

## **CHANGING ROLES OF YORUBA WOMEN AS AN ISSUE IN NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND FAMILY STABILITY**

Olumuyiwa Olusesan FAMILUSI, Ph.D  
Department of Religious Studies,  
Faculty of Arts,  
University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria  
[fameofame@yahoo.com](mailto:fameofame@yahoo.com)

and

Olusegun Peter OKE  
Department of Christian Religious Studies  
Emmanuel Alayande College of Education,  
Oyo, Lanlate Campus, Nigeria  
[okeolusegun25@yahoo.com](mailto:okeolusegun25@yahoo.com)

### **Abstract**

The relevance of women in every culture cannot be ignored. Their contributions to all facets of life are innumerable. However, conflicts have always arisen as to how and where women must play their role. In some cultures and religious traditions, they are to operate behind the scene; this belief is not without some attendant arguments especially in this era of clamour for egalitarianism. Works on various aspects of women studies abound. In such studies, women are seen as endangered species because they are victims of obnoxious cultural practices. They are denied of several rights and opportunities in patriarchal societies. On the other hand, women are believed to be indispensable, hence the importance that is attached to motherhood coupled with their influence in matriarchal societies. In this piece, attention is focussed on changing roles of Yoruba women with emphasis on how such has contributed to national development on the one hand and impaired family stability on the hand. The paper examines their contemporary roles as a response to modern day reality; and the implications of such in all forms. Efforts are

made at resolving the grey areas so as to sustain the family institution, which is cherished in Africa; and at the same time benefit from the invaluable role of women in the society.

## **Introduction**

Every member of the family has specific roles to play towards ensuring harmony both in the family and in the larger society. Some of these roles are mutually exclusive while some are gender and age based. Roles of women in traditional African societies are unique. However, these roles have changed, owing to acculturation, acquisition of western education and civilization. This reality as a matter of fact has both beneficial and harmful effects as shall be established in this paper. Various researches have been carried out on the place of women in society. While many scholars see them as victims of cultural practices others see them as indispensable. The main focus of this work therefore is to examine of the roles of Yoruba women vis-à-vis the changes that have taken place and how such changes have impacted on family stability and national development.

## **Changing role of Yoruba women**

Every sex is indispensable to the formation of a family. Therefore, the relevance of women can not be ignored in the home, community (Falola, 1984:108-109), cultic activities (Ilesanmi 1996:8-9) and economic sphere (Ojo 2004:241). Having given birth to a baby, the sensitive aspects of rearing him or her are undertaken by women. In the past, the mother had to stay at home for months before she began to engage in social, economic and religious activities. Even, with civilization and education in contemporary society, this is still recognized as nursing mothers are entitled to three month maternity leave; and after three months they are allowed to close early so as to take care of new born babies. Mothers are cherished among the Yoruba so much that they are likened to gold. The song below corroborates this attribute

*Iya ni wura iye biye*

*Iya mole f'owo ra*

*O lo yun mi f'osun mesan*

*O panmi f'odun meta*

*Iya n ko je gbage re*

*nibikibi ti mo ba lo*

Mother is precious gold

Mother I don't mind purchasing

She carried my pregnancy for nine months,

and backed me for three years

Mother I will never forget

wherever I may go **(Our translation)**

In the pre-literate society, Yoruba women were preoccupied mainly with house keeping (Morakinyo 2009: 58, Fadipe, 1970: 311) and other roles that were ancillary to those of men. In view of this, they were not always seen or heard. Western education was received with reluctance in most places and the few who were willing to send their children to school did not consider it wise to send the female ones. Therefore, those who had initial exposure to this form of education were largely men. This is attributable to the fact that a woman is seen as property and beast of burden at the mercy of the pleasure of the husband. Hence the mindset that spending money on a female child is tantamount to waste of resources. In the past, some parents felt that if girls should acquire some formal education and were privileged to work, they would surrender their pay packets to their husbands and not their parents (Adebisi, 2009:153). In addition, Adetunji (2001) holds that the African woman is not encouraged to avail herself of educational opportunities; rather she is encouraged to go into such an institution where functional education is acquired to prepare her for motherhood.

