which have positively influenced African societies include the extended family system, respect for elders, post-natal care for women and prolonged breastfeeding. On the contrary, there are negative practices that affect most especially women and children. These include female genital mutilation (FGM), son preference, widowhood rites, forced and early marriages, polygamy, acceptance of domestic violence towards women, and denial of inheritance right of women (Ssenyonjo, 2007).

Female genital mutilation (FGM) is a cultural practice that affects the female gender in most African countries. This is the ceremonial circumcision of the female child which is usually done between infancy and age 15 (World Health Organization, 2020). The proportion of girls on the continent between the ages of 15 and 19 years that have undergone female genital mutilation is still alarming even though there has been a slight decrease especially in North Africa subregion (Africa Sustainable Development Report, 2017: 75; United Nations Sustainable Development Goals Report 2017:28).

In Sub-Saharan Africa (Africa excluding North African states) the percentage in 2000, 2005, 2010 and 2015 was 40.9, 38.1, 36.5 and 31.8 respectively while in North Africa, it went down from 92.6% in 2000 to 86.2% in 2005, 81.6% in 2010 and 69.6% in 2015 (Africa Sustainable Development Report, 2017). A lot of reasons have been given for FGM. These range from it being an initiation rite into womanhood as it signifies the girls' readiness for marriage, to the fact that the removal of the clitoris prevents women from being promiscuous thereby making them submissive to their husbands, that is, FGM is meant to reduce women's sexual drive.

It has been argued that FGM is a form of male dominance which men have perpetuated under the pretence of culture. "The practice was forced by men simply to deny women similar pleasure". The circumcision of the male child does not in any way affect his health and sexual desire (Falola, 2018). Although this practice has medical implications to the reproductive health of

the victims and is a form of violence against women and it infringes on their rights (National Bureau of Statistics, 2018), it is estimated that at least two million women and girls in Africa undergo the operation each year (approximately 6,000 per day or one in every 15 seconds) (Adeleke, Nwamuo and Ayanlowo, 2017).

In many countries in Africa, especially those where patriarchy prevails, preference for the male child is strong due to the fact that the male child is culturally expected to carry on and preserve the family lineage (Agbor, 2016). For this reason, the birth of a male child brings great joy to his parents and the community, unlike the birth of a female child that will eventually get married and take her husband's family name. Usually in most of these societies, women earn respect from their husbands/families only when they have male children (Shah, 2005). The female child is thus disadvantaged from birth. She is likely to receive less attention from her parents who may not be willing to invest in her development especially where the resources are limited. This practice violates the rights of the girl child as she may be denied access to education, good health and economic opportunity. The girl child may be relegated to household chores while the boy child is sent off to school to acquire and equip himself with the necessary skills to chase his dreams of becoming revered in whatever career path he had chosen. A girl may also be withdrawn from school due to scarce resources so that her brother completes his education as he is required to ensure the continuity of the family name and inherit his father's property (Agbor, 2016; Nwokocha, 2007). The neglect and discrimination against girls has led to early marriages to men whom most times are chosen by their parents. The inability to bear a son may also lead to a man marrying more than one wife (Isiugu-Abanihe, 2003; Agbor, 2016). Even though several measures put in place by governments to ensure that the girl child is educated have yielded positive results as some parents have come to realise the importance of educating both the boy and the girl child, there are still those who still oppose these initiatives.

Child marriage is another aspect of African custom and tradition which grossly affects the female gender. The girl child is given away in marriage before the age of 18 years. This is oftentimes driven by poverty. Girls are considered a financial economic burden since they will eventually marry and leave their families. One of the reasons given for marrying out girls at a tender age is that through early marriage, parents guarantee their daughters'

virginity and chastity (but men can have sexual relationships before marriage). This is believed to guard against premarital sex, unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and promotes 'new alliance between tribes, clans and villages; reinforce social ties and stabilize vital social status'(Nour, 2006). Other facts that put the child at risk of marriage are the 'social norms, customary or religious laws that condone the practice, an inadequate legislative framework and the state of the country's civil registration system' (UNICEF, 2018).

