

AFRICAN WOMEN: THE NEGLECTED PARTNERS AND IGNORED RESOURCE

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Abstract

African women are often neglected by people who do not understand their potential. The effect of this has relinquished so many women from leadership positions in Africa and also leads to the view of women as second-class citizens who have little to contribute to national reforms in society. Research shows that few women are legislators in Africa. For instance, in Nigeria 5.6% and in Kenya 19.7 % of the legislators are women (Sow, 2016). The neglect of women is experienced in some families, communities, churches and in the political context. Conversely, the gender bias that women are second-class citizens has led to the violation of women's rights and mistreatment of women in Africa (Kamau, 2017). Men and women are created to reflect God's glory. Jointly, they were to be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth, subdue it, and have dominion over all things (Genesis 1:27). Women are gifted by God to contribute significantly to the development of the nation. From the interaction with newspapers and personal interview with a woman accused of witchcraft, the authors aver that some women in Africa are neglected for the following reasons: inability to bear children in their matrimonial homes (even when it is their husbands who are infertile), parochial African belief systems that see women as inferior to men, and false witchcraft accusations. According to the authors, there is need to curtail this neglect through sound Biblical teachings about men and women as co-partners created in God's image, a provision of opportunities for women to reach their potential, and empowerment of women through education to contribute significantly to the society. The method used in this paper is a situational assessment technique. The authors examined real-life situations of neglect in the African context and responded to the issues critically.

Key Words: the African woman, partnership, Africa's traditional society, gender bias, leadership.

INTRODUCTION

The neglect of women is a misconception that has prevented the Africa society from reaping sufficiently from women as a resource. God created mankind with full potential. Both men and women reflect God's glory. God created mankind in His image and likeness (Gen. 1:26-27). Thus, men and women bear God's image alike and they collectively reflect God's

wisdom, knowledge, and understanding. The existence of both male and female indicates a significant partnership for national development. According to Belle;

Power comes in different forms, and it is always associated with men who make up the majority. But in recent years, women have risen to power either through their achievements, political status or wealth. Today it is not uncommon to find female Presidents, female entrepreneurs in engineering and technology or many others who have worked hard to make a name for themselves in different fields formerly dominated by men. (Belle, 2016)

This paper examined the various aspects where some African women have been neglected by men through an assessment of real-life situations of domestic violence and discrimination of women based on gender bias. The aim is to encourage partnership among men and women to fulfil God's mandate on earth. Subsequently, the aim is to change the view of African men about women through Biblical review to verify the role of women in bringing liberation and peace to the society. In this contemporary era, a further aim is to review the role of women in building bridges of peace and development to the nation. And finally, this study seeks to motivate women to maximize their full potential in making a significant impact in the world.

Two research questions guided this study. Firstly, what influences the neglect of women in Africa? Secondly, what could be done to stop women's neglect in Africa? To address these questions, a review of the relevant literature was carried out to understand the characteristics of women as resource partners and also to examine the real-life situations in which African women have been neglected.

The qualities of women

There are certain qualities embedded in a woman that make her unique. This uniqueness is based on God's endowment. Johnes identified five characteristics of an ideal woman as thus:

- **Expresses high degree of ethics and integrity.** This quality can be found in some women across the globe. In Africa, there are women who have continued to maintain

their integrity without compromise. Such women should be fully supported as they serve in different capacities.

- **Strong and independent.** She attempts greatness by working hard daily, to keep the family together in peace. She can work very hard to support her family and cope with life's challenges.
- **Spiritually oriented.** She is a spiritual figure in her home and community. She goes the extra mile to satisfy the spiritual needs of her household through prayer and teaching of God's word.
- **Happy and satisfied.** She accepts her role in life and determines to be happy. She does her work with joy and anticipates a better life.
- **Hospitable and loving.** She shows love to members of her family by taking care of their specific needs. She lives a sacrificial life. Her words are seasoned with wisdom and tenderness. (Johnes, 2017)

The above qualities may not be true for every woman because of human weaknesses.

