

## **Gender Mainstreaming and Disability Inclusive Development**

### **Culture and Religion: The inseparable stumbling block towards the realization of gender equality and equity**

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#### **Abstract**

*Many initiatives towards gender equality have been considered and several actions taken towards achieving gender equality in the 20<sup>th</sup> and the 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. Of interest though is the fact that traditional gender roles, biases, stereotypes, and discriminative practices still persist. Unpaid domestic and public underpaid or unpaid labor for example remains the predominant responsibility of women, while on the other hand influential and powerful positions remain predominantly the purview of men. While a great deal of work has been done, the major question is still on the approach given to the most powerful influencers of gender inequality, religion and culture of which this paper seeks to address. Any mention of gender equality and women's empowerment always elicit some controversies and challenging the traditional gender norms in most occasions is seen as going against the belief systems which are informed by religious and cultural teachings. A common question always is, "is that not contradicting our culture or Gods ordained order of things or the fact that God created a man as the head and woman to be the helper?" Though destructive, the sense of gender inequality continues under the presumably iron chains of culture and religion. Hence this paper seeks to look at Gender mainstreaming from cultural and religious perspective seeking to address why these two are so slow to face the fact that equality is good for both men and women and the paper will therefore be theoretical.*

**Keywords:** Culture and Religion

## 1.0 Introduction

A collaborative teaching of a common course on Gender, Sexuality, HIV and AIDS at St. Paul's University revealed that even men and women who are considered as the elite of the communities due to their level of education, in matters of gender equality a majority of them still remain conservative to the interpretations given by culture and religion over the past centuries. The common course UCC 105 – Gender, Sexuality, HIV and AIDS was established for all students at St Paul's University in the year 2008 to help all students appreciate fundamental issues of gender equality. The course was informed by experiences gained from running Masters in Community Pastoral Care, HIV and AIDS where it became clear that this was an area that all students needed to understand on gender and sexuality issues. This course was to be both retrospective and prospective to allow students and staff reflect on their own attitudes and behavior. Interactions with the course both at the teaching and student level, is how though destructive, the sense of gender inequality continues under the chains of culture and religion. Hence this paper looks at culture and religion and the fact that these two factors seem to have an effect on younger generations in the 21st Century as much as was the case when the debate on gender issues began in the 20th Century.

Gender mainstreaming is a strategy towards realizing gender equality and has been embraced that way internationally. “It involves the integration of a gender perspective into the preparation, design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies, regulatory measures and spending programs, with a view to promoting equality between women and men, and combating discrimination”.(European Institute for Gender Equality, 2019). It is quite clear from the components that should be involved in gender mainstreaming that there is a good will to promote the equality between men and women. But quite also clear that the main agents of social influence namely culture and religion have not been given optimum concentration. Yet on the other hand we cannot underestimate the important role that these components play for a better human relation for today and tomorrow. But until they become a people's way of life from which they draw their daily way of living they will remain components only on paper.

When it comes to gender equality “We have achieved much in recent history on the path to gender equality, but we have a long way to go to ensure equal endowments, participation, and voice for women”(Sylvie, 2020). In agreement with Emily A. Onyango on her discourse on Gender and Development, it is a continued fact from history that “Despite the opportunities for empowerment, African societies disempowered women. This was mainly due to patriarchy and also some of the religious practices and rituals”(Onyango, 2018: 8). The issue of patriarchy which is deeply rooted in religion and culture and goes beyond the borders of Africa and touches nearly all corners of the world. Dr. Karina Batthyány, notes that “there is no country in the world where women enjoy the same opportunities as men, especially economically and politically. Gender equity is far from a reality in a world where nearly 70 percent of the world's poor are women. Laws about marriage, divorce, property inheritance, land ownership and access to loans and credits are only some of the areas where women lag behind men in their formal rights”(Barnwell, 2006). In terms of payment for their labor “Women are paid less, earning 77 cents to every dollar earned by a man, and bear disproportionate responsibility for unpaid care and domestic work (performing 76 percent of total hours of unpaid care work worldwide). In

fact, if women's unpaid work were assigned a monetary value, one study of six countries has suggested that it would constitute between 10 and 39 percent of GDP"(Sylvie, 2020). Rosemary Ukata notes that "Culture makes women's empowerment difficult just as religious beliefs are also working against building women's capacity"(Godia, n.d.). "Cultural and religious practices based on patriarchal norms and women's repression are major obstacles that can reinforce stigma and discrimination and can also affect the design and implementation of laws and policies"(Dugal, 2015). With this in mind we cannot undermine the role played by culture and empowered by religion in making it harder for us to achieve gender equality and equity.