Sub-Saharan Africa has the highest number of child marriage as about 4 in 10 young women marry before the age 18 (UNICEF, 2018). It is estimated that more than three million girls in Sub-Saharan Africa get married before they turn 18 every year (Wodon et al, 2018). Although countries like Djibouti, Rwanda and Swaziland have achieved success in delaying the age of marriage among women, others like the Central Africa Republic, Guinea, Niger and South Sudan are countries with the highest prevalence of child marriage with over 50 per cent of women between 20 and 24 years of age married by 18 years. Niger has the highest prevalence of child marriage in the region and in the World with more than 75 per cent of women between the ages of 20 and 24 married before reaching 18 years (African Sustainable Development Report, 2017: 72). In Niger, 3 out of 4 girls are married before they are 18 (The Economist, 2018). This is further escalated by the country's minimum legal age of marriage for girls of 15 years. Notwithstanding this minimum legal age, some brides are nine years old (The Economist, 2018).

The practice of child marriage is unhealthy. It is an abuse of fundamental human rights. Such marriage deters the growth and development of the victims. The girls are denied the right to education, freedom of expression and the opportunity to attain their desired potentials.often . Once the girls are shipped off to their husbands' houses at a very young age, there is the likelihood that due to child bearing and other family responsibilities, chances of returning to school may not be feasible. Such girls and women become susceptible to physical and sexual abuse since the age gap between them and their husbands are usually very wide. They live at the mercy of the men.

Child marriage has health implications. Even though the level of fertility is higher, the risk of maternal mortality is very high when compared to those who marry at a later age. There is an increased risk of contracting sexually transmitted diseases and cervical cancer (due to HPV infection) from some husbands who have multiple sexual partners. Such girls are also 'at risk of

malaria and obstetric fistulas'. Infants born to such marriages have higher risk for illness and death and higher risk of being preterm and having low birth weight (Nour, 2006). This poses developmental challenges to both the immediate and future generation.

According to the World Bank, "Africa loses billions of dollars due to child marriages" (World Bank, 2018). This is in lost earnings and human capital. Child marriage can result in high population growth due to high fertility rates (Agbor, 2016). This affects the standard of living as well as the development of the countries. Despite efforts made by African governments to reduce this harmful practice through the enactment and implementation of laws that prescribe the minimum age of marriage at 18 years and above and promotes education for the girl child, child marriage is still on the high side as Africa accounts for 17 of the 20 countries with the highest level of child marriage Worldwide (Odhiambo, 2017).. This implies that African leaders need to intensify efforts in curbing this dehumanising act. Parents, community and religious leaders have roles to play in ending child marriage.

Polygyny, which is the marriage of a man to more than one wife, is a hindrance to gender equality and development in Africa. This is mainly concentrated in male dominated societies and Islamic communities as stipulated by traditional and religious customs (Sanderson, 2001). In various societies in Africa, the islamic law supports a man's marriage to four wives as long as he caters for his wives and children financially and otherwise. Some societies support both monogamy and polygamy. For instance in Nigeria, the civil law prohibits polygamy while both customary law and sharia law recognize polygamous marriages.

This traditional practice has been in existence for centuries even before the advent of Christianity and colonialism in Africa. Justifications given for polygamy were that it provided farm labour; ensured that a man has children even if some dies or one wife is infertile as a marriage without procreation in Africa was incomplete; was a solution to menopause since some women may not be sexually active at this stage; solved the problem of women snatching the husbands of other women because of the imbalance in the ratio of women to men; ensured that men remain sexually active during advanced stage of pregnancy and nursing of the child as some cultures prohibits sexual activities during pregnancy; remedy against social exclusion as women being single was associated with evil; and helps to take care of a widow and

her children by the younger brother of the deceased (levirate marriage) (Lawrence-Hart, 2019).

