

Harmful Traditional Practices in Nigeria and Measures for Eradication: An Educology of Home Education

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Abstract

Educology is the fund of knowledge about education, and the educology of home education is the fund of knowledge about the educational process as it functions within cultural and social setting of the family and the home. The educational process consists of intentionally teaching and studying under guidance something in some cultural, social, and physical setting. Within traditional Nigerian home education, many aspects of it are good, but some features are patently harmful to the individual and to the society at large. These practices are well intentioned, but misguided and misinformed. There exists a need to expose and eradicate these deleterious practices from traditional home education.

Introduction

Within traditional home education in many parts of Nigeria, there are some unquestionably harmful traditional practices. In this educological study, some of these practices are identified, and the underlying traditional rationale for the practice is explicated. The deleterious consequences of the practice are enumerated in terms of the undesirable effects on the individual, the family, the nation at large and the process of national development. Finally, some measures necessary for eradication of these practices

are outlined.

Harmful Traditional Practices

Nigeria is bedevilled with a number of harmful home education practices. They are harmful both to individuals and to the process of national development. Some of these include early marriages, female circumcision, male child preference, child labour and begging assistance.

What makes these traditional home education practices harmful? For the large part, the practices constitute physical and mental abuse of children. In the context of this study, children are taken to be individuals from birth to 14 years of age. Child abuse within the context of this study is taken to be any practice which is detrimental to the child's well rounded development, including their physical, emotional, conative and intellectual development. Abuse encompasses both overt abuse and negligent treatment of children.

In the Workshop on "Child Labour in Africa" (1986) held at Enugu, a number of child abuse issues were identified. The issues included, not only the onerous conditions and consequences of child labour, but also deleterious practices used in childbirth and in rearing and caring for infants and young children.

It was acknowledged at the Workshop that most women, even those in urban settings, preferred home delivery to hospital delivery. It has been part of their home education that girls are taught that home delivery is the best, and it continues to be a tradition with which women feel comfortable. There is nothing inherently harmful in home deliveries, but in Nigerian home deliveries, it has been typical that local traditional implements are used in the process. Blades are typically unsterilized. Sometimes, not

knives, but blades of grass are used to cut the child's umbilical cord. Such practices introduce easily avoidable infection and jeopardise the life of the newborn child with fatal diseases such as tetanus.

The pattern of child abuse has continued, the Workshop acknowledged, with the practice of handing care of the newborn child over to an inadequately trained and qualified house maid. The maid may never have had any previous experience in child care. The mental and physical condition of the maid is hardly known. Because it is a low paid and low status job, the maid typically originates from a disadvantaged situation with little formal schooling and may have suffered malnutrition and may carry a set of debilitating infectious diseases such as malaria and tuberculosis. The child is consequently abused by being negligently exposed to inadequate care and infectious diseases.

The pattern of abuse has continued with the widespread practice of female circumcision. Girls at the threshold of puberty have traditionally been circumcised as a mark of their maturity and traditional identity as mature women. Girls have traditionally been taught through home education within their families that it is right and proper to be circumcised. While many dread it, many girls also anticipate their circumcision with pride, for it marks their entry into womanhood and their acceptance as an adult woman. Practices vary, but the labia or clitoris or both may be surgically removed in a female circumcision. This is traditionally done without anaesthetics, antiseptics or antibiotics. Traditionally very elderly women, who have no appreciation of the dangers of infection from unsterilized instruments, perform the circumcision. The girls are held down, and the old women cut away. The complications can

be horrendous. They include fatal loss of blood, death from shock, fatal infections, extensive scarring, complications in child birth and extreme pain during sexual intercourse.

Another area of traditional abuse of children has been that of agricultural labour. Through home education, children are taught that they have an obligation to their parents to generate income for the family. Poverty stricken parents have hired out their children as farm hands to earn money for the family. It has been typical for the children to be terribly exploited. They have been overburdened, overworked and underfed or malnourished. In some cases, they have been indentured, i.e. sold into an extended period of work which closely resembles slavery.