## **2.0 Literature Review Results and Discussion**

### **Religion**

Religion is one of the most powerful tools whose doctrinal interpretations have continued to favor patriarchy and hence becoming a stumbling block towards the achievement of gender equality. It is important not to undermine the role that religion plays in the lives of the faithful followers. It controls sexual life, conception, life before birth and informs how life is to be lived after birth and finally has power over death itself interpreting the way of handling the dead and the power of its liturgical burial and where one is to spend their eternity in the afterlife. "Religion, which serves as a reference point for gender norms and expectations, is often seen as institutionalizing and perpetuating patriarchy, thus frustrating many advocates for women's rights and equality"(University, 2016). This is deeply engraved in the way the story of human creation and the fall of human beings from Gods order is interpreted. "Interpretations of religious doctrines as assigning inferior status to women and girls have given rise to patriarchal systems which continue to obstruct women's full participation in society... Such messages of inequality are conveyed even before the birth of a child and continue on into old age"(Dugal, 2015).

If the Beijing declaration of 13<sup>th</sup> September 1995 is to bear more fruits and reach out to the grassroots where gender inequality is more affirmed and realize its dream in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, then deep collaborations with religious institutions is key. Declaration number 24 and 25 states, "Take all necessary measures to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women and the girl child and remove all obstacles to gender equality and the advancement and empowerment of women; Encourage men to participate fully in all actions towards equality"(UN & Fourth World Conference on Women, 1995). Therefore, on paper we have the goodwill and the main challenge is not to make an agreement in a boardroom or conference room rather the major challenge is on implementation. Will men agree to have women as co-equal partners in all fields of life? Will women consider themselves worthy of being co-partners with men in all fields of life not as a favor but as their rightful position?

One of the written statements to the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women, distributed officially to all participants reveal what kind of a path we must take in order to realize gender equality, it states; "The personal transformation required for true equality will undoubtedly be difficult for men and women alike. Both must relinquish all attachment to guilt and blame and courageously assume responsibility for their own part in transforming the societies in which they live. Men must use their influence, particularly in the civil, political and religious institutions they control, to promote the systematic inclusion of women, not out of condescension or presumed self-sacrifice but out of the belief that the contributions of women

are required for society to progress. Women, for their part, must become educated and step forward into all arenas of human activity, contributing their particular qualities, skills and experience to the (religious), social, economic and political equation”(Bahá’í International Community, 2012). This clearly maps out what kind of a road lies ahead of us on matter regarding the equality of humanity. The challenge for men to accept that it’s not a favor they are doing women in paving their way up the market and for the women their main challenge is for them not to feel it’s a favor or payback and it’s not a competition rather the assumption of their rightful position in life.

When it comes to religion the battle for gender equality will only be practically possible when we stop seeing the battle as the battle between men and women rather the battle of principals that influence both men and women. The interpretations given to the issue of sin is key because it is here and after that that equality becomes unacceptable. The story of creation and the fall greatly inform the preaching and teaching of the three major mainstream world missionalistic religions; Islam, Christianity and Judaism. Their interpretations clearly elevate the man and undermine the woman as far as the fall is concerned. It’s the woman who solely is blamed to have caused the fall for she has always been seen as the weaker sex. “Religion plays a vital role in shaping cultural, social, economic, and political norms in many parts of the world. Similarly, gender roles and the status of women and men in society are deeply tied to the manner in which religious texts have been interpreted for centuries by those in positions of authority—positions held predominantly by men”(Anon, n.d.)

### **Culture and Gender**

At creation in the first order, human beings were created equal but after the fall human beings took the path of inequality coupled with game blame, exhorting of one gender above the other. It is clear that domination and subjugation are not a part of Gods order but are introduced at the fall(Dyrness, 1977: 103). Gender is a constructed norm over centuries defining how men and women should behave, what roles they will play in their private as well as public life. Sylvia Rose notes that “For too long we (women) have tried to hide safely in the falsehood of our being the weaker sex, desiring to be covered and protected by men”(Rose, 2004: 14). Rose is in agreement with Hiratsuku Raicho in her appeal to women on reclaiming their initial position in of the first order in which she says, "In the beginning, woman was truly the sun. An authentic person. Now she is the moon, a wan and sickly moon, dependent on another, reflecting another's brilliance"(Hiratsuka, 2006). The feeling of reliance of a woman on a man for authenticity must be broken in order for the woman to remain free and have an identity of her own.