Polygamy was usually practiced by wealthy men (affluent polygamy) who had enough land and resources to take care of their large families. There is also the interventive type of polygamy that occurs when the wife is unable to bear a child. The wife may decide to marry a wife for the husband who will bear children for the family. The first wife will take such children as her own. This gives the first wife a sense of purpose and fulfilment. In a situation where the man decides to marry a second wife he consults with his first wife before marrying another wife. This is often the case where the first wife was infertile (Nwoye, 2007). When on the other hand the husband is impotent or has a low sperm count, culture provides that with his approval, a relative or a close friend impregnates his wife in order to bear children for the family (Achebe, 1958 in Nwoye, 2007).

Today, the practice of polygamy has decreased due to colonial impact and religious values (protestant and catholic mission) (Frenske, 2011), it is not limited to the rich. Poor men who cannot take care of themselves marry multiple wives. A man can marry another wife without the knowledge and consent of his first wife. He rents an apartment for his new family and sometimes may move in with his new bride and abandon the first wife and her children. The first wife may not find out until the death of her husband, when the second wife appears with her children to give the man the last respect and to claim their inheritance. There is what is referred to as “informal polygamy” which is not as a result of childlessness or sonlessness but due to the dilemmas of the modern western economy (Nwoye, 2007). Today, there are families that do not live together due to economic reasons. The husband may get a better paid job that requires him to relocate to another location. He may decide to start another family there.

The practice of polygamy is a violation of women’s fundamental rights as it inherently subordinates women, promotes gender inequality and encourage cultural practice that deny women the right to make decisions concerning their bodies and reproductive health.. A study of twenty countries in Africa shows that junior wives in polygynous marriages are more likely to be HIV positive than the wives in a monogamous union and that the prevalence of HIV is lower in populations with more polygyny (Renier and Tffaily, 2012). Polygamy affects the mental health of women. It can lead to increased rates of somatization, anxiety, depression, hostility, low self-esteem and

psychiatric disorder (Shepard, 2012). The level of reproduction in such unions is very high. This has contributed to the explosive population growth especially in most countries in Sub-Saharan Africa. Mortality rate is also high as a lot of women are exposed to early and prolonged risks of pregnancy (Yasuku Hayase and Kao-lee Liaw, 1997). Neglected women and children are impoverished and become easy prey for exploitation. Hence polygamy is one of the major contributors to poverty in Africa.

Not minding the dangers associated with polygamy, there are countries where polygamy has been legalised. A good example is Kenya in East Africa where polygamy was legalized in 2014 by President Uhuru Kenyatta. The law permits men to marry as many wives as possible without the approval of their spouses (BBC News Africa, 2014; Muhumed, 2014).

Other countries where polygamy is also legalized include Chad, Niger, Sudan, and Zambia. Polygamy is supported by notable political leaders on the continent. President Mwai Kibaki of Kenya has two wives, while Jacob Zuma of South Africa has married six times but currently has four wives (Magwaza, 2018).

In countries with civil codes that prohibit polygamy, the law is rarely enforced.

Another aspect where culture has discredited women is in the area of inheritance. Women in most traditional societies in Sub-Saharan Africa are not allowed to inherit land or any other property due to customary laws that favour patriarchy. At the death of a man, his property is inherited by his adult sons. Where they are minors or only females, his family takes back possession of the property. When this happens, the woman and her children are either sent packing or denied access to some or all of the property. Where the woman insists on the ownership of any of the property, she may be asked to tender a receipt to any property belonging to her.

In the Eastern part of Nigeria, women and daughters are not entitled to any inheritance. A woman does not own land. Having a male child is the only source of having access to her husband's property. In some cases women are regarded as the property of their husbands to be inherited by one of their husbands' younger brothers at their demise.

The case of *Mojekwu v. Mojekwu*, (1997) 7 NWLR (pt. 512) 283, highlights a classic example of gender discrimination where the respondent was barred from inheriting her father's landed property under the *oliekpe* custom of the Nnewi people of Anambra state, reason being that she was a female. In

Northern Nigeria where Islam is the predominate religion, the Sharia laws states that women can own property and also inherit a small portion of their husband's property?

