The Religious Root of Nigerian patriarchy

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A whopping 70 percent of women in Nigeria have been abused at some point in their lives. In a country where religion is the order of the day, a stalwart religious patriarchy enforces a gendered order of submission that ensures that this disturbing statistic will remain where it is. Here, patriarchal structures and harmful gender stereotypes still exist, and women still experience systematic denial and marginalization.

It works like this: Religious leaders in Nigeria still believe that men are the only right choice in leading not only religious groups, but also almost any aspect in which women are seen as leaders. This has, in turn, made men think of themselves as superior in intellect and otherwise, even to the point of dictating what women should or shouldn't do. Women all over the world are fighting to be heard, but the voices of women in Nigeria have been particularly muted by religion — an issue that compounds our situation, leaving us expected to keep quiet about our abuse. Here, fighting to be heard and treated equally is seen as disobedience to both God and man.

Being born and brought up in a very religious home in Nigeria, I grew up hearing the saying "Women are meant to be submissive to their men." But at an early age, I really did not know more than this and accepted it as a normal way of life. My first conscious experience with how wrong this felt was during a Christian seminar for teenagers. The minister said something that has stayed with me since: "Women are the main reason men become abusive towards them." I knew everything about that sentence was wrong.

Years later, I would notice that women were never given certain roles in my church and that everything was being run by the menfolks. For example, the pastor of my church was my aunt's husband and knew he was very abusive to his wife. On many occasions, she ran out of the house to stay at our place and at some point was even hospitalized. No one said anything to anyone in our family but we all knew. "Women need to be put to their place" was a very popular saying of his.

I changed churches at 15, but it wasn't much different from where I was coming from. On one occasion, I asked the pastor of my new church why women were never given any role of authority in the church. His excuse was Jesus had no female disciples — and not just that. He also said that women brought with them a whole lot of confusion and are too emotional to handle stress. Needless to say, a year later I left this church.

I couldn't help but notice that people across the country had similar beliefs regardless of their religion. Even more, the Pentecostal doctrines have created a more equal platform, incorporating all genders, giving credence to equal partnership among men and women. Being a branch of Christian denomination, it has saturated itself as a neutral equality center for women. As such, women are allowed to own their parishes, women minister, women are pastors, women counsel in Pentecostal churches, and women lead side by side with men.

On a daily basis, women are criticized for their choices of clothes and hairstyles. Often this leads to them getting harassed and stripped on the streets, and even at marketplaces, for wearing anything above the knee or what they perceive to be too revealing for a woman. To date, most workplaces, organizations, and even churches have mandated a dress code for women. Here is where feminism plays an important role, in helping Nigeria women fight for their basic human right, to be heard and acknowledged.

Unfortunately, the idea of feminism in Nigeria itself has been identified as a threat to men. Patriarchal structures dictate that being submissive and loyal no matter the circumstances is what a good religious woman should be. This doesn't speak for any one religion, but rather for all: Women who identify as feminist in Nigeria are criticized and mocked using all means to dissuade us from the very idea. This in itself I believe is a psychological game to mentally break us down and keep us passive in the face of true horrors.

This is not just a Nigerian or African problem. But the fight for young African feminists in Nigeria is for simple acknowledgement, which has proven particularly difficult. Nigeria remains a deeply religious country, where old African cultures and traditions are still enforced through the likes of Christianity and Islam (these being the most popular religious groups here in Nigeria). The common ground for zealots of both of those imported persuasions is their total agreement on the second-class nature of women, their bodies, and their rights. Imagine two conflicting religions finally agreeing not on anything but this terrible idea.

No wonder, then, that most women in positions of power are severely criticized by men for being too emotional or too strict and are often labeled as rude; this especially is not just a problem faced by women in Nigeria, but rather a global phenomenon. (Never mind that these are the very same attributes that make men in similar positions more successful and rewarded.) Most men in Nigeria still believe that women should not even be allowed to talk in certain social situations.

All this is just highlighting some challenges faced by women in Nigeria — but how could a solution be created? I believe that the first step to ending these abuses in Nigeria/Africa would be to further promote gender equality to prevent discrimination against women. Also, it is instructive to fight against the idea that men are better than women in religious settings and to create laws to protect against all forms of abuse against women. In addition, it is important to raise awareness of the dangers of harmful traditional values. But most of all, it is important to create a safe environment where victims of such abuses can speak without the fear of being bullied or blacklisted by their families. As such, the Nigerian patriarchy sets the parameters for women structurally.

Nigeria in itself is a country plagued with inequality and corruption at all stages. It is a given that women will most often suffer the burnout of this. So what are we to do? Patriarchy, to me, has been

a major feature of many societies, but other societies have gradually adjusted, and as such it can be adjusted here also. The country is currently seeing its share of revolution in areas that were seen lacking. People of all ages have come together to gradually speak up against injustice. The last decade especially has seen efforts toward some level of structural change in terms of gender equality in Nigeria by both men and women, but mostly by millennials. We have seen it pop up in the form of protests about gender pay disparities, political structural reform that enables women to be elected to offices, and advocate work against domestic violence.

But to a large extent, the work in this movement comes from women who have used their growing voices to speak out against patriarchal abuse that is built on strict religious structures, change they say is constant the new generation of parents have learned from the burnout that occurs when children's emotional and mental health are not well addressed and cared for by adults. This neglect has resulted in toxic masculinity that has also paraded itself as the patriarchal power in Nigeria. Most religious leaders have become outspoken about how wrong the accepted norm is and have encouraged the youth to do better than the previous generations. Seeing as the youth of today are the leaders of tomorrow, this is a great starting point, although it requires a lot of work and time. I believe that all these efforts will stir Nigeria to the right path. Patriarchy has no solid stands in traditional values, which may seem confusing to most, as old African religion differs completely depending solely on one's origin or region of traditional belief. For example in some settings of traditional beliefs women are held in extremely high esteem where abuse of any kind against women is frowned upon — and in other cases not so much.

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