At this point we shall examine some of their new roles with a view to seeing how such impact on national development and family stability. It should be remarked that although women have always contributed to development, Most of their contributions were not recognized until the United Nations declared the Decade for Women (1976-1985) making it mandatory for governments to focus on issue of women as an integral component of national development. In 1979, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women. Consequently, other conferences on women were held in Copenhagen, Denmark 1980, Nairobi in Kenya 1985 and Benjing in China 1995, which led to their appreciable emancipation (Jekayinfa 1999:2).

Despite the changing trend, women are still important elements in the family but in a different facet. Of course, their roles in reproductive activities are exclusive and inalienable. Therefore, they remain partners in progress in respect of child bearing. Because of economic melt down, that has characterised the society, many women are now bread winners in their respective families and with this; they may not always have the time to discharge their duties as mothers because of official responsibilities. Even if they are not bread winners, the fact that they are employees of some organisations will impel them to perform dual roles- as mothers in the home and workers in office. The implication of this is that women may not always be responsible for food preparation in places like Lagos, where it takes several hours to get to work and back home after closing.

Experience has shown that expertise is not determined by sex. Therefore, areas that were once controlled by men have been flooded by women. It follows that posts that were not applied for in the past because experts were few are now open to many people. Still on western education, there are several examples to suggest that women were not seriously taken into consideration at the initial stage. A clarification was made by Adebisi Sowunmi (a retired Professor of Archaeology and an advocate of equal rights for women) in a sermon preached at Chapel of The Resurrection, University of Ibadan Nigeria concerning why new students in universities are referred to as 'fresh men'. The reason was that men were the first to have advantage of University education. The same mentality is echoed in professions like Journalism where journalists are conventionally addressed as press men and in the Police force, where members are referred to as Police men. It is only in the age of women liberation that the taxonomy is being changed so as to accommodate female members. Given the fact that women in contemporary time are in virtually all professions, they now have additional responsibilities thereby changing their traditional role.

Today, it is a common practice for husbands and wives not to stay together. That is why some men are referred to week end husbands. In this case, the husband stays at his place of work during the week and joins his family at week end depending on the distance. Some reside in other countries and may not see members of their families for years. This is understandable as the father has a duty to provide for his family. Conversely, experience has shown that some women have assumed economic leadership in the home. Such women go out to engage in

different kinds of work that would fetch them money for the upkeep of the family. This scenario can only be explained in terms of their changing roles. Even when the man remains the bread winner, the economic condition of the day has necessitated the involvement of women to supplement whatever men can afford. Indeed, they are the conspicuous second aspect of the binary system of complementarity, which has to be comprehended and appreciated for peaceful coexistence in this universe in order to maintain a permanent cosmos (Ilesanmi, 1996:9).

It is no longer absolutely fashionable for a woman to be a full time house wife, no matter how wealthy the husband may be. In fact, it is a thing of pride for many women to go to work like men. It has been earlier established that Yoruba women were/are involved in traditional politics. Their involvement has gone beyond that as they have launched themselves into prominence in modern day politics. All major political parties in Nigeria recognise the role women can play; that is why the office of women leader was created at local government, state and national levels. As mothers, they are good mobilisers and they show commitment in whatever they engage in. This clearly explains why political rallies hold in market squares that are usually dominated by women. In the South-Western Nigeria, which is our geographical scope in this work, women are now very prominent in politics. Apart from some of them being members of Houses of Assembly and the National Assembly, chairpersons of local government councils, special advisers, personal assistants and state commissioners, there are at present three female deputy governors and a Speaker; while two serving federal ministers are from the region. It is also on record that the first female speaker of the House of Representatives, Patricia Olubunmi Etteh and the incumbent majority leader are Yoruba women. This is a good starting point and efforts are being made towards having more representation. The establishment of the office of the first lady at all tiers of government alludes to political relevance and activism of women. Without bias, women are understood to be good administrators and that is why the call is consistently made to put them in positions of authority. In 1990, Shina Peter, the Afro- Juju exponent sang in support of giving women chance to rule like what obtained in countries like Britain, India, Phillipine and Nicaragua. Former President Obasanjo seemed to share this idea during his eight-year rule as he integrated women into his

administration putting them in juicy and choice ministries that were hitherto manned by men (Olujinmi, 2009:88).