Nevertheless, there are some women in Africa and across the globe that are still upholding these qualities. Hence, such women should be given full opportunities to make the best use of their gifts to serve the community. Kamau stated that,

Traditionally, African societies viewed women as second fiddle to the men. This has led to a special kind of recognition to women who achieve certain milestones that have not been achieved before. Several women have given hope to the future generation of women leaders and proven that a woman is able to achieve all that she ever wants to if she works for it. (Kamau, 2017)

Women are gifted and strong, notwithstanding their low status in African societies.

They continue to make a significant impact in the agricultural sector, self-help projects, and education. As stated by Udechukwu,

Women have the biological and social tasks of bearing, nurturing and providing initial education for children and, in general, ensuring the well-being of their families. They fetch water and firewood for domestic purposes; they tend and milk the cattle; and it is they who carry the produce of the farm, usually many miles to sell at the markets.

(Udechukwu, 2015, p.122).

It is also evident that women in some cases head their households. For example, in Kenya the 1969 census shows that a total of 1.7 million rural households, 525,000 or approximately 31 percent are headed by women. In Botswana, where men emigrate to the South African mines, women were found to head one out of every five households. In Mali, 16 percent of the families are headed by women. In agriculture and animal husbandry women are more involved than men. For example, in the West Lake Region of Tanzania, men work 1,800 hours annually and women put in 2,600 hours in agriculture. In Gabon, a researcher calculated that women work more than 200 days a year in the fields while men spend only a few days there. In the pastoral and nomadic areas of the continent, women often bear a heavy responsibility for the care of the animals (Taylor & Francis Group, 1972, pp. 359–364).

In this millennium era, women have continued to make significant contributions to the development of the nations. For example:

- Isabel dos Santos, the eldest daughter of Angola's long-time incumbent president, at age 43 became a billionaire who is a major stakeholder in Portugal Telecom Company. She controls about 19% of the Portuguese bank. Her establishment has offered job opportunities to many people.
- Ngozi Okonjo Iweala of Nigeria, with her vast experience as the formal managing director of the World Bank, became the first female minister of finance in Nigeria who served the country under the tenure of President Goodluck Jonathan. In 2012, Nigeria became the fastest growing economy in the world.
- Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, a Liberian politician, served as the president of the republic of Liberia from 2006 to 2018. She became the first female president in Africa. She fought against corruption and restored peace in the country through the establishment of a Truth and Reconciliation Committee (TRC) in 2006.

- The late Wangari Maathai, an environmental activist in Kenya, made a significant contribution in sustainable development, peace, and democracy of her country. She is the founder of the Green Belt Movement, an environmental non-governmental organization that focused on the planting of trees for environmental conservation and the protection of women's rights. (Belle, 2016; Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2018 & Kamau, 2017).

Women are created with unique characteristics which must not be ignored by men.

Thus, equal privileges and the opportunity to serve in various capacities should be given without prejudice. Subsequently, domestic violence against women should stop.

Governments should protect the lives of women from violators.

Partnership with women in the Bible and its results

Old Testament Example – Hulda (2 Kings 22:8-17)

In this example taken from 2 Kings, a book was found in the temple by Hilkia, who was concerned about the content and needed someone to confirm its authenticity. For this task to be accomplished, Hulda a prophetess was consulted. The priest and noble men serving under Josiah's regime partnered with the prophetess to accomplish this task. They had no problem with her being a woman. These men valued and acknowledged her leadership role as a prophetess who could authenticate the content of the Book of the Law. They valued her contribution and accepted her verdict concerning their mission. If they had ignored her simply because she was a woman, they may not have accomplished their mission.

Her husband was the keeper of the wardrobe; that was all we know about him. He did not prevent his wife from fulfilling her God-given leadership position. He did not envy her, nor did he feel insecure, rather he partnered with her by giving her his full support and space to fulfill her ministry.

Josiah's vision was to bring sanity in the land so that his people could worship the true God. Nevertheless, this wouldn't have been possible without the help of Huldah (vv. 16-17). Religious reform is incomplete when it fails to affect society and the social system. Partnership with a woman brought that to bear in his reformation agenda. Huldah dared to say aloud what others had sensed but were unable to say. The priest read the book of the law and the content was clear. Shephan read it to the king Josiah. The trio feared the content, but none dared to say aloud its possible meaning. They needed to partner with someone, with Hulda, who could verbalize the message. We can see how getting a woman on board enabled the completion of a task.

