The Place of Social Work in Preserving Human Rights in Context of Changing Gender Roles in Nigeria

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Abstract: - **Contemporary struggles between genders have ensued changes in gender roles, with relative harmful implications for family and societal members. This has occasioned implications for human rights, thus creating relevance for the social work profession in managing such change. This paper utilized the rational choice theory in justifying core reasons people derive from maximizing their potentials and fulfilling their goals. The paper stuck to secondary sources of data collection and concluded that these changing gender roles occasion cases of human rights concerns which cut across various levels of practice. Hence, social workers as stakeholders in human rights fields should play the role of professionals with relevant skills and knowledge to achieve successful management of the inevitable change.**

Keywords: **Gender roles, social work, rational choice, human rights**

I. INTRODUCTION

Issues of gender have been of enormous concerns to governing bodies, communities, families, and individuals. In most cases, arguments of supremacy, role appropriateness, and access to resources form the bedrock of gender issues (Sefinatu, 2014; Akintan, 2013). With such profiled arguments, those featuring socioeconomic, political and cultural significance, have been captured within frameworks of human rights, with emphasis on bridging gaps over inadequacies. Attributes of these shortcoming deal with gender dissatisfaction and constitutes a product of the dynamic consciousness of societal change (Nwosu, 2012; Omodjohwoefe, 2011). The order of the society cannot remain the same over time since respective genders keep looking out for ways to get satisfied with consequences on their roles. In a bid to get happy, impacts of human rights significance are bound to occur between relationships of gender categories and those around them. Such calls for reconciliation within the domain of human rights protection. It becomes evident that social work as a profession deals mainly with human rights faces tending toward being the best fit for the provision of such sought after reconciliation (Thompson, 2006; Coulshed & Orme, 2006).

Gender is a sociological construct different from natural positions of sex, which is male versus female. Therefore, the sociological implication that gender has a definition that emphasizes roles which differs from natural views of sex, as proven and accepted by the individual is questionable. Hence, gender can be argued to be socially prescribed roles along sex lines (United Nations, 2006; Otite & Ogionwo, 2006; Igbo, 2003). Thus, a person's sex could be defined by roles played or vice-versa. Gender conflicts now question societal instituted and socialized roles, thereby sticking to viewpoints contrary to their hierarchy and normative differences (Ogege, 2011; Nnoruga, 2009). Such assumption fuels the feelings that societal instituted and socialized roles tend to suffocate the satisfaction and tendencies of fulfillment for genders. With the apparent changing order, recent trend stimulates some form of concerns for principles of human rights (Nwosu, 2012).

Historically, African societies shared power between men and women (Sefinatu, 2014; Asiyanbola, 2005; Engels, 1962). As such, the wellbeing of members of the community depended on whose shoulder power reposed. With time, a changing order was instituted, which threatened the earlier exercise of monopoly at both extremes (Menon, 2012; Sanday, 2008; Agwu, Atumah, Okoye, 2016). With the newest order, gender roles tend not to be what they have always been. Females now feel a normative sense of undertaking traditionally male responsibilities, and vice versa. This new order has occasioned conflicts at family levels and as well the broader society which has become topical in human rights discourses (Setlalenta, n.d; Oluwafolahan & Kuponiyi, 2013). Having established choices to reject or accept traditional ideologies, one can argue that the duties of social workers cannot be neglected.

Fundamentally, defining human rights seems not far from the dignity of a person, unfettered worth, and promotion of egalitarianism and fairness for everyone. They seek to protect people from cases of deprivation, frustration, and abuse (United Nations, 2006; Obasi, 2007; Pierson & Thomas, 2010). Social work, as reflected in its professional scope of engaging people and structure to enhance the wellbeing of service users, given principles of justice, human rights, and collective responsibility. The average social worker aims to challenge forces of inequality, oppression, and

inequity as they impede the fulfillment of potentials of people (International Federation of Social Work [IFSW], 2014; Reamer, 2009). In essence, if a person cannot responsibly fulfil societal ascribed gender roles, social workers through empowerment, advocacy, mediation, or outright confrontation may intervene. Also, if changing gender roles would affect the fulfillment of potentials of a third party, social workers are also professionally obliged to act (Jaspers & O'Callaghan, 2010; Payne, Adams & Dominelli, 2009). The essence of human rights is to appreciate and value the feelings and concerns of others.