Traditional Yoruba women have been identified as important religious functionaries. However, their religious functions are not limited to traditional religion. Though, the status of women in Christianity is shrouded in controversy, it is apparent that they are no push over when important decisions are to be taken. In what can be considered to be analogous to political leaders' wives is the office of the wife of the Pastor, Priest, General Overseer or as the case may. This office, though not entirely a new invention is a distinguishing feature of contemporary Christian Ministry; and has given rise to titles such as 'Mother G.O.', 'Mother-in -Israel', Mummy in the Lord among others. In addition to this, there are several churches founded and managed by women. However, Islam a major missionary religion in Yoruba land, places some restrictions on women (Adesope, 2009:170).

In the academia, Yoruba women have broken much ground in contradistinction to a primordial worldview that it 'was' strictly for men. Apart from numerous female professors in different parts of Nigeria, Adetoun Ogunseye, one of the pioneer students of the then University College Ibadan, now the University of Ibadan and Nigeria's first female professor is of the Yoruba extraction (Olujinmi, 2009:78). Others in this category are Bolanle Awe, Jadesola Akande, a one time Vice-Chancellor, Lagos State University, Biola Odejide, first female Deputy Vice Chancellor, University of Ibadan, and Gladys Adeyinka Falusi, who has won several international awards in medical research, among others. The legal profession has also witnessed a significant representation of women both at the Bar and in the Bench. Examples are the current Chief justices of Oyo Badejoko Adeniji and Lagos states, Inunmidu Akande. It is important to note also that Folake Solanke, a Yoruba woman is the first female Senior Advocate of Nigeria. The same thing can be said of the military and Para-military sectors where they have reached enviable status. Not too long ago, a Yoruba woman Itunu Hotonu was promoted to the rank of Rear Admiral in the Nigerian Navy, the first African woman to attain that status (<http://nigeriabestforum.com>). In the field of sports, Falilat Ogunkoya from Ogun State won different laurels for the country including an Olympic medal. Also, we must not forget to

mention that journalism, also known as the pen profession has for a long time been embraced by women. History has it that Anike Agbaje-Williams was the first person to cast News on the then Western Nigeria Television, now NTA Ibadan in 1959. The list of women in public sphere is long; it can never be exhausted in a single medium. From the foregoing, can it still be said that the Yoruba woman is neither seen nor heard? It is not only among the Yoruba that women's role have changed. The wind of women liberation has blown in many parts of Nigeria and Africa, even the northern part of Nigeria that is substantially Islamic has produced many women, who have excelled in their fields of endeavour. A very recent example is the, first female Chief Justice, Aloma Murkthar (Nwannekanma 2012).

### **Implications for National Development and family stability**

This section discusses how changing roles of women affects national development and family stability in Nigeria. The effects are both positive and negative. While the society in general has benefited in so many ways, the family remains a victim, which in return affects the society. The fact that women did not have the same opportunity with men when education was introduced affected their representation in many professions at the initial stage. This did not only affect their emancipation and exposure, it equally led to shortage of manpower in such professions. The implication of this then was that jobs were available but there were no enough hands to man them. This was why many establishments used to engage the services of expatriates to fill the vacuum. However the trend has changed; women have arrived and they are now excelling in all professions. Many of them have broken new grounds in their chosen careers, hence the relevance of the dictum 'what a man can do a woman can do better'. The point being emphasised is that the barrier has been broken; women are no longer inhibited in the matter of education and in effect have significantly contributed to national development in various ways. There is no denying the fact that all the women that we have made reference to in this paper and many others not mentioned are assets to this country and their contributions to national development can not be quantified. Jekayinfa 1999:6 affirms that women are formidable productive force and a store of human resources, which are required for national development. They can dictate the pace and direction of the economy and society. Their sheer numerical strength is enough to jolt cynics. Their contribution cannot be discountenanced in