The Wise Woman of the City of Abel of Beth-ma'acah (2 Sam 20:1ff)

The wise woman mentioned in 2 Samuel 20 was not a prophetess like Hulda or a judge and militant leader like Debora, but she is just an ordinary woman. Her marital status was not indicated in the passage. One of those who rebelled against the rule of King David was "a worthless fellow, whose name was Sheba" (2 Sam 20:1 NIV). He was pursued by David's commander, Joab, into the city of Abel of Beth-ma'acah. The city was put under siege: "They built a siege ramp up to the city, and it stood against the outer fortifications. While they were battering the wall to bring it down, a wise woman called from the city, 'Listen! Listen! Tell Joab to come here so I can speak to him'" (2 Sam 20:15-16 NIV). He went toward her. After negotiating over Sheba's life, it was agreed that the siege would be lifted if Sheba were killed: "Then the woman went to all the people with her wise advice, and they cut off the head of Sheba son of Bikri and threw it to Joab. So he sounded the trumpet, and his men dispersed from the city, each returning to his home. And Joab went back to the king in Jerusalem" (2 Samuel 20:22 NIV). The city was saved because Joab and the people listened to the words of a wise woman. A woman's partnership was needed and accepted. In

fact, her coming into the matter hastened it. Joab and his men were focused on battering the wall, but a woman spared them time and energy by handing Sheba's head over.

New Testament Example -Priscilla and Aquila (Acts 18:2-3, 18, 19, 26; Romans 16:3-4; 1 Corinthians 16:19; 2 Timothy 4:19)

In the seven references where both marriage partners are mentioned, the name of Priscilla comes first in five instances and Aquila first in the other two. They are never mentioned apart. Why is Aquila not named first every time, but equally shares mention with his wife? Many reasons have been suggested why Priscilla comes first at all in the references to them both. Some writers suggest that she was the more energetic of the two, and perhaps had the stronger character (Young, 1988). They think that Priscilla may have been a believer before her husband, and that she won him for the Lord by her "chaste conversation," or that perhaps hers was a primacy of character and service or a more conspicuous intellectual ability, or that she may have been of nobler birth than Aquila. Others claim that she was of a higher social status or that she was the better-known church leader. There was no account or impression that Aquila felt uncomfortable that Priscilla outshone him or that her name was often mentioned before his. Both worked as partners supporting each other and giving each other room to perform or use his/her God-given gifts to serve. They were both tentmakers by trade – his wife was involved in his trade/profession. He did not leave her behind at home. Paul says that they are his "coworkers" that they have "risked their necks" for his life. They hosted Paul (Acts 18:1ff NIV) and accompanied him to Ephesus (Acts 18:18-19 NIV). Priscilla and Aquila together accompanied Paul. Aquila involved his wife in his ministry; he was willing to accompany his wife with Paul. This may be difficult for some men nowadays to do. Aquila did not hinder her from serving the Lord or hosting house churches in their home, rather he even prepared with her. She and her husband instructed the eloquent and brilliant preacher, Apollos, the way of the Lord more accurately (Acts 18:26 NIV). Aquila

served with his wife, he did not relegate her to the background, rather he acknowledged and accepted her leadership role in the certain aspect of trade and ministry. He gave the needed support and they were very successful.

From what has been discussed so far, it is obvious that women are resourceful and they can contribute significantly to the liberation of any nation from oppression of any kind into a prosperous and free society. The story narrated above indicates that women are resourceful. Therefore, men should love and respect them. This will help to motivate women to maximize their full potential in building the nation.

Violence against women is an issue that is occurring in most Africa nations.

According to Gabriele,

Violence against women is a pivotal issue that must not be glossed over. In large parts of the world, women's rights are violated by genital mutilation, forced marriages or honor killings. These forms of violence occur in various groups of society and cannot be ascribed to just one specific culture or religion. Often based on certain values and notions, perpetrated by people invoking tradition, they constitute serious violations of human rights. (2009, p. 4)

Violence against women's rights is not limited to genital mutilation, forced marriages, and domestic violence alone; it also includes hindering women from participating in leadership, paying less attention to the concerns of women's needs, rejection of women as co-partners in professional engagement and subjecting women as housewives for domestic and sexual use. Sometimes, some men justify their actions based on Biblical texts. The misinterpretation of Biblical texts has led to the neglect of women in participating fully in the church services. In some churches in Africa, women are not allowed to be ordained as priest to serve in the church. This has prevented some women in these denominations from responding to the call of God to serve as leaders in their respective churches.

