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Harmful Cultural Practices-A Crime against the Girl Child: A Historical Perspective

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Abstract:

This paper examines the harmful cultural practices considered as against the girl-child. Girls are victims of negative cultural practices in Nigeria and they are in different forms like early/ forced marriage, genital mutilation, early pregnancy, bonded labour, rape, girls thought to be witches, etc. which have physical, emotional and psychological effects on the girl-child. The Nigerian society is plagued with various incidences of the girl-child assault. The phenomenon has drawn the attention of the world at large. This paper states the causes of harmful cultural practices and their effects on the girl-child. It highlights measures that could be used for the eradication of these unwholesome practices in the society which include involving religious and traditional rulers in enlightening the populace about the dangers in harmful cultural practices and the need to change its attitude towards them. And also, to involve people who had experienced or witnessed these practices in the community.

Keywords: Harmful, culture, girl- child, practice

1. Introduction

Culture is simply defined as a way of life of a group of people. According to Falola (2007), culture embodies the philosophy, world view, behaviour patterns, arts and institutions of a people. Nigeria is made up of different ethnic groups with diverse cultural practices. Some of these cultural practices have contributed to the crime against the girl-child.

The issue of harmful cultural practices has been a major challenge in Nigeria in particular and the world at large. This menace has drawn the attention and condemnation of the global community. Girls are exploited and forced to engage in unwholesome practices. Girls are victims of harmful cultural practices in Nigeria and they are in different forms such as forced or early marriages, genital mutilation, bonded labour, early pregnancy, girls thought to be witches etc. All these violations against the girl-child could be regarded as harmful practices. These practices are most times undertaken without the consent of the girl-child involved and this is an infringement on her right as a child as stated by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. These are products of social norms which project the cultural beliefs and tradition of the society based on cultural biases against the girl-child. Gender inequality which is deeply rooted in misled values makes the girl-child vulnerable to the society who tramples on her rights.

Harmful cultural practices are those customs that are known to have bad effects on people's health, obstruct the goals of equality, political and social rights and the process of economic development. These practices are derived from ethical or religious and moral norms and are socially sanctioned by the communities in which they are practiced, even when the law of the country forbids them. It is sometimes part of a family's survival strategy to hold on to its identity and promote its own cultural heritage in the face of change.

According to the UN Convention (1989) on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and other major UN treaties, these harmful cultural practices against the girl- child are violations of the right of the girl child. These practices strengthened the discrimination, position of girls and low social status.

The Rights of the child (girl) by the UN Convention (1989) stated the rights of children which include

- Right to life
- Right to a name, family and nationality
- Right to good health, protection from illness and proper medical attention for personal growth and development.
- No child should suffer any discrimination irrespective of origin, birth, colour, sex, language, religion.
- Rights to be protected from indecent and inhuman treatment like sexual exploitation, child labour, torture, maltreatment and neglect.
- Every child shall grow and develop in a free society in the spirit of understanding tolerance, mutual respect and friendship among other people.

Thus, in 1991, Nigeria ratified the Child rights Act to domesticate the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). In 1996, Nigeria submitted its first report on the implementation of the CRC to the UN Committee on the Rights of the child, but had a major setback in October 2002 by the National Assembly on the ground that it is contrary to Islamic values,

traditions and culture. According to UNICEF (2002), the main objective targeted a provision setting 18 years as the minimum age for marriage and this was incompatible with religious and cultural traditions in various parts of the country where girls are given out in marriage at a younger age. But in September 2003 with pressure from different quarters, the legislators reconsidered their former decision to the opposition of the Child Rights Bill.

2. Definition of Terms

2.1. Child Labour

International Labour Organization (ILO) (2000) defined child labour as work for children under age 18 that in some way harms or exploits them physically, mentally, morally, or by blocking children from education. This includes all forms of work or practices that has link to debt bondage and compulsory labour. Also, Wikipedia Encyclopedia (2006) says child labour is work undertaken by a child that is harmful to them in some ways and against their interest. Child labour is globally seen as a crime against the child. It is a bodily or mental subjection of a child to work.

2.2. Girl-Child

A girl child is a female homo sapien of unmarried age that is defined by the anatomical and physiological characteristics that set her apart from male counterparts. As a compound noun, the term connotes the sex and age bracket of the gender under reference.

2.3. Female Genital Mutilation (FGM)

Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) is also known as female circumcision or female genital cutting. According to World Health Organization, it is all procedures involving partial or total removal of the external female genital or other injury to the female organs for non-medical reasons.

3. Nature of Harmful Cultural Practices on the Girl Child in Nigeria

Harmful cultural practices are still very prevalent in Nigeria despite the domestication of the girl child Act in the country. The maltreatment of the girl child is very rampant in different forms.

