

## AFRICAN AND GENDER ISSUES: PERSPECTIVES ON NON-VIOLENCE CONCEPTS AND PRINCIPLES

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### Abstract

Definitely gender in African context means women and everything that has to do with them. There is no better way to bring these issues to the fore than in conflicts which always affect women more negatively because they are not always recognized or addressed by the mainstream. As enshrined in the African socio-cultural strata, women especially have not always been privileged to express themselves in actions or in responsibilities towards *life* and *self* despite the acclaimed civilisation in the post-colonial era. The aim in this paper tends towards proper understanding of African gender perspectives and mostly on the post-colonial set up which tends from just being observant in the scheme of things in the society. We adopt the non-violence approach in addressing the conflicts of interests on gender inequalities which affect women in Africa. In line with this, we shall discuss primarily Africa scenario in line with gender issues. The study challenges Western conceptions of development propagated through various UN developments Decades and its prescriptions for gender equity as being devoid of the cultural context of African societies and hence incapable of promoting sustainable development. For all their seeming commitment to social equity, both the human development strategy and the gender and development approach originated from western conceptions of economic and social realities. However, African culture cannot be romanticised as there are certain aspects of it which marginalise, inhibit and subordinate women. As long as the goals of development are sustained improvements in people's welfare, such practices would need to be changed. The study recommends future strategies for mainstreaming gender in development including individual based principles/programmes that will not only improve African development but sustainable development in the world.

**KEY WORDS:** African, Literature, Gender Issues, Concepts, Non-Violence, Principles and Applications

### INTRODUCTION

African and most of the time, its literature is weaved around Africans sociological contexts. Drawing from various maxims, songs, folklores and proverbs according to Soetan, R. (2001:2-3), African literature is replete with write-ups that project male dominance and inadequately pleads the case of the African woman. It becomes imperative to trace the genesis of gender inequality in African literature. As Kolawole, M. (1997:12) notes, by omission or commission, most male writers in the early phase of African literature encouraged the marginalization of women. In this context, female characters are made marginal to the plot of the fiction, while only a few emerge as powerful and credible protagonists. Chukukere, G. (1995:4) affirms that the ideal female character created by male writers often acts within the framework of her traditional roles as wife and mother. So strong are social values that the respect and love which a woman earns is relative to the degree of her adaptations to these roles. For instance, while Chinua Achebe's Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart* (1958:26) slaughters a goat for one of his wives who has had three sons in a row, Elechi Amadi's Madume in *The Concubine* (1966:18) is demoralized by his

wife's inability to produce a male heir. On the other hand, a barren woman is stigmatized, considered a social misfit and invites the wrath of her family and society.

African literature in the pre-colonial era encouraged the pursuit of communalism, industry and thrift. At this period, literature is oral and more of eulogy. During the colonial era, African literature was more anti-colonial and revolutionary. The post-colonial era which is our focus here, African literature becomes observant i.e. studies what happens in the society with a view to commenting and seeking for the necessary change. Most of the approaches are either subjective- the pre-colonial era where women as seen more or less as objects to be acquired or the radical- colonial era where women began to take steps like forming associations and unions or even sometimes protesting on the streets dressing half naked to address the wrongs being done against them. None of the approaches have work positively for the African women because the acceptance of gender stereotype in Africa is one of the reasons that such blindness persists. Therefore, there is the need to shift from the above approaches to *Non-Violence concepts* on gender issues aim to creating awareness on the danger of wrong notions and the implication on the social and economic development of the people.

It is important to understand the concept of gender as a social construction which is not permanent and therefore subject to change due to societal pressures. So, it will be dangerously misleading to build life philosophies on moving sand, because change is the only constant thing in life. There is need therefore, for both men and women to be actively involved in a non-violence approach which is the best way to addressing gender inequality. The understanding of these principles and the stages of its application will go a long way to sustainably address the gender violence matted against women.

## GENDER: MEANINGS AND CONCEPTS

### Definitions

**Gender:** Boys and girls are encouraged by families, schools religious organizations, and communities to be different. These differences between expectations of males and females are known as "gender". Boys are socialized to have "masculine" gender characteristics. Girls are socialized to have "feminine" gender characteristics. Boys who have "feminine" characteristics and girls who have "masculine" characteristics are often punished or sanctioned by their communities. Therefore, gender is a social construction, not biological endowments.