Culture on the other hand “is the sum total of a person’s way of life or mode of being. A society contains a cultural heritage that has greater effect on how its people behave, what they become and how they feel about themselves than their genetic inheritance... (it is a people’s way of life and plays a major role in the field of gender and equality, it propagates the survival of a given community through) “art, language, dress, education, politics, religion and technology”(Osaso, 2006: 12,86). Hambur and Nurhayati note that “Gender inequality has been a part of culture for hundreds of years, as most of times it produces oppressions toward women... (based on) the idea that men are superior and women are inferior”(Hambur & Nurhayati, 2019: 184). Culture therefore associates power with male and powerlessness with female, strength with male and weakness with female and this shapes every single field in life

and is passed on through formal and informal literature. At birth most of the cultures will not place the boy child in the same status with the girl child, in a patriarchal society the boy child is esteemed higher and is associated with being the rightful heir to the family's wealth. In the language of the Agikuyu for example, a woman in death is referred to as "*mwendo ni iri*" meaning the one loved by the one who possessed wealth, and a man "*mutiga-iri*" meaning the one who leaves behind his possession. Therefore, culture and interpretations of religion doesn't place the woman and the man on an equal platform neither in life nor in death.

### **Culture and Religion in Preserving, Protecting and Propagating Social Order**

Not everything in culture and religion is bad, there are very many aspects of culture and religion that are life enforcing and must be upheld and advocated for their sustainability. Every society is preserved through culture and religion but at the same time we cannot shy off from pointing out to elements within culture and religion that undermine the preservation of life and instead create a culture and religion of domination and subjugation either of one gender by another or even of one race or tribe against another. "It is clear that religion and culture cannot be separated... culture and religion must be viewed as relatives since it cannot be denied that religion is a cultural expression... religion is determined by culture, but religion also influences culture. The fate of religion and culture is, thus, interwoven"(Beyers, 2017: 1).

The Vatican Pontifical Council for Culture notes that "a faith that does not become culture is a faith not fully accepted, not entirely thought out, not faithfully lived" (PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR CULTURE, 1999). The importance of culture and its basic connection with religion is that "culture is so natural to man that human nature can only be revealed through culture. In a pastoral approach to culture, what is at stake is for human beings to be restored in fullness to having been created in the image and likeness of God" (PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR CULTURE, 1999). This therefore means that religion has a major role in helping human beings to achieve the restoration to fullness. It is quite clear that what we have at present at stake is the image and likeness of God in humanity which was lost in the fall, this through culture and religion must be addressed and anything that undermines the path to achieving restoration of humanity back to the image and likeness of God must be dealt with.

Pauline Muchina, a member of the Future African Leaders Project and a theologian, notes that "due to cultural and religious gender norms, African women and girls lack the social and economic power to control their own bodies. She says that all religions today maintain male social dominance within social structures, with religious texts encouraging the exclusion of women from leadership in the family, church, and society, influencing the way people behave toward each other and how women are treated in their homes, in society, and at work" (Tomaszewski, 2018: 4).

Mariam Rawan Abdulla notes and affirms that "the reality is that in many cases, culture and religion are not so distinct, with cultural practices becoming "religionized" and religious ideas becoming part of the culture"(Abdulla, 2018: 102). Therefore, without contradiction culture interacts with, influences, and is influenced by, religion. This is due to the fact that religion "reveals the most profound of meanings that humans carry, their origins, and their purpose on earth is naturally manifested through the creation of culture and the adaption of material objects, through the use of symbolism, places of worship, and sermons"(Abdulla, 2018:

103).

### **3.0 Research Methodology**

In order to make knowledge valid and authoritative it is basically important to have procedures in form of a methodology in research and for the sake of this paper its not exempt from it. This paper is approached from a theoretical framework and the methodology used in this paper is the feminist theory. This theory focuses on analyzing gender inequality under the umbrella of critical theory dealing with issues about and on women from a feminist perspective and in Christianity reflecting on the liberating works of Jesus Christ, “And ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free” John 8:32 KJV. Feminist methodology is about thinking issues differently than the way they have always been presented over many centuries. It “gives the researcher the power of naming those aspects of women’s lives that are not always named in the general science research” (Kamau, 2010: 4).

### **4.0 Conclusion**

This therefore brings us to a conclusion that religion and culture are inseparable aspects of human life and to shy off from addressing both undermines the efforts and progress towards gender equity and equality. While culture can be more dynamic and easy to forge path of change religion is more conservative and “religion may merit special protection because it provides a source of authority that may appear to be at odds with that of secular society”(Abdulla, 2018: 103). The greatest stumbling block created by both culture and religion is the issue of who stands as the course of problems in any given society or religion. As long as the issue of who caused the fall of human race from the grace of God remains a burden placed on women, equity and equality will remain but a dream. The more we continue viewing what a woman does as a sense of weakness for a man to engage in the same, the harder it still remains for equity and equality to be achieved. For a man to do home chores it still remains more of a taboo just like it is for a woman to the bread winner in the house and to always return home late from work.

The cultural and religious way of bringing up a woman with an appetite for beauty and in competition of the same with fellow women is retrogressive and the way of bringing up a man as the master of authority, provision and protection as his rightful position and a woman as a favor only works at reducing the human productivity by half. We as human beings must arise to challenge our fears, women should arise to take up their rightful positions of power and men should refrain from being a stumbling block to women’s progress but should rather be an encouragement.

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