
Social Status of Girls / Women and Childbirth in African Culture

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Africa is a continent with 52 countries and multiple cultures. As an example, Nigeria, the most thickly populated has more than 250 ethnics groups.¹ Each has its own traditions and customs. The women in certain areas are quite modern, whereas in others they are subjected to the traditions and customs of their regions.

It is true to attribute social barriers and patriarchal cultures to women who usually spend their lives as home makers and child bearers. In other words, women spend their youth under the control of their fathers and their adulthood under the authority of their husbands.

Women are cornerstones of African economic development. According to a recent survey, 70% of the agricultural labor is provided by women and they produce almost 90% of all food. Women`s economic activity rate, which is measured by the percentage of labour supply for the production of economic goods, is the highest compared to other regions of the world, but majority of them are in the informal labour force or low skill jobs.²

As in other countries all over the world, African women face a lot of economic, legal, and social constraints. Unfortunately some laws still consider them as minors. In Zaire, for example, a wife has to have the consent of her husband before she can open a

bank account.³ Similarly, although being the key food producers, women are still unable to own a piece of land in some areas. Gender inequality makes most of the African women remain at the bottom of the social hierarchy with inadequate access to land, credit, health and education.⁴

Poor access to health and education are the key contemplating factors towards the back states of women. Primary education of females according to Gender Institutions and Development Data Base (GID-DB) is still at an alarming low rate of 67% despite the international efforts to implement the second MDG, that is, to achieve universal primary education by the year 2015.⁵

This wide gender gap in education affects the family health and nutrition, lack of resources, poverty & pressures on time and energies act as a huge obstacle to provision of health to women and their children.⁶ More than 2/3 of African illiterates are women. In short, women`s share in national education system is biased as compared to their counterpart male population due to the socio- cultural and economic environment.⁷

Thus brunt of poverty and poor economic situation of African countries is faced by women. This together with the societal attitude towards women in general is responsible for the gender discrimination.

In contrast however women may have power in society in the constitution of family, kinship group and ethnic group for example women's power as a mother over their children regardless of age. As wives, the first wife has more power as compared to the successive ones. As political officials, there are examples of women who were queen mothers, for example, the Buganda of Uganda and the Akan of Ghana. However like other countries of the world changes are gradually coming in women's life in Africa. Activists of gender rights have directed all their effort towards introduction of a code of behavior to the African charter on human and people's rights aimed at raising gender equality. The code of behavior states that every woman has the right to the recognition and protection of her basic human and legal rights. It also contains clauses for protection of women in armed conflict, equality in marriage, access to justice and political participation, and the provision of education, training, and health care. It also places emphasis on women's rights to housing and inheritance.⁴

Although many laws in women have been passed for women's rights, yet the actual implementation is missing. This requires a radical change in the mental attitude of society towards women.

Pregnancy in African Women

According to latest fact sheet almost 800 women die daily from pregnancy and child birth related preventable causes worldwide. More than 50% of these deaths occur in sub-Saharan Africa.⁸ The present maternal mortality rate in Africa is 500 deaths per 100000 live births. An African woman has a 1 in 39 life time risk in dying due to pregnancy and its com-

plications in contrast to 1 in 4000 in the developed world.^{9, 10}

According to a report conducted by BBC News, "Being pregnant in Africa is like watching the sun going down before you get home."¹¹

There are multiple gloomy and sad tales especially from the poor living in remote areas in countries like Nigeria, Mozambique, Cameroon, Tanzania, Ghana, Kenya, Zambia, and Ethiopia. There are many contributing factors to most of the complications.

Poverty is at the top of the list. Poverty is observed at two levels: one, at the family level where services at health centres cost more than what they can afford and two, it is noticed at the government level, which is unable to provide good quality health care. Very few hospitals are there in remote areas despite these areas being thickly populated. Moreover, doctors and midwives avoid working in poorly developed areas. Thus there is lack of qualified staff. As a result, sometimes the antenatal health facilities do not diagnose foeto maternal complications on time, resulting in life-threatening situations. Over-crowding in antenatal clinics also discourages the women from attending them.¹² Food shortages contribute towards low birth weight and decreased maternal and foetal immunity. Adequate health facilities cannot be provided in remote areas as there is no electricity, let alone clean water. For the rich, transport to well-equipped health facilities is not a problem. However, for the poor, strong belief in spiritual powers to save them is the only hope to remain alive.

