

PATRIARCHY, SEXUALITY AND THE SPREAD OF HIV/AIDS IN NIGERIA

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***Abstract:** In every patriarchal society like Nigeria, the cultural patterns allocate more authority and power to men in family and in the society as a whole. The low socio – economic status of women has gone a long way to increase the domination of men even in sexuality. This has made Nigerian women to be more vulnerable and prone to sexually transmitted diseases including HIV/AIDS. This paper is an attempt to explore and expose the ordeal of Nigerian women in an unequal relationship characterised by male domination.*

Keywords: Patriarchy, Sexuality, Culture, Spread, HIV/AIDS

Reference to this paper should be made as follows: Ayesoro Sunday Adesina and Ojo Sunday Stephen (2015), Patriarchy, Sexuality and the Spread of HIV/AIDS in Nigeria. *J. of Social Sciences and Public Policy*, Vol. 7, Number 1, Pp. 41 – 45.

INTRODUCTION

Nigerian society varies greatly between urban and rural areas, across ethnic and religion borders, with levels of education, still most Nigerians share a strong attachment to clearly differentiated roles for men and women, to a hierarchical social structure, and to the dominance of religion in shaping community values. The society functions in a highly patriarchal fashion, with men exerting broad control over the lives of women, who are typically less educated and have limited access to health and social services. Thus, the society embraces the domination of male in the family and societal decisions; this does not exclude decisions affecting sexual relationship, (Fayeye, *et al*/1998). This domination has led to the suppression, oppression and sexual exploitation of the women. That is social interaction that supposed to characterize sexual relationship between men and women is often absent or strained, men are left with too much liberty to exercise their masculine effrontery even at the expense of the health and life of women, thus, marriage and sexual relationship are dominated by men as they are empowered by the culture. Hence, it is a taboo for women to negotiate for a protected sex in case of HIV infected men – partners. The main thrust of this paper is to explore and expose the ordeal Nigerian women are passing through with the ravaging scourge of HIV/AIDS in an unbalanced relationship.

CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Social class theorists may provide a possible explanatory frame work for the suppression and the subordination of women in African society in general, and Nigeria in particular. However, the feminists have a more precise and direct views. Particularly, Parkin *et al* (1987) likens women to minority, which is defined as a group of people who, because of their physical or cultural characteristics, are singled out from others in the society they live for differential and unequal treatment. Central to feminist philosophy is the concept of oppression of women who live in patriarchal (male controlled) societies. This is owing to gender inequality which has both theological and cultural roots, (UNICEF, 2001:202). According to her, among several illusions are excerpts from the Holy Bible in the book of Genesis, where women is admonished thus, "your desire shall be thy husband and he shall rule over thee", The supremacy of man over women is equally substantiated by the Holy Quran. Thus, it is evident through these holy books is the origin of man – the creation of Eve from Adam's ribs that women are inferior to man. However, according to the critical feminists, there is the apparent need to destroy anti-women cultural traits in the society such as preference by parents for male over female children; this has implications for the status of women and indeed for development. If allowed to persist, women would continue to remain second class citizens because the culture, language and symbols would continue to present them as such.

PATRIARCHAL CULTURE AND NIGERIAN WOMEN

Culture is regarded as a set of learned or shared beliefs, customs and traditions of a group of people that have lived together for a long period of time, (Unicef, 2001). It must be clearly pointed out that in spite of the cultural diversity in Nigeria, it is predominantly evident, and throughout that women suffer one type of suppression, oppression and socio – economic deprivation in the country because of their sex, which is culturally perceived to be inferior. Although the scale and dimension may vary from one part of the country to another, Imam (1985) observes that these are common patterns of cultural 'mindset' among Nigerians and they are passed from generation to generation through the process of socialization. Hence, there is a more or less universal cultural predisposition to the concept of hierarchy, in which girls and women status and their social roles are seen as being inferior to boys and men. This plays down the personality of women to the point that they have no say even in matters of sexuality, this puts their health and life in jeopardy. Higher premium is placed on male over the female and general preference for the former over the latter. Gender roles are patterned and defined along this cultural context and precluded in certain key spheres of life that put men at an undue advantage over women. According to Hartman (1979) the strength of men's domineering figure is drawn from patriarchal system. Which is "a set of social relations between men and women that have a material base, which though hierarchical in nature, established or created interdependence and solidarity among men that enable them to dominate women? It is a binding cultural value in most Nigerian cultures that no matter how poor or useless the man may be, all power belongs to him in the home, no authority or power goes to the woman.