**Gender Roles:** The different behaviours, tasks, and beliefs groups consider appropriate for males and females.

**Gender Discrimination:** Gender discrimination is any pattern of preferential treatment of males over females or the female over the male in education, employment and leadership roles, for example.

**Gender Oppression:** The discrimination of females or males in political, educational, economic, religious, cultural, and social systems.

**Gender Analysis:** An analysis of how policies and projects affect males and females differently.

**Gender Sensitization:** An effort to raise awareness about the different needs of males and females and to increase the capacity of organizations to address these needs.

**Gender Equity and Equality:** An approach to ensure that men and women are valued equally for the roles they play and benefit equally from policies and projects such as education and compensation for work according to their needs. Gender equity takes into consideration that women have been historically disadvantaged and may need special programs to overcome this discrimination.

**Gender Mainstreaming:** This inclusion of the goal of gender equity, the use of a gender lens, and the active inclusion of women and women's groups into all institutional choices and practices.

**Patriarchy:** Many societies operate with a system of male authority that oppresses women through political, social, cultural, religious and economic institutions. Patriarchy denies women positions of decision-making and power.

**Matriarchy:** Systems of social organization in which descent and inheritance are traced through the female line.

**Sex:** The biological differences between males and females are defined as 'sex'. Women, for example, can give birth and nurse babies because of their biology.

#### **What is Gender?**

Gender is a social construct. This means the different roles and responsibilities society assigns to men and women. It is different from sex, which is the biological difference between men and women. It is a term indicating socially determined roles given to men and women in society. These roles are determined by structural and individual conditions, such as culture, tradition, religion, etc.

#### **Why do men feel uncomfortable any time the issue of gender is brought up for discussion?**

Gender as a concept acknowledges that there are disparities between the male and female gender. A discussion about gender relations reveals the fact that women are often discriminated against in all spheres of life- public and private. The concept assumes that the inequality between men and women can be changed, and equality between the sexes attained. This requires a change in attitude. This makes men uneasy. Why should they 'lose' the power, control and identity 'God gave them as men'? However a better understanding of gender and gender relations, improves communication and understanding between the sexes.

### **GENDER BASED VIOLENCE**

#### **What is gender-based violence?**

Gender based violence as defined by the United Nations, is any act of violence that results in or is likely to result in physical, sexual, psychological harm or suffering to women and (men), including threats of such acts, coercion, or arbitrary deprivation of liberty whether occurring in private(domestic) or public life. It is violence directed at women, because they are women (CLEEN Foundation and Project Alert on Violence Against Women 2006).

Violence against women during conflict: research (UN 2002) has shown that conflict worsens existing patterns of sexual abuse against women in two main ways- firstly, incidences of everyday violence, particularly domestic violence increases as communities break down during and after conflicts. Secondly, 'everyday' violence escalates in the context of masculine and militarised conflict situations. For instance, rape camps are established and sexual services are provided to occupy soldiers in exchange for resources such as food and protection during and after conflict.

#### **Forms of Gender-Based Violence**

There are four distinctive forms of gender-based violence and these are: physical, sexual, psychological and economical.

1. **Physical:** Acts such as slapping, hitting, kicking, stabbing, shooting, pouring acid or any other corrosive substance and murder constitute the physical form of gender based violence. These various forms of assault can occur both in public and in private (the home). This means that a woman or young lady could either be assaulted by someone who is not related to her in any way, in the public or by a family member inside the house. There are numerous and countless examples all around the globe but predominantly common in African societies.

**Harmful Traditional Practices:** widowhood rites, widow inheritance/denial of inheritance rights and female genital mutilation, which come under the guise of culture and tradition, constitute another form of physical violence experienced by women in Africa. Women and girls are subjected to all sorts of inhuman practices as one move from one community to the other. Some of these practices include drinking the water used to bath the corpse, sleeping with the corpse, sitting on the floor for certain number of days and eating from an unwashed broken plate, etc. In most cultures in Africa, widows are either inherited as properties or denied the right to inherit their late husband, even when there are children to feed, clothed, housed and trained.