However, the increased maternal mortality in Africa cannot be attributed to poverty, illiteracy, and lack of medical facilities only. There are a number of taboos and superstitions regarding pregnancy which are a hindrance to acquiring modern antenatal and deliv-

ery care. For example, according to a woman in Nairobi, she did not consume meat, bananas, and eggs during her entire pregnancy believing them to be detrimental to her baby as foretold by her ancestors.¹³ Thus, the health experts consider such practices as having a negative impact on maternal and child health outcomes. These beliefs are still rampant in Kenya despite the fact that there is high literacy rate there. Moreover, heavy meals near term are believed to interfere with the pushing of the baby. Thus, avoiding nutritional diets means depriving the woman of essential nutrients which increases the risk of infant morbidity or mortality due to low birth weight or low immunity.

Traditional healers with their herbal medicines also have a strong influence on pregnancy and labour management. Although the western medicine is considered necessary for treatment, but traditional medicine is believed to protect from harmful evil spirits.¹⁴ Zulu women use traditional medicines for a quick delivery.¹⁴ The Tswana lay emphasis on stimulation of prolonged labour or induction when overdue, mainly with the help of crushed ostrich egg shell called *kgaba* medicine. In the Sambaru tribe of Kenya, once pregnant, the bride is considered as a *boofeydo* or someone who has made a mistake. She is not allowed to see or speak to her husband. Moreover, the husband also cannot express his feelings for the new born or his wife. This continues till three years after which the woman can stay with her husband, provided that her mother purchases everything for the bride's home. Spiritual values influence maternal and child health. Everything good or bad is attributed to God's Will. Hence, neither family planning nor aspiration for medical care is practiced by many women. Going to a clinic is a sign of moral

failure, according to Dr. Peter Sikana, a reproductive health and emergency obstetric care technical advisor for the UN Population Fund in Freetown.

As man is the breadwinner so he makes all the decisions regarding seeking healthcare for pregnancy and family planning.

In a country with a very high maternal mortality and a failing healthcare system due to lack of qualified staff and non-availability of drugs, the Traditional Birth Attendant (TBA) remains the only hope for providing care in the antenatal and delivery period. Majority of women, especially in rural settings, often resort to self medication, mostly herbal concoctions.¹⁵ In spite of promotion of allopathic medicine by international organizations, 80% of African population still relies on traditional medicines for primary health care.¹⁶

Thus, in short, there is still a long way to go in African culture towards achieving safe motherhood.

Birthing Rituals, Customs, and Traditions

There are five main African initiation rites which are considered to be the first step for human growth and development. They provide a clear and guided means of transition from one stage of life to another, linking the individual to the community and the spiritual world, which has a strong influence in African culture. It is believed in almost all African cultures that the newborn has come from the spiritual world, blessed with unique qualities and talents and a special mission to fulfill as a return for these gifts.¹⁷

The mission is discovered with the help of a diviner who makes a birth chart and performs rituals. Finally the infant is named according to the special task assigned to him so that it reflects in the infant's personality throughout his life.

Childbirth in African countries is also associated with many cultural influences. In urban areas, most of the women go to health centres; however, in remote areas, for example in the Bantu tribes, the women have either trees in the forest to hold on to while undergoing the process of birth, with or without the help of a TBA called *mbusas*.¹⁸ Childbirth gives social recognition and status to young girls navigating through pregnancy and delivery. They are taught to face the painful journey of childbirth fearlessly. Women mostly give birth in a squatting position away from their settlement. The squatting position has cultural overtones—it indicates the earth's fecundity and the maternal contact with it. Once the child is born, the mother cuts the cord, either with the help of her teeth or with a stick or a sharp leaf blade. The placenta and the cord are buried. This ritual is called *inkaba* and has great importance to the clan as it seals the attachment of the baby to his ancestors. *Inkaba* is a symbol of the relationship of the individual not only with his ancestral land but also to the spiritual world. The place is where the individual will later on meditate and communicate with his ancestors.¹⁹