In place of the preceding, there is a need to correct the impression that whenever gender issues are discussed, feminism tends to resurface. This paper considers human rights from every respect which might have males, females, extended family, or even children as victims. For instance, by changing gender roles where women and men participate in the workforce, the rights of quality care for children could be grossly affected. This culminates to human rights consideration for these children as well. In fulfillment of the above, this paper would take an objective look into human rights of all stakeholders, in the face of changing gender roles relationship in Nigeria and the influence of social workers in maintaining societal and family balance. It is in hopes of aaccomplishing such task that this paper seems sharply different from related works to the theme under study (Ogege, 2011; Sefinatu, 2014; Nwosu, 2012; Oluwafolahan & Kuponiyi, 2013; Vijayasiri, 2011; Omodjowoefe, 2011).

II. THEORETICAL ORIENTATION

Rational Choice Theory

The rational choice theory emphasizes making informed decisions and can also be referred to as cost-benefit analysis (Abella, 2008). It fundamentally asserts that individuals would always have preferences and reasons for actions which must be beneficial to them before they make choices ofparticipateein changes (Amadae, 2003). The theory seeks to link cost-benefit analysis with choice making. Therefore, preferences or behaviours are said to be rational if aimed at achieving goals capable of being evaluated and consistent over some time (Grenfell, 2008).

Gender roles being an elementary unit of social life reside within the individual and human action, and are subject to review when deemed necessary. Changing gender roles will be best explained using the interactional framework exercised through the effort of individuals. Therefore, societal developmental perspective based on aggregated consequences of change occurs at the level of individuals (Elster, 1989; Sato, 2013). Therefore, there is need to protect and promote human rights by adopting the approach that will produce the "greatest good".

Individuals are bound to take up new gender roles they feel will help them to fulfill their goals or satisfy their needs. A married woman can request the help of her husband in preparing meals while working towards an academic goal. (Corcoran, 2012; Omoregie, &Ikensekhien, 2009). By such a decision, there is the possibility of her children not getting the desired care and the husband not providing the needed assistance. From the perspective of human rights, the children might lose their right to quality care, but their mother may still be fulfilled. It is possible that asking for help could result to a conflict between the couple as the husband may have a different point of view from that of the wife. To this end, rational choice theory argues that changing gender roles in the society today, is as a result of attempts to satisfy alternativegoals. Therefore, roles are replaced in pursuit of better options (Elster, 2007). This alternative driven approach to role replacement is applicable to politics, culture, domestic and macro economy, among other areas of human endeavor.

III. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Change is bound to promote conflict, but at the same time, it also inevitable in societies. It ensures productivity and makes genderroles to become prominent. The pursuit for gender equality and equity at various societal levels have become more pronounced (Menon, 2012). In the event of current tide, human rights concerns demand crucial services of social workers to leverage on humanitarian and democratic ideals to protect interests of persons affected during the change process.

Several scholars have written on changing gender roles from different perspectives. Asiyanbola (2005) did a study on the roles of women and men in a patriarchal society. He maintained that gender roles at domestic levels remain unchanged because young boys and girls continue to be socialized in traditional masculine and feminine family roles. Therefore, at the domestic levels, gender roles could be said to be static. Nevertheless, the author pointed out that his study revealed increasing involvement of females in business and career pursuits that are not consistent with the expectations of their spouses. Thus, it is inarguable that these new trends of family role could be responsible for raising human rights concerns, which social workers are at the forefront.

On the contrary, Sefinatu (2014) believes that changing gender roles remain evident in every sphere of the Nigerian society, including the family. The author attributed this to cultural accumulation and globalization. Hence, males are forced to take up the responsibilities of females because females are tending toward the traditional duties of men. He finally asserted the existence of conflicts in the entire system because of inherent patriarchy in Nigerian society, however, he failed to provide recommendations capable of resolving these conflicts exerting stress on human rights.

