

**SOCIAL STATUS OF WOMEN IN THE SOCIETY: AN ABERRATION  
FROM THE CONSTITUTIONAL DECLARATION(S) OF EQUALITY  
OF MEN AND WOMEN.**

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**Abstract**

The paper examines the social status of the female in the Nigerian society. In doing this, the author mentions the secondary position occupied by women in ancient societies to the present day. The caustic experience of women in terms of the differential training given to the girl-child, the differences in inheritance practice in many societies, the overriding power of men over women, the discriminatory burdens placed on women, and the role played by male writers have made women to seemingly accept the status given to them by men dominated society. All the constitutions of the world give inalienable rights to women. The writer therefore conclude that women should see themselves as capable of changing themselves and the world they live in irrespective of the constitutional aberration.

**Social Status Of Women In The Society: An Aberration From The  
Constitutional Declaration(s) Of Equality Of Men And Women**

A social status is a position in a social system or in a society. It is the rank or position which an individual occupies in a group or the position of a group in relation to other groups. Thus we have mother, wife, father husband, carpenter, priest, governor, president, etc, as some examples of social status. A status or social rank carries with it a set of duties, privileges, rights and expectations. Some statuses attract more privileges and honour than others and some impose greater responsibilities, duties, rights and expectations on the occupants than others. Status can therefore be ranked in terms of higher and lower, superior and inferior status. (Igbo, 2003:78). This paper examines the social status of women vis-à-vis that of men in the society and is of the opinion that women occupy an inferior, substandard and a secondary status compared to that of men in the society.

According to Azikiwe (1997), the status of women refers to the conditions and rights of women. It means the condition under which women live in society as well as the chances they have to do certain things in the society. The world in which we are living is a man's world in which everything seem to be in their favour and to the disadvantage of women. Tasks are divided between men and women. The type of tasks which are performed

by men are classified to be more important or more noble than those performed by women. In fact, everything that concerns women forms a substratum and so inferior in the society. This is also confirmed by Junaid (1996) when he stated that the role of women is perceived generally to be in the home caring for the young.

The secondary status occupied by women in the society started from time immemorial. It started from when man was a hunter and gatherer down to the preliterate age. And since then generation after generation has devised means and ways in which to keep women to where they actually want them to be. Throughout the ages and everywhere in the world, women have always been considered inferior to men (Aderalege 1972:136).

The different trainings given to boys and girls was confirmed by Osinula (1994:129) when he stated that boys are generally socialized to be inquiring, adventurous or venturesome, to subdue, conquer or at the very least understand nature, while girls are expected to be obedient, malleable, traditional (which often involves subordination and preservers of nature. Thus Dornbush (1966) confirmed that:

*In the family, females are generally expected to assume more nurturant, conservative and home-based roles, while males are assigned the roles of breadwinner, disciplinarian and protector of the household.*

The caustic experience of the girl-child right from birth to adulthood will make one to believe that women are an endangered species. The news that a man's wife has given birth to a baby girl is received not with much happiness. Some men even feel reluctant to tell friends and relations that the wife has given birth to a baby girl more especially if the woman has given birth to the first that is also a girl. This is the main reason behind the frenzied demand for a male-child almost the world over. A woman is subjected to despicable experience and may eventually be sent out of her matrimonial home if she fails to deliver a male-child.

Oputa (1998) states that in Ancient Israel, women were definitely inferior in status. A girl-child is never counted in numbering a man's children e.g the twelve tribes of Israel. There was an almost complete lack of healthy, simple companionship between sexes. For a girl, there was no ambition but marriage. She could be married as early as 12½ years of age. Daughters were in fact not wanted. In terms of assets sharing, the girl does not inherit anything in some cultures.