house hold and national economies. The foregoing wouldn't have been possible if they had not been sent to school or if they had remained full time house wives. Ogunboyede, quoted in Shittu (2009: 159-161) highlights the importance of women education as follows:

- (i) It fosters self-confidence in women and enables them contribute meaningfully to national development.
- (ii) Through their being educated, women are being encouraged to have ability to contribute their talents and skills in the task of national economic revival and survival
- (iii) An educated woman is a better and more useful house wife, mother, and a citizen. She is a community mobilizer and social worker
- (iv) Women education prepares girls for their "main secondary roles" in the building of the nation
- (v) It brings about a change of attitude towards obnoxious traditions and modernizes them so as to be fit for the modern day reality.
- (vi) Women education removes the symbol of marginalization, discrimination, denial of employment opportunities, unscientific traditional beliefs and taboos about marriage and child bearing.

If education is an agent of social change and liberation, and women that constitute a significant percentage of Nigeria's population are educated, it can be logically inferred that education of women has engendered national development. The relevance of women in contemporary politics, which is equally an offshoot of women education, was discussed earlier in this work. Of paramount importance is the institution of the office of the First Lady at the three tiers of government through which several developmental projects have been implemented. Such projects have not only enhanced the status of women but also advanced the course of humanity in the areas of job creation, healthcare delivery and poverty alleviation ( Jekayinfa 1999:5). But a major misgiving about them is the lack of continuity owing to change of government in which case, each first lady has her choice project. Thus previous project are abandoned whenever a new government comes on board.

On the other hand, changing role of women has altered the status quo as far as family stability is concerned. It is not a fiction to say that families are no longer stable nowadays. Of

course, conflicts that endanger unity in the family have arisen especially when it comes to the issue of who heads the family. Should the woman who now shoulders family responsibilities continue to obey her husband in line with the dictate of Yoruba culture or will it be wrong if the husband engages in some domestic chores when the wife who now provides money for the upkeep of the family is at work? If issues like this are not addressed with caution, the family may not stand. Writing on the subject matter among the O-kun, a Yoruba sub-ethnic group, Metiboba (N.D) says that

The increasing emancipation of women on a global scale has resulted in the duality of functions for some educated O-kun women. While some of them are still primarily tied to the domestic chores, a good proportion of them are now found in wage employment outside the home, while simultaneously still bearing the burden of domestic responsibilities. The impact of this development is manifest in a shift in the authority structure of some homes. Some women who have become “bread winners” as a result of their relatively advantaged occupational status now tend to control the major decision-making process in their marital homes (<http://www.unilorin.edu.ng/publications/>).

Conflicts also often arise when there is a need to combine family responsibilities with official responsibilities. The nature of her job determines the intricacy of such conflicts. How will it be possible for a female journalist who is on morning duty to get her children ready for school before leaving for work? Women in this category need understanding husbands in order to guard against marital conflicts. It is not an overstatement to say that several women have at various times resigned their appointment in the interest of the family; and in some cases men do reject juicy appointment in order to ensure that there is no crack in the family. The experience of many female politicians can not be different. In fact, a major challenge to women political participation is from the home in respect of cooperation from their husbands. Odugbemi (2009:104) believes that:

Most men would always want submissive women. They fail to understand that women have their own rights and aspirations too, and that the future of every nation lies on both men and women. There is the constant fear of losing their homes; hence some

Women don't want to come out once there is little resistance from their husbands. These women cannot be blamed if we consider the instructions in the holy books