In Ghana, the Akans in the Ashanti, Central and Western regions and the Lobi, Tempolese and Baga in Northern Ghana practice variant forms of matrilineal customary law where children inherit from their mother's family. The property of the man is inherited by the sons of his sisters who he considers as his blood kin instead of his children (Kutsoati and Morck, 2012:6). Among the Ga tribe (Greater Accra region); Ewe tribe (Volta region) and Dagomba and Nanumba tribes (Upper East region), children belong to their father's family (patrilineal inheritance) (Kutsoati and Morck, 8). This implies that the children can inherit their father's estate. Under both matrilineal and patrilineal laws, property acquired during the period belongs to the husband (Scholz and Gomez, 2005, 16). Even though the Intestate Succession Law (PNDC Law III, 1985) in Ghana mandates 'a widow and her children to be the primary beneficiaries of the deceased husband/father; the law has not been fully implemented (Kutsoati and Morck, 12).

The Optional Protocol, a special section in the African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights stipulates that "all women must have the same rights as men to housing, and that all women (no matter what kind of marriage they have) must be allowed to inherit from their husbands"(COHRE, 4). The inability of widows to inherit their husbands' property limits their access to economic and social support. Quite a number of widows and children are left destitute due to their husbands' death. Disinheritance adversely undermines women's economic security and independence as well as their access to adequate food and housing. The denial of land rights to women also contributes to the feminization of poverty and stunted economic development in countries where harmful inheritance practices are common'(Richardson, 2004:1).

Unfortunately, the legal provision that makes it possible for a man to write a will bequeathing his property to his immediate family members has been ignored by men in Africa. Only a few take advantage of this privilege. The culture of silence where women are expected to silently endure whatever problem they encounter in the family also contributes to the suffering of women in Sub-Saharan Africa (Ntiwunka and Iyanda, 2017: 241, 246).

. Those who are aware that their rights are being infringed upon cannot afford the services of a lawyer and thus continue to suffer in silence. Only a few

countries in the region have successfully passed laws that guarantee women's rights to inheritance. These include Cote d'Ivoire and Ethiopia.

Implications for Development in Africa

Africa is blessed with both human and natural resources but this does not reflect in the level of development of most countries on the continent as the poorest countries of the world are located in Africa. This to a large extent has been influenced by culture/tradition and religion which has made it difficult for both genders to achieve their potentials and significantly contribute to the development in their communities. Of the total population of the poor, women are the highest. Their access to the resources and opportunities for development are limited. This affects their social, educational, political and economic life.

Educating women is simply investing in a country's human resources. If a country is unable to develop its human resources, it cannot build anything else, whether it is a modern political system, a sense of national unity, or a prosperous economy. Modern nations are built with capital, natural resources, foreign aid, international trade and most importantly man power, this means the development of people and organization of human activity (Harbison and Myers, 1964) cannot be overemphasized in relation to the growth and development of a state.

UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) (2018) reports that gender disparities in education plays a huge role in increasing the poverty levels in a country, having compared low income countries and high income countries it was deciphered that in low-income countries females are more likely to be out of school than males, while the opposite can be observed in high-income countries (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2018). This is especially true for youth of upper secondary school age, where female out-of-school rates are higher in low-income and lower-middle-income countries, while male out-of-school rates are higher in upper-middle-income and high-income countries. Child marriage is a major contributing factor that prevents a young girl from benefiting from her right to good education.

Educating women and young girls on the principles of human rights encourages the awareness of individual autonomy, equality, and choice in the practice of religious and cultural norms (Merry, 2006) and helps them make informed decisions that will positively aid the realization of protecting their fundamental right. Education is a powerful tool that has proven

effective in curbing inequalities between men and women as educated women have higher opportunity rates and participate in the social and economic development processes in the society (Doroba, 2018) .

Although Sub-Saharan African women have the highest rate of employment in the world, the region remains one of the “most gender-unequal regions” as majority of the women are in the informal sectors (especially agriculture) and vulnerable employment where they are either unpaid or poorly remunerated. Negative perceptions, attitudes and cultural constraints continue to deny women access to decent jobs. Historic gender roles do not only restrict women’s access to education and health care, it also encourages job segregation and sexual abuse (Wachina, 2018). Since women earn less due to the kinds of jobs that they do, it is difficult for them to contribute meaningfully to the growth of their families and their communities.