2. **Sexual:** This includes rape, indecent assault of young girls, incest and sexual harassment and child pornography. Rape is having sex with a woman without her consent. Rape is a crime. According to Section 357 of the Criminal Code, any person who has unlawful carnal knowledge of a woman or girl without her consent, if the consent is obtained by force or by means of threat or intimidation of any kind, or by fear of harm or by means of false or fraudulent representation as to the nature of the act.

Indecent Assault is the sexual exploitation (seduction or prostitution) of a young girl below the age of sixteen years. Some African societies like South Africa, Namibia, Swaziland, etc. believe that when they dis-virgin young girls will cure them of the dreaded HIV disease. These harmful and outright wicked practices are culturally rather than medically or ethically based and the consequences are numerous, including medical, gynaecological, emotional and psychological. Incest is the sexual relations between blood relations. It is sexual abuse of young girls in the home by adult male family members such as father, brother, uncle, cousin, grandfather. Incest constitutes one of the most dangerous forms of gender based violence because of the silence and denial that surround it. In Africa, it is considered a taboo and as such the often young victims are not believed and no attempts made to protect them from the abusers. As a result incest might go on for a long time before it gets exposed.

Sexual harassment is another form of sexual violence. It means unwanted and unwelcomed sexual advances. It includes unwanted sexual speech, looks and gestures that could lead to sexual assault or rape. Countless examples abound in the newspapers, Television, radio and on the internet of young girls, ladies and women murdered just for refusing sexual advances. Sexual harassment can take place in homes, schools workplaces and other public places.

3. **Psychological:** This form of gender-based violence is not easily noticed. It involves threats to life, threats of physical abuse, verbal abuse resulting in deep rooted fear and trauma to the victim; neglect and abandonment physically and sexually.
4. **Economical:** This is a kind of violence that is also difficult to notice especially in society like ours. It has to do with the denial of a woman (person) ability or opportunity to earn income, or have access to money, Most African men do not if they can help it, want their women to work. They hide under flimsy excuses to keep women from being empowered. Women's empowerment, which is the ability to have resources, access, skills, and self-esteem to participate fully in the decisions that control and affect their lives, must not be denied them, either by the immediate family or the larger society.

#### **Society's Response to Gender-Based Violence.**

High insensitivity to the plight of the female victims of gender-based violence has been the historical response by various stakeholders in the society, such as the police, service providers, religious organizations, family members and friends. Instead, the victims are often blamed for their plight. In Africa, it is believed that the woman's place is with her husband and even when the man is maltreating her, she should bear it.

In domestic violence cases, it is often considered a private matter, with the female victims being blamed for not being submissive enough, patient and tolerant. They become double victim by being accused of provoking their husband into beating them. Also, sexually abused children in the home (victims of incest) are not believed when they report as they labelled and called all sorts of names. Consequently, this response often exposes the young victims to further and more severe abuse from the perpetrators.

Rape victims are often accused of dressing provocatively, behaving in such a manner as to invite the rape upon themselves (e.g. entering a man's car, going out on a date with a man/boy, being in the same room/house with a man alone, etc). These excuses divert the attention from the perpetrators (suspect) and the fact that a crime has been committed. The victims become the villain and the family on their part consider it too shameful to report and support the victims in seeking justice.

What are the major consequences of this historical response to gender-based violence? There are three major consequences of the insensitive response to reported cases of gender-based violence. These are:

- Under-reporting is one of the characteristics of gender-based violence and in particular sexual violence. Survivors generally do not speak of the incident for many reasons, including self-blame, fear of reprisals, pressure from family member, ignorance of rights and options available, economic dependence on batterer; mistrust of authorities and risk/fear of re-victimization.
- Health Problems: Survivors of gender-based violence are at risk of severe and long lasting health problems, which could be physical or psychological in nature. These include permanent physical disabilities because of injuries sustained; mental imbalance/psychological trauma due to social stigma and rejection; unsafe abortion; sexually transmitted diseases including HIV/AIDS.
- Death: This constitutes a major consequence of wrong response to reported cases of gender-based violence. Disbelief apathy and blame of victim could result in murder or suicide.