In another discourse, Nwosu (2012) noted that the cultural practices, public opinion, religions, laws, and customs in Nigeria, to a very large extent influence discriminations among gender roles. He maintained that Nigerians are yet to appreciate this change, given its benefits in some other parts

of the world. This has led to the inclusion of new orientation of gender roles into frameworks of human rights concerns. The orientations should be carried out through media sensitizations, religious-based teachings, community organizations and policy initiatives. By these recommendations, the role of social workers cannot be overemphasized (Okoye, 2008; Okafor, 2004; Iwarimie-Jaja, 2002). Nevertheless, the author failed to point out the shortcomings of changing gender roles in respect to how they affect human rights of a broad network of persons within the relationship framework.

Ogege (2011) share the view that Nigerian indigenous cultural practices make the polity obstinate to changing gender roles, as he posits that the society remains male-dominated. However, he disclosed that females are beginning to look into dropping specific traditional roles that make them servitudes to males. Women are reconsidering their traditional positions and asking how it will benefit them, andhow well those traditional roles will help women to become relevant in the promotion of inclusive development for the nation. The author believes that eschewing gender role discrimination is a panacea for development of Nigeria. He recommended that efforts must be made toward changing gender discriminating socialization models in Nigeria while utilizing policies to foster and consolidate the gains of changing gender roles in all spheres of societal development. To this end, the absence of such equity, especially on sides of the aggrieved gender, will bring to the fore, implications for human rights vis-à-vis professional services of social workers (Ogundipe&Edewor, 2012).

Duruji, Azuh, Oviasogie, and Ajayi (2014) noted that changing gender roles are relative to different societies within Nigeria. While increasingly being experienced in some, gender role is culturally suppressed in others. For instance, the Igbo society has witnessed an increase in some areas like active participation of women in business and career due to their enterprising nature. On the contrary, the Hausa-Fulani communities hitherto still grapple with challenges of female involvement in top-notch areas of societal organization. Hence, gender roles in Igbo society seem to be more changing than those in Hausa-Fulani communities. This could also be applicable to other areas. In this regard, Duruji et al. (2014) recommend sensitive cultural approaches to change gender roles, implying that intervention should be more focused on certain areas than others if change must be diligently and evenly managed.

At this juncture, it is apparent that changing gender role is an integral part of the developmental evolution of the Nigerian society. It is equally apparent that indigenous cultural practices of Nigerian cultures do not entirely support the change. Nonetheless, literature revealed that these changing gender roles exercise some commendable influences on the developmental framework of the Nigerian society (Agwu, Atumah & Okoye, 2016; Ogege, 2011; Nwosu, 2012; Menon, 2012). Notwithstanding, regardless of the conflicts it

brings which occasion human rights concerns, it must be managed for productive reasons.

Among such professionals who are deemed relevant to managing the situation are social workers. Supporting the preceding is Okoye (2008) who made a case for the practical inclusion of social workers into the structure of the human rights framework. This is sequel to changes in the society which is inclusive of changing gender roles. She argues that these changes are capable of creating issues of injustices, which will impede the development of individuals' potentials if left unchecked. Therefore, her positions dwelt on social workers utilizing tools of human rights education to foster a consciousness of human rights culture from psychological and sociological perspectives.

IV. SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND GENDER ROLES

According to IFSW (2014) definition of social work practice, it is a practice-based profession and educational discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. It further emphasizes that social workers are staunch promoters of the principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility, and diversities. Social workers engage structures and people for enhancing wellbeing and addressing challenges of life. On such defined precedent, it is technically clear that the social worker is relevant to cases of human rights concerns and social justice while advancing wellbeing for people. Situations of human rights orchestrated by the advent of changing gender roles are obtainable at the interconnections of micro, mezzo, and macro levels (Idyorough, 2013).

There is bound to be conflict when a man is forced to take up domestic roles, and yet, the wife who is earning a salary refuse to make financial contributions to the family. Reason being that the husband may not effectively provide for the children and meet other family needs, which inadvertently will amount to denying quality care to the children. The woman, on the other hand, has the right to fulfill her potentials through her career. Asking her to halt her career implies depriving her of her right to life and socioeconomic relevance. This is a clear case of human rights being occasioned by changing gender roles at the interplay of micro and mezzo levels. On the other hand, the presence of gender role discriminatory practices and policies that could exercise some level of restrictions on the maximization of gendered potentials, bring cases of human rights at macro level to the forefront (Dominelli, 2009; Thompson, 2006).

Social workers are expected to tackle these issues utilizing micro, mezzo, and macro approaches of the profession (Teater, 2010). At micro levels, social workers adopt counselling and behavior modification techniques in bringing to the knowledge of people, consequences of certain changes they make, given their gender role specifications.