In Sub-Saharan Africa, notwithstanding the legal provisions which restrict women’s economic advancement, several reforms aimed at promoting gender equality, “a critical component of economic growth,” have been made. From the assessment by *Women, Business and the Law 2019: A Decade of Reform*, where a total of 187 countries were investigated for a period of ten years based on eight indicators to “measure how laws affect women throughout their working life”, six of the top reforming economies are in Sub-Saharan Africa of: Democratic Republic of Congo, Guinea, Malawi, Mauritius, Sao Tome and Principe and Zambia (World Bank Group, 2019: 1 -4). The region moved from an average of 64.04 points in 2007 to 63.63 points in 2018. Democratic Republic of Congo made a remarkable move from 42.50 points to 70points close to the global average of 74.71points in 2017. Its reforms enabled “married women to register businesses, open bank accounts, sign contracts, get jobs, and choose where to live in the same way as men.

Restrictions on women working in specific industries including mining manufacturing and construction were also removed”. Mauritius took the lead amongst the countries in the region from 75 points to 99.88 points. The country introduced “civil remedies for sexual harassment at work, prohibiting the dismissal of pregnant workers, introducing paid paternity leave, prohibiting discrimination in access to credit based on gender, equal remuneration for work of equal value and increased the length of paid maternity from 12 – 14 weeks”. One of the lowest countries was Sudan with 29.38 points (World Bank Group, 8 - 11). Suffice to say that it is not the

number of reforms that matter but their implementation. For African economies to advance, women economic empowerment is vital as this will boost productivity and effects towards gender equality.

The absence of good health is a major challenge to development, and this is why governments have made various efforts aimed at improving the health conditions of their people. This has led to the decline in maternal mortality which “dropped from 846 deaths per 100,000 live births to 546 deaths per 100,000 live births in 2015 in Africa (excluding North Africa)”, even though it is still very high in countries like Sierra Leone with 1,360 deaths per 100,000 live births, Central African Republic, Chad and Nigeria (United Nations, 2017:49 - 51).

Despite the legal instruments which promote gender equality in all spheres of life including politics, the progress for women in the area of political participation remains deficient as a result of certain dominant factors that weigh against women’s participation in politics. These factors include religion and culture, lack of finance, and lack of proper orientation/ political education. Women in developing countries are constantly faced with the limitations of being excluded from participating in political and social activities. They are prevented from influencing the decision making process and social norms. Enduring all the odds and obstacles, few women have forged ahead and broken down barriers, and have taken up high ranking positions.

Mabel Dove Danquah was the first woman to win an election seat in Africa (Legislative Assembly, Ghana 1951}; Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Liberia’s first democratically elected female president between 2006-2018; Aja Fatoumata Jallow Tambajang appointed in 2017 as Gambia’s Vice President; Joice Mujuru who was also a Vice President of Zimbabwe between 2004-2014; Joyce Hilda Banda was the President of Malawi from 2012 to 2014; Ameenah Gurib-Fakim, President of Mauritius 2015 to 2018; and Sahie-Work Zewde, whom since 2018 serves as the current President of Ethiopia. Women have become presidents in acting capacity while many have gotten ministerial and parliamentary appointments.

According to the [Inter-Parliamentary Union](#) on the situation of women’s representation in parliaments conducted in 193 countries, as of 1st January, 2019 Rwanda ranked 1st globally with 61.3% women’s participation rate where women were recorded to have occupied 49 out of 80 seats in the Lower/single house and recorded 38.5% with women occupying 10 out of

26 seats in the Upper/senate houses. Apart from Senegal which ranked 11th out of 193 countries recording 41.8% in favour of women's participation in the lower/single house, women occupied 69 seats out of the total number of 165 seats available in that category (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2019).