Methodology

The methodology used in this study is the situational assessment technique.

“Situational Assessment is a systematic process to gather, analyze, synthesize and

communicate data to inform planning decisions” (Public Health Ontario, 2015, p.1). The authors examined real-life situations through the assessment of primary and secondary data in order to determine the influence of women neglect in Africa. The data were analyzed critically before making a valid judgment. The primary data was gathered through face to face interviews while secondary data consists of newspaper articles which depict women neglect in Africa. Four case studies were evaluated, analyzed, and interpreted in response to the research questions.

The story is captured within two African countries. The analysis revealed four major reasons why some women are neglected in Africa. Firstly, inability to produce children, secondly, parochial African belief systems, thirdly, criticizing of husband and lastly, witchcraft accusations.

CASE 1. “Infertile man accused of cutting off wife’s hands as punishment for not bearing him children” (Kyama, writing for the Times, 2016)

Mwende is the fourth child of impoverished peasant farmers in a remote village near Machakos town; she left school in the eighth grade because her parents, with six children to support, could not afford to pay. She met Ngila seven years ago and the couple married two years later in a church. At that time, he was a good man. He was a churchman. The first days of their marriage were happy days. Her husband, a tailor, set Mwende up with a small business in 2014 where she sold items such as soap, sugar, tea, and salt, to bring in extra money. They lived together in a three-room brick house on the top of a hill. “None of my siblings are employed and my parents are poor. Whatever I was doing running the small shop was because I wanted to help my parents and my siblings. But children didn’t come to the marriage” (Kyama, 2016, August 15).

Mwende said her husband blamed her for the problem. Neighbors told Kenyan media

the sounds of domestic fights often drifted down from the house on the hill. In 2014, Mwende and her husband sought medical advice at a Nairobi hospital on why they had not had children. The hospital result showed that her husband had a problem. According to Mwende,

So the doctor advised him to attend the clinic, but he never went. Every time I reminded him to attend the clinic, he would dismiss it. He would say, I will see if I will get time to go then he would never go. A sour seed had been planted in the marriage and it grew, Mwende said. “It reached a point that he suddenly changed. He started to get drunk. That man never used to bring anything home. He was very brutal. He used to beat me.” At times the couple would call their parents, who would come and try to bring peace to the marriage (Kyama, 2016, August 15).

Her impoverished parents advised Mwende to leave Ngila, but she didn't want to go back home to burden them. She sought advice from her pastor, who advised her to persist and to do her best to save the marriage. The encouragement she received from her pastor and the elders of the church encouraged her to stay in the marriage. When the attack happened, neighbors heard screaming and called the police. One neighbor told local media how she witnessed the rooms spattered in blood, with a severed hand on the floor. Mwende's husband attacked her with a machete, slashing her face and hacking off her hands, enraged because she had not produced children in nearly five years of marriage.

CASE 2: Man chops off wife's hands for overstaying at a funeral in Migori.

(Kingwara/Standard Media, 2018)

A woman said she was going for a funeral on Monday at the home of one of her in-laws, thinking that the burial would take place on that day, but it was delayed until Wednesday. “When she came back home the following day her husband was not in but in the evening when he came back he attacked her with machete repeatedly threatening to kill her. He cut off her right hand and left the left hand hanging limply because she delayed in the funeral. Some other parts of her body were injured.”

When the Standard media visited her at the hospital, she had just been wheeled out of

the theatre after a second surgery. She claimed that her husband, his brother, and other family members left her to bleed and that it took the intervention of distant relatives to rush her to Ombo hospital in Migori town. “They refused to report the matter to the police. I passed out and gained consciousness at the hospital after my nephew brought me here,” she said. The woman appealed for justice, saying no action had been taken against her husband. The family has decided to keep it covered but we will ensure justice prevails” (Kingwara, 2018, January 22).

CASE 3: “Nigeria’s first lady relegated to the kitchen for criticizing her husband”

(Mikailu/ BBC, 2016).