He narrates the worries the man always had with his daughters thus:

*It is written a daughter is a vain treasure to her father. From anxiety about her he does not sleep at night during her early years, lest she be seduced; in her marriageable years lest she does not find a husband, and when she is married, lest she is childless, and when she is old, lest she practice witchcraft(Oputa, 1998).*

The father suffers from the anxiety of childlessness because it is through her that the lineage of both her family of orientation and family of procreation are perpetuated. This child-bearing function encourages early marriages and negotiations in connection with it are often handled by the extended family. A woman's importance and stability in her husband's home are judged by the degree of her fertility, especially her ability to bear sons. If she is childless, she is considered a failure in her primary duty and often suffers considerably as a result. At every stage the daughter brought anxiety. Legally, a woman is a minor, not a responsible person, while socially, she was no better than a chattel. Women do not eat with men, they only stood and served. In the synagogue and temple they were separated. They could not inherit from their fathers or from their husbands, that is why in the scripture the widow is always the symbol of poverty and helplessness (1 kings 17:9-15, 2 kings 4:1-4, Luke 18:1-5).

In Athens, women's status is that of childbearing slaves. Wives were secluded in their quarters, had no education and were considered by their husbands as no better than chattel. In Ancient Babylon, the status of women was equal to that of men. The code of Hammurabi, the King of Babylon, granted married women a great deal of financial and personal freedom. The bride price paid by the bridegroom, which may include real estate, was settled on her and remained her property. Marriage was monogamous. If a woman decided to return to her father, or was divorced by her husband, she took her dowry with her. Under that code a woman could divorce her husband on grounds of cruelty or adultery. The children remained in the custody of their mother, who must usually be given adequate means to support them. Women could trade on their own account, independently of their husbands, and could be judges, elders, witnesses, and scribes.

In Ancient Egypt, the Status of woman was even higher than what obtained in Babylon under the Hammurabic code. Women owned property, worked in many sectors of the economy, took active part in public life and mixed freely with men. It has even been asserted that in ancient Egypt, women were the dominant sex and the social roles of men and women were reversed. It is certainly, a well known fact of history that many queens ruled Egypt.

Riley (1997) carried out a research on the status of women in the Asiatic countries like China and India and observed that their status was humiliating and dehumanising. In China, because their government promulgated a decree that nobody should have more than one child, parents there use ultra-sound and other medical devices to know the exact sex of the child while in the womb. If it is a girl-child instantly they will abort the pregnancy. Parents there want their only child to be a male-child.

Similarly, Indians have strong preference for sons. Their girls are more likely than boys to be neglected or maltreated. More recently, medical advances have enabled expectant parents to abort female fetuses, which has pushed the sex ratio at birth well above 105 boys to 100 girls. In many parts of India, daughters mean an additional disadvantage to parents—the obligation of paying her prospective husband's family a large bride price and the accompanying dowry. Bride price and dowries often require parents to go into debt, and the amount families must pay has been increasing over the years (Krishnan, 1994:267-286). Nearly all aborted fetuses in Indian hospitals are females. To parents, having a girl-child is both a burden and a liability. The brides are treated poorly by their husband's families if the dowry and bride price was considered too low.

In a similar vein, Mensah-Brown (1968) states that the Akan women from Central and south west Ghana is distinguished from her economic activity in the exchange sector of economy. Despite that, she is still weighed down by the Akan law of inheritance under matriliney. Although descent is traced through the mother in a matrilineal society, the woman lives patrilocally, matrilineal family ties are evidently very strong for the "moyga" (blood) of the "Abusua" (Matrilineage) is passed down the family line by the woman. The man on the other hand transmits the "ntoro" (spirit). This is distinctly a sexist belief.