Other countries in West Africa ranked 77 and above. Cabo Verde ranked 77th with 23.6% with women occupying 17 seats out of 72 seats in the lower /single house only, Guinea ranked 82nd with women occupying 26 seats out of 114 seats in the lower /single house only

Whilst other countries in West Africa such as Togo ranked 127th with 16.5%, Sao Tome and Principe ranked 140th with participation rate of 14.5%, Guinea-Bissau ranked 142nd recording (13.7%), Burkina Faso ranked 143rd recording (13.4%), Ghana ranked 146th recording 13.1%, Gambia ranked 164th recording 10.3%, Mali ranked 172nd recording 8.8% Women's participation rate and Benin ranked 175th recording 7.2% in the lower/ single house with no record of women's participation in the Upper house / senate, countries like Liberia, Cote d' Ivoire ranked 152nd and 161st with 12.3% and 11.9 % participation rate in the Lower /Single house and 10.0% and 12.1% participation rate in the Upper/senate house respectively. Nigeria ranked 180 as the lowest ranked country in West Africa in respect of women's participation in politics recording 5.6% with women occupying 20 seats out of 359 seats in the lower/single house and 6.4% with women occupying only 7 seats out of 109 available seats in the Upper/senate house (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2019).

The participation of women in politics in many of these countries is below the average, despite all laws that promote equality and freedom to participate , women still hold minimal participation in the decision making process of their countries. This continues to have adverse effects on development. Decisions which promote the well being of the women and children are relegated to the background. Though women have struggled to occupy key positions in the societies, they are yet to make a significant impact that will change the health status, improve the educational level and create economic opportunity for women. Apart from male dominance, finance, and culture/religion, women constitute a major hindrance to the realization of this goal. Women do not support the women who aspire for leadership positions. A lot of women believe in male headship as promoted by tradition. This includes those that are educated.

The struggle for women's equal participation has been engaged in by many individuals and different organizations. Gloria Steinem, a renowned feminist, journalist and activist once said "*The story of women's struggle for equality belongs to no single feminist nor to any one organization but to the collective efforts of all who care about human rights.*" This is evidenced in the way reputable organizations come together to plot developmental schemes and themes to help promote equality. For instance the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) supports the exercise of political rights by both women and men, promotes the involvement of women in decision making, leadership and development processes. Some of the programmes initiated to support this agenda include training for women candidates, awareness campaigns, gender parity, gender quotas, coalition building and networking, gender mainstreaming, amongst others. To achieve gender equality and other sustainable development goals as specified by the United Nations, UNDP collaborates with women's networks and academia, UN Women, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), UNICEF, Office of Democratic Institution and Human Rights (ODH) and Civil Society Organization (CSOs) (United Nations Development Programme, 2019).

African Governments especially those in the Sub-Saharan region, have made several efforts to ensure the wellbeing of its citizens through policies, programmes and the establishment of institutions to curtail some of these harmful cultural practices that hinder development and endanger the lives of people but these are yet to yield the expected results as some of these practices persist. This is evident in the level of discrimination and forms of violence against the female gender. Cases of domestic violence and rape are on the rise. These continue to endanger the health and growth of women. Empowerment programmes established by governments as well as non-governmental organizations are not sufficient as women and youths especially those in the rural areas are yet to benefit. Achieving development means that both males and females will be adequately catered for.

Conclusion

The influence of culture on development cannot be overemphasized. This influence which could be positive or negative, is dependent on gender roles as prescribed by culture. Development in Africa to a large extent has been undermined by cultural practices that favour mainly the male folk. Women

are deprived of their freedom, dignity and the basic necessities of life. The outcome of this is the high rate of poverty among women. Ensuring the freedom, dignity and well being of all citizens will not only enhance personal growth but will also promote national development.

Although there are institutions saddled with the responsibility of implementing policies and programmes that guarantee and protect the fundamental human rights of both men and women, African governments need to strengthen these institutions and ensure that more women take part in decision making and have access to leadership positions in order to influence policies that positively impact the lives of women. Community leaders need to be re-oriented on the dangers that these harmful practices pose to the development of their societies. Women organizations need to rise up to the task and speak to those concerned (government, community leaders and women).

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