They also use these techniques in providing affected persons with knowledge and skills on how to manage these consequences in such ways that members of the system will not be deprived of their rights. In doing this, social workers endeavor to be culturally sensitive and non-judgmental (Coulshed& Orme, 2006; Okoye, 2008).

Social workers are trained professionals in the dynamics of group work, which is crucial at mezzo levels. Here, they organize family therapy sessions for families that are affected by changing gender roles. Family members are made to freely discuss their deprivations and grievances as a result of the absence of the gains of specific roles due to sought after changes. Social workers equally organize forums for people with everyday problems associated with changing gender roles, for the benefits of learning from shared experiences. This could similarly be therapeutic (Okafor, 2004). In events where these changes occasion rift between family members and leading to physical and psychological violence, social workers intervene using instruments of mediation, conflict management, motivational counselling, behavioral techniques, and at extremes, aligns with the principle of self-determination to seek specialized services.

At macro levels, social workers utilize advocacy, policy pointers/considerations, academic research, social actions, community sensitization, inter alia, to preserve the rights of persons in the context of changing gender roles. For instance, the mother in the above reference could be made to give more attention to her family, if the social worker can provide for lobbying and advocacy strategies that could be used to influence her workplace policies to be more accommodating. Research conducted by social workers could also bring to the fore the realities of these changes and their consequences, thereby, stimulating necessary and relevant actions.

Furthermore, in the event of discrimination and oppression, social workers utilize advocacy, social actions, among other anti-oppressive strategies, to challenge such level of deprivation and frustration (Teater, 2010). Through community sensitization, they discuss the implications of changing gender roles at diverse forums, taking into consideration their strengths and shortcomings. Cultural practices that impede the gains of changing gender roles are challenged by social workers through policy formulation, conscientiousness, appropriate social actions, and legal redress (Ogundipe & Edewor, 2012).

The crux of this paper remains that central to the involvement of social workers in events of changing gender roles is the protection and promotion of human rights as a way of managing the change. In order to give such quest a human face, social workers are obliged to professionally factor the interests of several stakeholders in human relationship amidst considerations of best genders roles. They are obliged to commit themselves professionally in assisting those who are in pursuit of their best roles, for the purpose of fulfilling their potentials. This could be achieved through clinical engagements, family therapy, advocacy, mediation, resource generation/linkages, motivational counselling, social action and policy consideration (Okoye, 2014; Teater, 2010; Chukwu, Ebue, Obikeguna, Okala, Okafor & Agwu, 2016).

On the other side, social workers must be professionally rational in ensuring that rights of those who are dependent on individuals wishing to change their gender roles for cost-benefit reasons are protected. More so, social workers exhibit competency in reconciling issues ensuing from changes with the demands of harmless indigenous cultural practices, and in the event of frustrating circumstances, social workers take to constructive measures in challenging them, and very key to achieving this is dialectics (Teater, 2010; Idyorough, 2008). Conclusively, managing gender role changes by social workers must be done in defense of the most rational human rights in every context, following principles of the greater good and least harm upon consequences of actions. Therefore, the focus of social workers is to ensure societal balance amidst inevitable changes (Reamer, 2009; Coulshed & Orme, 2006; Okafor, 2004).

V. CONCLUSION

Changing gender roles have proven to be inevitable in today's Nigeria. They are premised on the fact that humans are constantly in search of what will benefit them as put forward by the rational choice theory. As a result, more people are moving towards those roles that will be instrumental to the fulfillment of their potentials and development. Such development is welcomed at different levels of society. However, such change could occasion conflict on the grounds of those who are not in support of it and those who tend to be affected negatively by it. Both grounds imply pertinent human rights concerns at micro, mezzo, and macro levels of the society.

Challenging such concerns of human rights craves the relevance of social workers who are trained to engage people and structures for the purpose of enhancing human wellbeing. They do so through principles of greater good and least harm while rationalizing the actions and consequences of change on the individuals who change their roles. Therefore, social workers as change agents are established as key actors in change management all over the world, with vital areas of gender squabbles and human rights being of huge interest. This puts forward the urgent imperativeness of consolidating the profession of social work which have scaled through readings and approvals of parliament.

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