Early marriage is referred to as the marriage of persons below the age of 18 years and it is practiced in different areas in Nigeria. Despite the domestication of Child Rights Act 2003, early marriage is still prevalent in Nigeria especially in the Northern part of the country. And it is believed to be a means to preserve purity and chastity. Section 18 of the Marriage Act in Nigeria permits persons under the age of 21 to get married provided the parents' consent to the union. The customary law of the land still prevails. In North Central and North West Nigeria, a girl of 14 years could get married, but in North Central, second and third menstruation is suitable for marriage, while other part of the country varies from 16-18 years. According to United Nations Population Fund (2005) fact sheet, child- marriage prevalence in Nigeria is 88%.

As a religious belief among the Hausas in the Northern part of Nigeria, the girl-child is subjected to various forms of discrimination, which include early marriage. The parents betroth the girl-child to people who are old enough to be her father and sometimes grand-father. Child marriage deprives the child of her childhood experiences needed to develop emotionally, physically and psychologically. However, traditional and religious beliefs on the issue of early and forced marriage are different in the various parts of the country. Early marriage and early pregnancy make the girl child vulnerable and it is detrimental to the physical, emotional, and psychological wellbeing of the child. This has caused in several cases of vesico-vaginal fistula, a situation precipitated by giving birth when the cervix is not properly developed. This happens when the pelvic bones are not mature to cope with child birth. UNFPA (2004) stated that 22 percent of all Nigerian teenage girls have at least one unwanted pregnancy. This has tremendous implications for the social development of the girl-child, in terms of low level of education, dependence on husband, and poor health. Girls who start to bear children at an early age are prone to have larger number of pregnancies, resulting to more chances of miscarriage, death, infant death and malnutrition. Early marriage is considered as a crime against the girl child because the consent of the girl is not considered while it makes the girl child vulnerable to various psychological, economic, social and health matters. Early marriage and child bearing are closely linked to low educational achievement.

Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) is still a rampant practice in some parts of the country irrespective of religion or tribe. The origin of FGM is not yet established but it is thought to predate Christianity and Islam in communities that practiced it. The reasons given for the practice are diverse and points to ideological and historical condition of the community or the family. According to UNICEF (2001), FGM is practiced in Nigeria and has the highest absolute number of cases in the world, which accounted for about one-quarter of the world estimated 115-130 million circumcised women worldwide. In the Report, FGM has the highest prevalence in the south-south (77%), followed by the South-East (68%) and the Southwest (65%) but practiced on a smaller scale in the northern part of the country. According to World Health Organization (WHO 1995), there are four types of FGM. Type 1 is the excision of the clitoriahood with or without removal of all part of the clitoris. Type II is the excision of the clitoris together with part or all of the labia minora. Type III is the excision of part or all of the external genitalia and stitching or narrowing of the vagina opening, leaving a very small opening, about a size of a matchstick, to allow for the flow of urine and menstrual blood. The girl or woman's legs are generally bound together from the hip to the ankle so she remains immobile for approximately 40 days to allow for the formation of scar tissue. Type IV includes the introduction of corrosive substances into the vagina. This form is practiced to a much lesser extent than the others in Nigeria.

The reasons for the mutilation include religion, customs and tradition, preservation of virginity, hygiene, and to increase sexual pleasure for the male. It is usually undertaken by people with no medical training. Anesthetics and

antiseptics treatments are not used during the "operation". Basic tools as scissors, knives scalpels, and razor are used in the process. After the cutting, a mixture of herbs and iodine is applied on the wound in order to stop the bleeding. The mutilation has a number of short-term health implications which include severe pain and shock which in some cases lead to temporary unconsciousness. Also, there may be infection on the wound as a result of untreated tools used. Other short-term implications include urine retention, immediate fatal bleeding and injury to adjacent tissues. Also, in some cases, some girls experience some long-term health implications like extensive damage of the external reproductive system, cysts, complications in pregnancy and child birth, sexual dysfunction etc.

According to WHO (2007), FGM is entrenched in the Nigerian society where such decisions are undertaken by grandmothers, mothers, women, opinion leaders, men and age groups. Yonder stated that mothers chose to subject their daughters to the practice to protect them from being ostracized, beaten, shunned or disgraced.

Child-witches is an ancient but now rapidly growing trend. The belief in witchcraft is not new in traditional Nigerian society but it was largely women and the elderly women who were accused of witchcraft, but the tide has changed now when families and individuals blame their children for their misfortune and that children have become the target for initiation by elderly witches. A witch is culturally understood to be the epitome of evil and the cause of all misfortune, disease and death. Children are the targets of Nigerian witch hunt and this fear is rooted in the belief that a spiritual spell could be given to a person through food and drink. According to Stepping stone Nigeria, the suspected child witches have been treated in various inhuman ways such as bathed in acid, abandoned, ostracized from the community, buried alive, poisoned to death etc. This is considered a crime against the girl child because it denies the child her fundamental human rights of clothing, shelter feeding etc.