In Xhosa culture, birth is carried out in *rondavel*, that is, mud houses with thatched roofs. Birth is usually assisted by experienced grandmothers. After birth, the mother and the baby are isolated till the cord withers off. Grandmothers help this process by applying a specially prepared mixture of ash, sugar, and a poisonous plant called *umtuma* on the newly severed cord. This is considered to help in the drying out of the cord. The day the cord falls off, the new baby is introduced to the family and community members. The strange ritual of *sifudu* is then carried out. *Sifudu* tree leaves are burnt which produces a

very pungent smoke.²⁰ The women gather around it and the baby is passed over the smoke thrice, which induces severe coughing and screaming. The baby is passed under the knees of the mother. It is bathed and painted with the white chalk like substance *ingceki* mixed with a sweet smelling ground wood called *mtomboti*. All these rituals are thought to make the baby strong, fearless, and protected from evil spirits. The baby is then breast fed by the mother, the *umdlezana*.²¹

The ritual of *imbeleko* is to welcome the child to the clan. A goat is slaughtered and the tribe is invited to the feast. The skin of the goat is considered sacred and will be a covering for the newborn. This also signifies his attachment to his ancestors.²²

Childbirth is an event associated with great honour, respect, and celebration for many African communities. The dark side of it is, however, the lack of provision of medical care and the lack of sound knowledge by the TBA. This results in a lot of maternal complications leading to the very high maternal mortality rates. Moreover, the formation of fistulas due to birthing injuries makes childbirth a nightmare for African women. According to Dr. Kees Waaldijk, a fistula repair surgeon in Nigeria, "to be a woman in Africa is truly a terrible thing." In Nigeria alone, 400000 to 800000 women suffer from untreated fistulas, according to a UN report. Dr. Waaldijk is reported to have repaired 15000 fistulas in 22 years.²³ Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) as well contributes to difficult labour and maternal complications. Women having prolonged and difficult labour are often suspected of infidelity and often pressurized to confess their crime.²⁴

Huge reforms are needed to provide the minimum status of a human being to women in Africa before

aspiring to meet the target of UN's Millennium Development Goals (MDG).

Childhood Rituals in Africa

A very important ritual of childhood is circumcision. Circumcision is not only carried out for males, but it is widely rampant for females as well, known as Female Genital Mutilation (FGM). In Congo, male babies are circumcised between 0-3 weeks after birth. Female circumcision is seen in 5% of Congolese, 95% in Sudanese, and almost 100% in Somalian women.²⁴ This involves the partial or complete removal of the prepuce, clitoris, or labia. It is usually carried out on a young girl child with the parent's consent. Those in favour of this procedure justify it to be not only beneficial for the well-being of her future husband, but also important in controlling her promiscuity. It also maintains her "purity" according to them. In contrast, those who do not undergo "genital cutting" are labeled as "unclean" or a "nymphomaniac."²⁵ These abnormal procedures lead to lifelong health problems, for example, serious infections, menstrual problems, hepatitis, and HIV. Moreover, these women undergo immense psychological trauma, sexual dysfunction, and complications during childbirth.

The upbringing of a child ensures instilling respect for elders in almost all ethnic groups in Africa. Children learn not to make direct eye contact with elders or to initiate a handshake. Moreover, they will bow, kneel down, or even prostrate in front of elders. Strict rules of discipline are maintained.

Girls are often raised to fulfill the household chores. They are observed to be carrying their siblings on their backs although they may not be more than five years old themselves. Once the child starts walking,

he or she is entrusted with many adult responsibilities. Thus the children learn the ways of the world at a very tender age. The girl child is expected to do all household chores tirelessly without complaining, whereas the boys learn to hunt, fight, and make different things, for example, handicrafts, bows, arrows, etc. the male children are considered superior to girls and are thus given preference in providing nutritional diets, education, and health care.

Different ethnic groups have different customs and traditions. A unique custom seen in the *Mursi* tribe is the introduction of a plate or a *dhebi* or *tregoin* in the lower lip of the young girls. Progressively larger plates are put during several months. These plates can be as big as 12cm plates are removed during eating.^{26, 27}

Children are brought up with strange rites and rituals which become an integral part of their beliefs. Thus education and awareness programs are needed to bring the new generation at par with the modern world.

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