In the event of the death of a man in matriliney, the woman under customary law is denied inheritance rights over her husband's property. It is the deceased nephews and not his children that are entitled to the inheritance of his people. Added to this, the maternal uncles and not the aunts take decisions concerning the children. (Aidoo 1979: 48)

A critical study of the Igbo people by the writer shows that in Igboland in the South Eastern part of Nigeria, the psychological trauma a woman that is having an all female children passes through is even worse than that of a barren woman. Every day of her life, she is being faced with the threat of divorce or that of a second wife. For a woman to give birth consecutively to girls three times calls for hatred from her husband's people and her husband. Instances abound of women that have been abandoned at the hospital because they delivered a baby girl and there are also cases of women that developed hypertension after delivery because it is a female for fear of

what she would face at home. A woman does not count herself a full-fledged owner of her husband house until she has given birth to a male child. She would be given a lot of derogatory names such to "Omuchiriama", "Amandiomi", "Ewuaghom", "Omechiri Obu" etc, all but in a bid to keep her in tears always. She is to be seen and not to be heard. Chukukere (1995) confirms this obnoxious attitude towards woman when she states that sons are clearly what consolidates a woman's marriage and endear her to her husband and his family. A woman's inability to bear sons ultimately condemns her. She is always reminded of her inability to have sons that will immortalize the husband's name. This was also reflected in Chinua Achebe's *Things fall Apart* in Okonkwo who slaughtered a goat for one of his wives who has had three sons in a row. Conversely, Elechi Amadi's Madume in *The Concubine* is demoralized by his wife inability to produce a male heir.

Women are also regarded as mere property, which they can keep, cherish and even destroy depending on situations or circumstances around. This is due to the bride-price that men pay on behalf of their wives. This proprietorial attitude of accepting bride price grants authority to the husband over his wife, and enriches the senior members of the brides family who receive it in form of money, cattle, and other valuable goods. The significance of the bride prices is that it is not possible for a woman to be equal to the man that 'bought' her with his hard earned money just the way he bought other properties in his house. The bride price issue portrays the woman as an article for sale and after marriage she is treated as an article purchased.

In the traditional set-up, a woman was supposed to exhibit moral restraint. The inequality in the culture allows the man more freedom than the woman. Gender differentiations portray the man, having power over the wife while the wife has no reciprocal power over the husband. Njoku (1990) opines that sexual rights and prohibitions are prescribed by the society for both husband and wife. While the husband has sexual rights outside wedlock, the woman has not. Her husband so because her services, which include sexual responsibility, have been legally secured this.

According to the words of Oputa (1998) in ancient Nigerian community the father and, after him, the husband had absolute power over the women, which include the right and power to discipline, to sell or even to kill his daughter (in case of the father) or his wife (in case of the husband). Women thus having no legal personality correspondingly had no legal rights. They could not own property, especially land. If and where they engaged in trade, they did so as mere agents of their father or husband, to whom therefore rightly belonged the proceeds of such trade. It was based on this that the International Labour Organization (I.L.O) cited in Smyke (1991) stated that the low status of woman has been disadvantageous to them. It explains that although women constitute half of the world's population, they receive one-

tenth of the world's income, account for two-thirds of world working hours and own only one hundredth of world's property.

UNESCO (1986) asserts that the traditional principles regarding the status of women in Africa include:

- (a) Women were strictly dependent on the men because tradition obliged a woman to respect, obey and submit to her husband.
- (b) The woman is classified as a minor and thus cannot take any action pertaining to law on her own. She could be deprived of goods acquired during the marriage even though she has contributed to the prosperity of the household. The payment of dowry or bride wealth restricted a woman's choice of a partner and prevented her from recovering her autonomy after the death of the husband.
- (c) Only a woman's adultery was punished. A woman was obliged to accept in the conjugal home the children born of her husband adulterous union and could be repudiated unilaterally by her husband if she is the one guilty. (P.25)

Akumadu (1998) looks at the status of women in society and summed it up thus:

*The discriminatory burdens placed on women include those of chastity of making marriage work at all cost, of fertility and fertility control, and the burden of being clean and desirable as symbolized by female circumcision. Others include the burden to prove rape both in the community and in court of law, to raise "good" children and to mourn their husbands to the taste and dictate of his relatives. Compared to men, Nigerian society treats women a little better than beast of burden, more like donkeys than human beings.(p.29)*

The image being given to women from the literary perspectives is indeed a reflection of what the male authors term women to be. Literature according to the words of Hart (1989) acts as a mirror on society. In the same line, Ekom (1977) noted that the artist has always functioned in African society as the record of the mores and experiences of his society. Therefore, by looking at how women are presented in African literature, a clearer vision of how women live in real life situations is depicted. The ideal female created by male writers in fiction often acts within the framework of her traditional

roles as wife and mother. As a matter of fact, the respect and love, which a woman earns is relative to the degree of her adaptation to these roles.