Widowhood practiced is practices and rites prevalent in Igbol and. It is a physical dehumanization of the female gender. The widow is the center of the crisis, a situation that worsens her mental and physical stability. The widow ordeal starts immediately after the official announcement of the husband death. The in-law takes over the man's property and other holdings. The widow is subjected to take an oath as per her knowledge of the husband's property. Afterwards the woman begins to undergo rituals associated with widowhood. They are subjected to long-term physical and emotional turmoil by the in-laws, such as being forced to drink the water used to wash the husband's corpse, the hair scraped off, etc. According to Agunwa (2011), in Abia state, widows are not allowed to come outside during the burial of her husband; she is not allowed to see the corpse of her husband when the casket is opened for relatives to see.

Also, among the Jukun, a grave digger would from time-to-time strike at the roof of the hut in which the women are sleeping and at each time the widow is expected to break out into loud lamentations. The knocking on roof top signifies a knocking by the soul of the departed.

4. Challenges to Effective Eradication of Harmful Cultural Practices in Nigeria

Cultural settings, traditional beliefs, norms and values of the society are a major challenge to the eradication of these harmful cultural practices in Nigeria. The people in the communities believe that they are good for the individuals involved and for the society as a whole. It is difficult to challenge beliefs and practices which are deeply entrenched in the culture of the people.

Religious belief is one factor being put forward as a reason for the continuous practice of the obligation. Both Christian and Islamic followers are involved in these practices.

Ignorance is a major factor for the continued practice of these practices in Nigeria. Parents involve their children with these practices with the best intentions not knowing the health implications. Ignorance is related to illiteracy, as a result of lack of knowledge of the negative effects of the practices.

The Federal government weak policy implementations to the eradication of harmful cultural practices promotes and encourage the continuous practice in Nigeria. For example, according to Ayenigbara, Cross River, Edo, Ogun and Delta States are the only states that had enacted law banning the FGM practice since the Civilian rule in 1999, while the Federal government is yet to outlaw it.

5. Effects of Harmful Cultural Practices on the Girl Child

These cultural practices have been seen to increase the crime and abuse against the girl child in Nigeria. The effects are highlighted below:

5.1. Poverty

The affected girl child is usually not equipped to be financially independent because she has not been privileged to receive western education or to have had acquired enough skills to survive and thus end up in poverty.

5.2. Emotional Problems

According to Osifo (2009), the girl child experiences emotional challenges like instability, lack of confidence, depression, aggression, self-destructive behavior, anxiety etc. This is as a result of lack of self-esteem.

5.3. Poor Health

As a result of some of these harmful cultural practices, some of the girls are vulnerable to illness such as Vesico Vaginal Fistula (VVF) and sexually transmitted diseases which may have long term effects on them.

5.4. Social Isolation

The affected girls suffer social stigmatization as they are literally excluded from the society. This is applicable to “girl-witches” who the society sees as being evil.

6. Conclusion

An adage says educate a man and you educate an individual but educate a girl and you educate a nation. The girl-child of today is a potential nation builder and a moulder of destinies and full of potentials but with the myriad of crimes against her, the God-given potentials loaded in her can never translate to reality. The solution is to avoid the uncountable and avoidable cultural practices against her so that she can contribute her unquantifiable quota to the development of the society.

7. Recommendations for Eradicating Harmful Cultural Practices in Nigeria

Harmful Cultural Practices has been in existence from time immemorial. There has been global opposition to the act. The measures bellow is considered for the eradication of these practices

7.1. Involving Religious and Traditional Rulers

Since the traditional leaders are the custodian of culture, the religious and traditional leaders should be enlightened on the dangers of it and the need to change the attitudes of their community towards such acts.

7.2. Educating and Empowering Girls

Education is a tool to help change the norms around these practices. The improvement of girls' access to quality education increases the chances of gaining secondary education. Education of the parents is as important as that of the girl. Education will broaden their horizons. An enabling environment should be provided for the girl child to stop this menace. Education changes the perception, beliefs and attitudes towards life and society. And also empowering girls gives them opportunities to acquire skills in order to support themselves.

7.3. Public Enlightenment on the Rights of the Girl Child

The relevant authorities should educate the masses on the rights of the girl child. This is necessary because of the erroneous perception of some parents and the society at large; many are simply unaware of the consequences of these practices. Promulgation of laws alone is not sufficient for the eradication of these practices in Nigeria.

7.4. Enforcement of the Implementation of the Child Rights Acts

The government should enforce the implementations of the Child Rights Act (2003) by all states in the federation. The Child Rights Act includes the sanctions that can be applied against any person that commit crimes against the girl-child. Mechanisms should be put in place by all concerned agency in order to achieve maximum success. This will support the campaign against these harmful cultural practices in Nigeria.

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