SOCIO – ECONOMIC DEPRIVATION AND WOMEN SEXUALITY IN NIGERIA

It is a widespread agreement among sociologists that human behaviours are largely determined and directed by the culture. Gender and roles are products of culture so also every behaviour that is gender based. Thus, men domination over women in the society is cultural rather than biological. These are learnt through the process of socialization and transmitted from generation to generation, this placed men above women in Nigeria. Besides, it has made women deprived and suppressed socially and economically, (Oakley, 1981). Although, opportunities for children's inclusion in programmes and activities are limited, it is much worse for girls than for boys. When they become women, the exclusion they suffered as girls become more compounded, leading to political, social and economic marginalization. According to UNICEF (2001 p: 192 – 196) this is far more extreme in parts of northern Nigeria, particularly due to the practices of too early or child marriage and seclusion – *puḍāh*, which is a religious practice in Islam. These practices deprived many women of their right to be educated, as some of them that are even in schools are withdrawn to be married out. This has deepened their poverty as most of them are either unemployable, or they are not allowed to work by their spouses, who exploit the situation by making them wives absolutely and perpetually dependant on them to determine their fate in all spheres of life. Sad enough, these practices have become so difficult to eradicate because they reflect the views about gender roles that are deep-seated in Nigerian culture.

According to Itavyar (1993 p: 11-22) the appointment of a token number of women in government and administrative offices might be to gloss over the fundamental cultural issues that have kept the women in socio – economic bondage. More so, such appointments only to the daughters and wives of bourgeois, and member of the ruling class, this further boosts the ego of the men. It has never and it cannot solve the problem of deprivation, oppression and suppression of the women, they are still frequently faced the threat of polygamy without prior consultation, they are exposed to sexual harassment and the possibility of sexual mutilation as infants, adolescents or adults, they cannot gain custody of their children if they divorce under customary laws in many parts of the country, they are prohibited from farming or inheriting the land because of their sex, they have scanty access to birth control facilities and must obtain their husbands' consent and as married women, they cannot control their property, especially if the property were acquired after marriage, they cannot enter into loans and hire purchase agreement unless approved by their husbands, (Seymour, 1986 p:75). These situations presented Nigerian women as deprived and under privileged humans, whose sexual lives are subjected to the absolute control and dictation of men.

MEN SEXUAL DOMINATION AND THE SPREAD OF HIV/AIDS IN NIGERIA

The low socio- economic status of women has gone along way to increase the domination of men even in sexuality. This has made Nigerian women to be more vulnerable and prone to sexually transmitted diseases including HIV/AIDS as they have no right or power to resist sexual advancement from their husbands even when they know

that they are not safe, they cannot negotiate for protected sex. They have no authority over their body; they are to submit even if such submission will expose them to HIV infections, (Tukura,2005). Any resistance from the women is regarded as insubordination, which the society frowns at. It often leads to the withdrawn of all the economic provisions made by their husbands as they are made to depend on them. It may even lead to the dissolution of marriage or provoke brutal and violent reactions from the men. Nigerian culture excludes women from virtually all decisions that have to do with reproduction and sexual relationship. These are exclusive areas where men enjoy hundred per cent domination. For instance, women are not allowed to take part in decision on how many children to have and when to have them. This also empowers the men to have sexual intercourse with their wives at any time of their choice, even when it is not convenient, healthy or safe for the women, (UNICEF, 2001).

CONCLUSION

It is very clear that the culture of Nigerian society has not treated the women fairly because of their gender; they are deprived, exploited, maltreated, suppressed and oppressed not only economically, but also sexually. This has never been without any consequence; it has left women at the lower rung of "social order" and empowered the men to have an uncontrolled sexual expression and a domineering sexual relationship over women, which has enhanced the spread of HIV infections in Nigeria contemporary society.

The paper is of the opinion that this relic of the past that placed men over women is discordant with the future and must necessarily disappear.

RECOMMENDATION

In the light of the above exposition, the writers advances the following way forward.

- All unhealthy and unfair perception and treatment of the women in Nigeria are rooted in the culture. The differences between the sexes are determined by the culture of a society, and therefore there is the need for change in values that will change the way women are perceived and treated in Nigeria.
- It is equally recommended that strategies aimed at transforming the mind sets of men towards accepting women as wielder of power and authority through education should be put in place.
- There is need to enact legislation and laws that could protect and give women the opportunity and right to negotiate for protected sex in any life threatening sexual relationship with their spouses or even opt out of the relationship if necessary.
- There should be a paradigm shift in the economic order of Nigeria, through which new economic order would emerge to empower women to own property, farmland and businesses like their men counterparts. This will bring about a new 'status order' for women.
- Faithfulness should be considered to be a key watch word for all, most especially men in marriage and sexual relationship.

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