In a Hausa BBC interview with Nigeria’s first lady Mrs. Buhari, she reported that:

The president does not know 45 out of 50 of the people he appointed, and I don’t know them either, despite being his wife of 27 years.” She said people who did not share the vision of the ruling All Progressives Congress (APC) were now appointed to top posts because of the influence a “few people” wield. “Some people are sitting down in their homes folding their arms only for them to be called to come and head an agency or a ministerial position (Mikailu, 2016, October 14)

His wife’s decision to go public with her concerns will shock many people, but it shows the level of discontent with the president’s leadership. Standing alongside German Chancellor Angela Merkel at a news conference, the president laughed off his wife’s accusations and stated: “I don’t know which party my wife belongs to, but she belongs to my kitchen and my living room and the other room.” (Mikailu, 2016, October 14)

CASE 4: A Kenyan woman attacked for witch accusation. An Interview with Sarah

(Interview by Priest, 2018)

Sarah is a mother of four children (who studied till Form Four) with land, crops, homestead, and cows. They lived with other neighbors upcountry in Kisii. While in Form Two, Malika, the only learned person in that homestead, had a strange experience. He would start studying and would hear noises outside; falling on the roof, someone calling his name and knocking on the door. Whenever he came out to check, he would see no one. Malika was

a very stubborn child who gave his parents a hard time to the extent that they told him he must have been bewitched. Because there was no graduate in this family, Malika was working hard to succeed but with these strange experiences, he believed someone was bewitching him. He believed it was Sarah. Prior to this incidence, Malika had a rift with Sarah because he claimed that his presence in the family was hindering her from accomplishing her evil plans in his homestead. He attacked Sarah with his friends, uncles, and the youth of the village because she was trying to cut his future short. Sarah fought back with her children and friends. Her homestead was burnt down, crops utterly destroyed and their plan to kill and feast on her cows was thwarted by the intervention of the police who took Malika and his friends to the police station. These families have remained great enemies and are not in talking terms and have been suspicious of each other.

From the above four cases, the following reasons are inferred as the factors influencing the neglect of some African women in Africa.

INABILITY TO PRODUCE CHILDREN

Women in most African societies are treated badly when they fail to bear children in their matrimonial homes even when the spouse may be responsible, as in case 1. Test results revealed that the husband was infertile and needed medical treatment which he failed to treat. Instead of heeding the doctor's advice he dismissed it, blamed the wife for it and chopped off her hands and butchered her face. A childless woman in most African societies is generally not highly regarded by those around her and indeed may be regarded as having failed in her calling. How can one be fully a woman without being a mother? She is not considered a full woman if she conceives through assisted techniques, if she delivers through unconventional means, or, if she adopts a child, that child is not recognized as a legal member of the family. Motherhood is a traditional way of defining the woman's status. A woman is viewed as being a person primarily in relation to others - as a mother or as a wife predominates in Africa. A

woman's social status depends on these relationships and not any qualities or achievements of her own.

Solutions to the problem of inability to bear children:

- Sensitization of the society that a woman's worth is not tied to her ability to bear children. The primary purpose of marriage is for companionship. At creation, God saw that the man was alone and created a companion for him. (Gen 2:18)
- Encouraging childless couples to love, educate, and invest in other people's children. What makes a woman a mother or a man a father is not simply giving birth to a child but parenting the child.
- Encourage adoption and the acceptance of such children. There are many children in orphanages needing a family, but they may never be adopted because some African societies are hostile to such an idea.

PAROCHIAL AFRICAN BELIEF SYSTEMS

Men who neglect women do so basely on parochial African belief systems that see men as superior to women and women as an inferior piece of property to be treated as they so wish. This was seen in case two where the husband chopped his wife's hands because she overstayed at a funeral. The beating of women is a normal lifestyle for some African men. "Wife-beating is still accepted in many African countries, only 21 African countries have laws which prevent such practices" (Chu-ilo, 2016). In cultures where women are considered inferior to men, wife beating is tolerated. A husband's brutal actions are often supported and defended by their family members as well as relatives.