That women now participate in politics is good for the country if we consider the impact of their involvement on national development. The position of the present Federal Government is that women should occupy at least thirty five percent of political posts in the country both elective and appointive. In spite of this proposal, the percentage of women in state and national assemblies is not significant. Perhaps many of them are apprehensive of losing their homes. Without necessarily committing an error of over generalisation, one can not say how stable the homes of many female politicians are. In fact, the appointment of the new Chief Justice of Nigeria and the first woman to occupy that office was opposed in some quarters on the grounds that she is a single parent (<http://wwwgoogle.com.ng>) This is one of numerous cases of high ranking women who do not have stable homes.

That women have become emancipated, owing to access to western education has impelled them to advocate for their rights based on the belief in equality of the sexes. This is the main goal of feminism, which seeks for equality of men and women in terms of opportunities, liberation, and rights. However, the position of radical feminists is a threat to family stability and destructive of traditional conception of the family. Its advocates seek to:

Create a new social framework as feminist alternatives in every area of life: family, religion, healthcare, marriage e.t.c. To them, women's relationship to men is politically problematic. They brought reproduction into political arena by questioning women's reproductive role and insist that it must be by choice. They support lesbianism and abortion and the right to have children or not. Radical feminism is associated with militancy (Ukpokolo, 2005: 119).

Pathetically, what Africans cherish as family tie or fraternity is fast disappearing as in many families today children recognize house maids as their mothers. The reason is that the real mothers are not always around to take care of them. Many parents including mothers, especially in cities do leave the home before children wake up in the morning and by the time they arrive very late at night, those children would have slept. This has seriously severed motherly

fondness. As a solution to this problem, children are now sent to boarding schools. It is not very interesting to note that many nursery and primary schools now operate boarding system. How would children who are brought up in such environment experience parental care? Another method is to engage them in private lesson after school while also, they attend summer school during holidays. This is the experience of many children today. Unarguably, it will be difficult for them to have proper upbringing. According to a Yoruba saying: *maa se 'ya kole dabi iya-* it is not possible for whoever is acting as a mother play the role of the real mother. Therefore one can not expect them to treat children under their care as mothers would have done. The hostility of some people to their house maids has further exacerbated their care free attitude about the children they are paid to take care of. On a sensitive note, several cases of broken homes are attributable to women abandoning their family responsibilities to house maids. If a house maid is charged with the responsibilities of cooking for the family, laying bed and keeping the company of the husband when his wife is away, one must not be surprised if she eventually becomes the second wife. Of course, other risks are involved in hiring house helps. Many of them come from different parts of Nigeria and neighbouring countries, and often - times, some of them do disappear with money and other belongings of those who hired them.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has examined contemporary roles of Yoruba women, which are symptomatic of a paradigm shift from their traditional roles as wives, mothers and home keepers. They are now seen in various walks of life. Unlike in the past when it would hardly be imagined that women could be medical doctors, pilots, engineers, pharmacists among others. This trend is both beneficial and detrimental as has been asserted. Though the society has benefited from it because the contributions of women to national development in various aspects are enormous, the family is at the receiving end as cases of separation, instability and divorce now abound. Moral values have drastically been eroded because children are no longer catered for like before, which will no doubt impede national development in that they are future leaders. There is obvious dilemma. Should the society go back to the ancient time when women were rarely seen or heard so that traditional values will revived? This is practically impossible in

the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Alternatively, should they continue to contribute to national development at the expense of family system, which is cherished in Africa? The only way to strike a balance is to resolve the grey areas, on this note we recommend as follows. Where and when necessary, husbands should cooperate with their wives by ensuring that changing roles does not lead to acrimony in the family. On the other hand, women should exercise caution in getting involved in politics and pursuing careers especially when their children are still young. It will not speak well if the family is destroyed because of the involvement of women in the affairs of the larger society. It should be remarked that women have always been fundamental factors in governance; in the traditional society they were stake holders but not at the neglect of their roles as mothers.