Agnew (1992) in the "womanly image" word to the wise woman is that "a man is in general better pleased when he has a good dinner upon his table, than when his wife talks Greek". In the same vein, Honore de Balzac cited also in the "womanly image" adds that "A woman who is guided by the head and not the heart is a social pestilence. She has all the defects of a passionate and affectionate woman with none of her compensations. She is without pity, without love, without virtue, without sex".

By analyzing the words of some African writers EKom (1977) shows that polygamy is calculated to maintain the domination of one class (men) over another (women). In Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo's beating of his wives are accepted as part of his rightful authority over them. Rousseaus justifies this act when he stated that "woman was made to yield to man and put up with his injustices" Achebe records the ingredient of polygamy---quarrel, jealousies, beating, many children, a fair amount of cooperation, favoritism *and a little communication.*

A Cameroonian, Ferdinand Oyono in *The Old man and the medal* communicated his feeling about a woman's miserable state in a polygamous home through his use of animal imagery. In his community, women are described as cheap objects to be acquired and discarded at will. Wives of Engamba are compared to goats straining at the leash. Ebogo one of the wives feels towards him "as a mouse feels towards the cat," living only for the day when the white priest would release her from the man she hates.

Senegalese Sembene Ousman in *Xala* presents the effects of polygamy among the highly placed in society. Materially, the three wives of El-Hadji Abdou Fader are well catered for. Yet, the first wife is described as lonely very lonely, without friends or someone to confide in and pour out her frustration to. In this novel, the status of women is glaringly depicted as "the downtrodden of the wretched of the earth". They are explored, exploited, oppressed and accumulated in polygyny and polygamy as the pre-requisite of the *nouveau riche* in the post independence capitalist, confused and corrupt society.

Similarly, Ngugi Wa Thiong O in his short story "Mugumo" present the acute misery of a woman in a polygamous home. For her barrenness for two short years, her husband shuns her hut and the other women mock her. In turn, she is lonely. Next she started receiving beatings, which nearly killed her. And the others call this her rightful place.

The status of women was conspicuously presented in Elechi Amadi's novel *The Great Pond* where the hero solemnly declared his village's traditional view on women as truth beyond debate thus:

*There is no place in the world where one man is equal to one woman. Our village maintains that one man is equal to four women or more.*

But the true position of it all is that one million women in the traditional African set-up is not equal to one man. If not so, why must a man with twelve daughters go out of his way to marry another wife in order to bear a male child for him to project and propagate the family name?

Ama Ata Aidoo exposes how the evil of age-old customs that subordinate women in her collection of short stories *No sweetness here*. According to Kodwo-Mensah Brown's study of marriage in Sefwi-Akan customary law, the husband sprinkles his wife with clay to declare her divorced with following words:

*In general Akan law, the wife is not entitled to the share in property of the man, even though acquired with her assistance. The husband is entitled to the custody of children. (p.64).*

The assessment of men concerning women is that they are no better than fools. This the male authors have variously written. To the men, woman are mere objects to be cherished when needed and to be dumped when necessary also. In Elechi Amachi's *estrangement*, Dan Suku declares his views concerning women thus:

*Women were all the same, so silly, forever vacillating, never knowing what they want, never using their heads, those small silly heads with finger of plaited hair. What a pity men could not do without them (p.244).*

In a likewise manner, Spiro Agnew of America in 1976 States that *Three things have been difficult to tame: the ocean, fools and women. We may soon be able tame the ocean; fools and women will take a little time longer.*

In Mongo Beti's *King Lazorus*, "women is an ear of maize any man with good teeth can have a nibble at her" and again, "woman is a slender palm tree any man with a good belt can get up her".