Solution to the problem of parochial African belief systems

To redeem this, men and fathers should unconditionally accept women for who they

are, not perceiving and treating them as inferior. Men and women need one another to exist. As Paul said, “woman is not independent of man and man is not independent of woman” (1 Cor. 11:11).

CRITICIZING OF HUSBAND

Tradition and religion are often used to silence women from speaking out against their husbands. The Nigerian first lady’s criticism of her husband earned her a sharp reminder of her inferior state as a woman. The response of president Buhari (her husband) portrays this assertion. The African Union’s Protocol on the rights of women in Article 18 notes that “Human and Peoples’ Rights calls on all States Parties to eliminate every discrimination against women and to ensure the protection of the rights of women as stipulated in international declarations and conventions” (Africa Union, 2013, p. 2). The protection of women’s rights is very important because the discrimination of women in Africa has led to domestic violence that has affected women from maximizing their full potential.

Solution to the problem of criticizing of husband

Women should be allowed to exercise their God-given right of speech without mockery or punishment. This will enable women to gain more confidence to stand for what is right for the advancement of the nation. But this must be done in humility and in respect.

WITCHCRAFT ACCUSATION

Women are often the target of witchcraft accusation in Africa. They face untold torture ranging from rejection, banishment from the matrimonial home, abandonment, or even death. They face extra-judicial killings simply because they are weak and powerless to defend themselves in a state ascribed to them by culture. Case 4 revealed how some women are falsely accused of witchcraft. Sarah was treated badly because Malika claimed that his presence in the family was hindering her from accomplishing her evil plans in his homestead through witchcraft. This led to the destruction of Sarah’s properties. Why could a second-

year high school boy do this to a mother with grown-up children? Because the culture permits it, because Sarah is a woman, and because men (despite their age) are considered superior to women. Aura avers that “for a long time, men have assumed superiority over women in all aspects of life. This superiority has known no limits and women have been at the behest of all manner of violence executed by men” (Aura, 2003, p. 8). The superiority of men has been misused to violate women in Africa; this shouldn’t be so because God made men as heads of families to protect the lives of women as resource partners.

Solution to the problem of witchcraft accusations

- Value the sacredness of human life: The Bible teaches that human life is sacred and no one should be allowed to take it away. God punished Cain severely for killing his brother, Abel, out of jealousy (Gen. 4:8-10). God cursed Cain and the work of his hands and he became a wanderer because he killed his brother. Violation of God’s law attracts suffering and instead of repenting, we seek someone to accuse and kill. Their blood will continue to speak against us like that of Abel.
- Protect the vulnerable: God also admonishes us to care for the weak, widows, fatherless and orphans (Ex. 22:22) but we torture them. God will ensure that neglected and oppressed women get justice. Why do we destroy women made in God’s image? We need to start living right to enjoy God’s blessings.
- We need to love our neighbors like ourselves especially in the relationship between men and women. The false accusations are as a result of envy, jealousy, hatred, and anger. Where there is agape love these sinful acts are absent. Love does not envy, it does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it does not delight in evil, and it protects (1Corinthians 13: 4-8).
- The church has an important role to ensure that both social and religious rights of God’s people, including women, are not violated. The church needs to be empowered

to combat this evil through proper theological training, awareness of the social effects of witchcraft accusation and violence meted against women. The church is situated within the community, so she needs to educate the community elders on how to protect women at risk rather than taking the law into their hands. In Joshua 20: 1-6, God provided the legal system and procedure where those who kill others unintentionally can be protected from extrajudicial killings. The elders in our communities are to protect the accused from extrajudicial killing until their cases are given a fair hearing instead of endorsing violence against them. It is not enough for the church to provide victims who live in isolation with social services; the church should be a voice for these voiceless victims. It should confront the governments, the legal or political systems in order to stop the suffering and humiliation against women without any legal reprieve. The church also needs to understand and teach that, theologically and ethically, violence against women constitutes sin—the physical, psychological, and spiritual violation of one person by another. As such it violates the bodily integrity of the victim and shatters the possibility of the right relationship between the victim and abuser.

Conclusion

This study revealed how gifted women are, the salient role they play in the family, society, and in the economy of a nation. When men partner with women, African nations, from the family to the society, will be a better place. Women are very resourceful, and African nations need to tap fully from her blessings through partnership.

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