Children are the leaders of tomorrow and the family is the basic unit of the society. Whatever happens at the home front has a way affecting larger society; either positively or negatively. It follows that if the home is not stable, one could deduce what is going to obtain at the level of the society. We must not forget a Yoruba aphorism that “*omo laso, omo tia ko ba ko ni yoo gbe ile tia ko ta*”. Children are the clothes we wear, any child that is not trained will destroy the legacy of his or her parents.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Adebisi, K.S. (2009). “Education of Rural Women: Catalyst to Achieving Vision 2020” in” in Kehinde, A. (Ed) *Gender and Development: Essential Reading*, Ibadan: Hope Publications Ltd.
- Adesope, D.A. (2009). “Gender and Religion: An Analytical Exploration of Women’s Limitations from Islamic Perspective” in Kehinde, A. (ed) *Gender and Development: Essential Reading*, Ibadan: Hope Publications Ltd.
- Adetunji, H.A. (2001). “Re-Orientating the African Woman Today” in Akintunde, D.O. (Ed) *African Culture and the Quest for Women’s Right*, Ibadan: Sefer.
- Fadipe, N.A. (1970). *Sociology of the Yoruba*, Ibadan: Ibadan University Press.
- Falola, T. (1984). “The Political System of Ibadan”. in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century” in Ade Ajayi, J.F. and Ikare, B. (eds) *Evolution of Political Culture in Nigeria*, Ibadan: University Press Limited .
- Ilesanmi, T.M. (1996). “The Ingenuity of Yoruba Women in the Worship of Orinlase in Ilawe-Ekiti” in *Orita: Ibadan Journal of Religious Studies*, xxxviii/1- 2.

- Jekayinfa, A.A. (1999) "The role of Nigerian women in Culture and National Development" in *Journal of Education and Practice*. 5(1&2).
- Morakinyo, O.W., (2009). "A Religious Appraisal of Parental Responsibility in the Home: A case Study of Ibadan City" B.A. Long Essay, University of Ibadan.
- Odugbemi, J.B. (2009). "Women and Political Participation in Nigeria: Challenges and Prospect" in Kehinde, A. (ed) *Gender and Development: Essential Reading*, Ibadan: Hope Publications Ltd.
- Ojo, E.D. (2004). "Women and the Family" in Lawal, N.S., Sadiku, M.N.O and Dopamu, A. (Eds) *Understanding Yoruba Life and Culture*, Trenton N.J.: Africa World Press Inc.
- Olujinmi, B. (2009). "Integrating Women in Nigeria Polity for Growth and Development: Perspective from Obasanjo's Administration (1999-2007), in Kehinde, A. (ed) *Gender and Development: Essential Reading*, Ibadan: Hope Publications Ltd.
- Shittu, A.K. (2009). "Education of Rural Women: Catalyst to Achieving Vision 2020 Objectives in Nigeria" in Kehinde, A. (ed) *Gender and Development: Essential Reading*, Ibadan: Hope Publications Ltd.
- Ukpokolo, F.C.(2005). "Gender Politics and African Culture: Concepts, Issues and Practices" in Oguntomisin , G.O. and Edo, V.O. (eds). *African Culture and Civilization*, Ibadan: GSP University of Ibadan.

#### Internet Source

- "How Jonathan sidelined forces against new CJN" in <http://www.google.com.ng>, accessed on 23<sup>rd</sup> July 2012.
- Metiboba, S.O. (N.D) "The Changing Roles of the Family in Socialization Process: The Case of The O-Kun Yoruba" in <http://www.unilorin.edu.ng/publications/>, accessed on 17-07-12
- "Nigeria gets first female Rear Admiral" in NBF News (<http://www.nigeriabestforum.com>, accessed on 14<sup>th</sup> July 2012.
- Nwannekanma, B. (2012) "Aloma Mukthar: A Woman of History" in (<http://www.ngrguardian.com>, accessed on 1th July, 2012.