## WOMEN'S RIGHT AND INSTRUMENTS

### What are Human Rights?

Human rights can be defined as the rights of all individuals regardless of sex, race, colour, language, national origin, age, class or religious or political beliefs to certain fundamental freedoms. Human rights are universal, inalienable, indivisible and interrelated. The founding document for modern international human rights are called **The International Bill of Human Rights** and consists of the **United Nations (UN) Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)** and the **International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)**. The **UN Charter** establishes the legal and conceptual framework for contemporary international human rights law. **Article 1** of the **UN Charter** recognizes that one of the UN's purposes is to promote and encourage respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. The United Nations Article 55 © states that the UN shall promote "universal respect for, and observance of, human rights and fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language or religion."

### What Are Women's Human Rights and Why?

Women Rights deals with the protection of women from those harmful practices that violate women's rights and well-being. Women experience cruel inhuman or degrading treatment, they are denied economic human rights by the disproportionate impact of economic policies. They are targets of discrimination in laws pertaining to citizenship, family and property. Women are denied social rights in the form of restrictive reproductive laws and policies. Based on these violations in spite of the above-named bodies, there were agitations to develop instruments that protect women better.

In response to these agitations the International Bill of Human Rights instrument was elaborated and in 1979 the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) was drafted. It came into force in 1981, and in 1999 the CEDAW Optional Protocol came into force with two mechanisms for enforcing the convention. The mechanism permits women to submit claims of

discrimination directly to the committee that oversees CEDAW compliance and it allows the committee to initiate its own investigations into violations of women's rights in countries that are signatories to the Protocol. The CEDAW Protocol has been a touchstone for women's rights activists worldwide, and has inspired numerous related declarations, policies and programs since its inception.

Protecting human rights and promoting gender equality and human security: one may be wondering why all these hassles about gender equality or what is the implication of these violations on the promotion of gender equality and human security? The answer is not far-fetched as research and studies have shown that the promotion and protection of human rights is the promotion of peace, stability and human security, but the violation is the breakdown of peace. 'Violent and destructive conflict can lead to gross human rights violations, but can also result from a sustained denial of rights over a period of time. In other words, human rights abuses can be a cause as well as a consequence, or symptom of violent conflict'. Christ of Heyns and Karen Stefiszyn (25)

In summary, according to UNDP (23-25) 'the human security approach is based on the assumption that all people have basic human rights and should enjoy these rights regardless of who and where they are'. Human security relates to the safety of people (particularly disadvantaged people) from 'such chronic threats as hunger, disease and repression...[and] from sudden and hurtful disruptions in the patterns of daily life—whether in homes, in jobs or in communities.' A human security focus for studying gender and conflict is significant because it establishes a link between gender equality and human security. Unlike a focus on rights, the human security approach implies that anything that threatens security is a violation of human rights, including gender-specific violations long considered to be normal, private or inevitable outcomes of war. However, even with the security framework, in practice there will still be resistance to recognition of these violations.

## CONFLICT ANALYSIS THEORIES FROM GENDER PERSPECTIVE

### What is Conflict Analysis and why is it Important?

Conflict analysis is the systematic (step by step) study of the profile, causes, actors and dynamics of conflict. It helps organizations in development, humanitarian and peace building work to gain a better understanding of the context in which they work and their role in that context.

#### Key questions for conflict analysis

**Profile:** what is the political, economic and socio-cultural context? What are emergent political, economic and social issues? What conflict prone areas can be situated within the context? Is there a history of conflict?

**Causes:** What are the structural causes of conflict? What issues can be considered as proximate causes of conflict? What triggers could contribute to the outbreak/ further escalation of conflict? What new factors contribute to prolonging conflict dynamics and what factors can contribute to peace?

**Actors:** Who are the main actors? What are their interests, goals, positions, capacities and relationships? What capacities for peace can be identified? What actors can be identified as spoilers? Why? Are they inadvertent or intentional spoilers?

**Dynamics:** What are current conflict trends? What are windows of opportunity? What scenarios can be developed from the analysis of the conflict profile, causes and actors?

### Why analyse Conflict from a Gender Perspective?

For a complete understanding; these two important factors in considering gender in the analysis of conflict are:

1. The changing situation in the world today. Since after the 1948 **United Nations Universal Declaration of the Human Rights**, over ten other resolutions which aim to protect women

have been declared by the UN and many other regional organisations including African Union have promulgated many laws to protect women and children. Many of these conventions are becoming reference points in post conflict situations and any meaning analysis of conflict must consider these facts

2. The changing role of women during and after conflict can no longer be ignored in the analysis of conflict. There are two schools of thoughts that looked at roles- one from a structural functionality which sees the available to women to act within, and the second is from the actor analysis perspective which looks at the dynamics of women behaviour during conflicts, which are not necessarily defined by the social structure, but the innate ability in the women and her choice to be dynamic and make the best of the situation.