The implication of all this is that the unsatisfactory appreciation of the significance of women in life has spilled into imaginative literature. The male



writers based on their perception about women have carried over the cultural reality into the literary world.

It was in response to all these that Poulain de la Barre a well known feminist of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century quoted in Chukukere (1995) declared that:

*All that has been written about women by men should be suspect for the men are at once judge and party to the law suit.*

The social status attached to women has affected their educational status. Men oppose the idea of sending the girl child to school, preferring instead that she should be married off to earn enough bride price. After much pressures, agitations and criticisms if they want to send the girl child to school according to Nwosu, (2004) because men are the educational administrators and curriculum planners, they will censor, sieve and channel the girls to subjects, courses and professions that will satisfy the ego of men such as teaching, nursing, catering, secretarial studies etc.

Unfortunately, women themselves are reluctant and afraid to enter into public discussions of the important issues affecting them and are contented in the position society has placed them. These are the type of women *Wazobia* in Tess Onweme's *The Reign of Wazobia* describes as "*suffering from intellectual menopause*". For instance Omu who wants to defend their conservative position by saying.

*Tradition, Tradition as we met it. Tradition  
passed down to us from time when the  
world's eyes were still closed. Tradition  
handed down from generation to  
generation( p. 22.)*

But this same Omu, when she undergoes a process of re-education by *Wazobia* now realizes that time changes and there is no reason why women's status should not be changed praises *wazobia* for opening her eyes to the *heat women steamed* in (p.52). Omu joins rank with the progressives, and mobilized the support of women for *wazobia*. They now became feminists who states that they should not stop at mere access to economic independence and social benefits, rather should also focus on the psychological development of the total self, whereby women should see themselves just as capable as men of changing the world in which they live.

After all, the preamble to our 1999 constitution stipulates interalia:

*We the people of the Federal Republic of  
Nigeria, having firmly and solemnly  
declared; to live in unity and to provide for  
a constitution for the purpose of promoting*

*the good government and welfare of all persons in our country on the principles of freedom, Equality and justice, do hereby make, enact and give ourselves the following constitution... (p.9)*

**Section 39 (1) provides interalia:**

*A citizen of Nigeria of a particular sex shall not by reason only that she is such a person be in the practical application of any law in force in Nigeria or by any executive or administrative actions of the government to disabilities or restrictions to which citizens of Nigeria of another sex are not subjected to.*

On 26 June 1945 representatives of 51 nations meeting at San Francisco in the U.S.A signed the charter of the United Nations. The basic aim of this representative was:

*... To save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, which twice in our life time has brought untold suffering to mankind, and to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small ... (Wilson 1979:184).*

Despite this constitutional declaration(s) the status of women in the society is still not comparable to that of men. Is the clarion call for equality a mirage or a mission impossible? If it is to be achievable, then, all hands (parents, religious and traditional leaders, school administrators, mass media, authors and publishers of textbooks and above all the psyche of girls/women should be changed from seeing themselves as inferior or second class human beings to believing that they are more than able of changing the world around them) must be on deck towards its realization (Nwosu 2004). The best way to project women henceforth should be from the view point of Ba (1981) where Dieng cautions that:

*Women should no longer be decorative accessories, objects to be moved about, and companions to be flattered or calmed with promises. Women are the nation's primary, fundamental roots, from which all else grows and blossoms. Women must be encouraged to take a keener interest in the destiny of the country (p.61.)*

### **Conclusion**

Despite all the hues and cries on the equality of men and women, it has been observed that up to date that the social status of women in the society has remained virtually very low. If our constitutional declaration(s) are to be authentic and realistic, then all hands (parents, guardians, authors and publishes of textbooks, novelists, government, the women themselves) must be on deck towards making the social status of women to be at par with that of men.

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