#### **PRINCIPLES OF NON-VIOLENCE**

Drawing from the definitions, concepts and the different forms of gender-based violence, it is important to really know some principles that will help to shift from the former approaches that have not really solved the issues surrounding gender-based violence. These principles are not absolute but will go a long way to ease friction generally in Africa and even globally and they are:

##### **Principle One: Non-violence is a way of life for courageous people.**

It is an active non-violent resistance to evil, always persuading the opponent of the righteousness of your cause. It is aggressive spirituality, mentally and emotionally. It is only passive in its non-aggression toward its enemies.

##### **Principle Two: Non-violence seeks to win friendship and understanding**

The end result of this approach is redemption and reconciliation. Its purpose is to create a beloved Africa where we all are proud of.

##### **Principle Three: Non-violence seeks to defeat injustice not people.**

This approach recognized that evil doers are also victims are not evil people. It always gives room for the benefit of doubt, and by non-violent resistance seeks to defeat evil and not people.

##### **Principle Four: Non-violence holds that suffering can educate and transform**

This approach accepts suffering without retaliation. It accepts if necessary but will never inflict it. Non-violence willingly accepts the consequences of its acts. Unearned suffering is redemptive and has tremendous educational and transforming possibilities and above all has the power to convert the enemy when reason fails.

##### **Principle Five: Non-violence chooses love instead of hate.**

Non-violence resists violence of the spirit as well as the body. Its love is spontaneous, unmotivated, unselfish and creative. It gives willingly even knowing sometimes that the reward might be hostility. Its love is unending in its ability to forgive in order to restore community. Non-violent love does not sink to the level of the hater knowing that love for others demonstrate love for ourselves. Non-violence recognized the fact that all life is interrelated.

##### **Principle Six: Non-violence believes that the universe is on the side of Justice.**

Every non-violent resister had deep faith that God is God of justice which will ultimately and eventually win/prevail.

### Strategic Steps to Non-Violence

**Education:** This can never be over-emphasized as the high level of illiteracy in Africa had contributed immensely to the underdevelopment of the continent. Use existing network of women's groups to raise awareness about non-violence issues. Identify and consult with key international actors, to gain awareness of their concerns and strategies for conflict prevention. Organize dialogues within communities, or among different sectors of the population on issues of concern and possible solutions.

**Direct Action:** Develop a common strategy to address root causes of conflict. Reach out to key stakeholders most susceptible to resorting to violence and encourage civic engagement and reach out to the government and military to withhold the use of force and encourage non-violence.

### Conclusion

Creating a gender responsive and equitable society requires commitment from every individual no matter the status, age, race and of course gender. There is a need for a paradigm shift and structural changes to accommodate broader issues of gender equality, social justice and equity rather than the narrow fixation which have achieved cosmetic changes without fundamentally dismantling entrenched structures and institutions that hold violence and gender discrimination. Therefore, to promote sustainable human and national development is to ensure that both men and women are free to harness their full potentials and are able to make choices without restrictive gender roles.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

- There is a need for Africans to know that, social justice is an important aspect of human welfare intrinsically worth pursuing
- There is a need for a gender sensitive national constitution and political manifestos that will not just give lip service but accord prime of place to gender non-violence principles and concerns.
- There is a need for government to support academic institutions to improve on gender equality responsive education, through reviews of academic curricula and taking a strong stance against gender-based abuses not only in schools but wherever abuses and violence may be taking place.
- The security organizations and personnel must continue to push hard to ensure abusers and perpetrators are brought to book to serve as deterrents to others.
- A gender management unit to help victims should be established at LGA councils to engender policies, procedures and practices as proposed in the 2006 National Gender Policy.

**Personal Commitment:** Prepare yourself to live each day using the principles of non-violence. If ill-will or physical harm confronts you, protect yourself, vacate the premises, but refrain from initiating harsh or threatening language or violent reactions. Promptly report unprovoked attacks to law enforcement agents or any other relevant authorities.



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