A practice related to child labour has been that of using children for begging. The children have traditionally been used as assistants to help a blind beggar collect money. Some parents have made available their children, especially their girls, to beggars as assistants, and in return, they are compensated with a small fee from the beggar's takings. The children involved have been deprived of schooling and exposed to numerous hazards and risks, including injury from traffic accidents, sexual assault and rape, exposure to weather and infections. Pneumonia is a not uncommon health hazard for begging assistants.

In addition to agricultural labour and begging assistants, children are used by parents in street trading. Again, children are taught in their home education that they have the duty to assist their parents in generating income, and the children are used in trading in the streets. Children either assist their parents, or they set up street stalls on their own or they simply roam the streets in the pursuit of trading goods to people passing by. This practice often deprives the children of their opportunity to attend school, and it exposes

them to a wide range of dangers and hazards including physical abuse, sexual assault and rape. There is, of course, no harm in a mother asking her daughter to assist in her street sales. The child abuse arises when the child is deprived of schooling, or the child is exposed to the dangers of sexual assault and physical abuse.

Early marriage is another harmful traditional practice. Through home education, girls are taught that marriage is a highly desirable, even essential achievement, and that marriage must be achieved as early as possible. This push for early marriage results in many girls entering into marriage as soon as they reach puberty.

At age 13 or 14, they are still far from physically and emotionally mature. As young wives, they are expected to bear children, and they themselves, through their home education, accept and even enthusiastically embrace this expectation. But they do not have the physical maturity to go through the trauma of child birth. Many have prolonged and difficult labour, and many die in the process of giving birth.

Among those who survive, one of the most troublesome complications is vesico vaginal fistula (VVF). Because the girl does not have a fully developed pelvic region, it is not uncommon for a girl to suffer a ruptured bladder when giving birth. The pelvis is basically too small to accommodate the birthing process, and the pressure from the muscular contractions during child birth ruptures the bladder. This can be repaired surgically, and it usually is. But, the expectation placed upon a young wife is that she bear several children. Repeated childbirths and repeated rupturing of the bladder eventually results in the bladder becoming irreparable. The bladder then leaks urine constantly. This condition is VVF.

Women with VVF suffer the humiliation of constantly leaking urine and smelling of urine. Their husbands abandon them and go marry other women. Their parents reject them. They become social outcasts. One of the saddest sights in Nigerian hospitals is that of young girls with urine bags attached to them wandering the halls.

Another ugly feature of the emphasis in home education for children to earn income for their families is that of child prostitution. The pattern is typically that of an experienced prostitute recruiting girls from poverty stricken parents to engage in child prostitution. A variation of this scenario is the situation in which certain hotels give accommodation to homeless children in return for a percentage of the earnings from prostitution. This is child exploitation of the most vile kind. It virtually destroys the life chances of the child, and it perpetuates the cycle of sexually transmitted diseases, including the deadly acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS), which is rampant in Nigerian society.

Nigeria is indisputably a male dominated society, and this male domination is manifested in home education and in many other ways. Parents prefer to have male children rather than females. They would rather send their sons to school than their daughters. When they are forced by financial circumstances to make a choice, they will even arrange for the early marriage of their young teenage girls in order to use the bride price or bride prize (or in western terms, the dowry) to finance the schooling of their sons.

When wives are widowed, they are often stripped of any claims to inheritance from their husband's estate. There have been many cases of the husband's family completely stripping the widow of all her assets and forcing her to leave the home she shared with her husband. Picture a situation in which a woman has had a considerable number of

children for her husband, the husband dies, the husband's family forces the widow to leave and refuses to allow her to take any assets with her, not even the property which she acquired together with her husband. This is patently unfair, but the husband's family believes vehemently that this right because they have been taught that it is right through their traditional home education.

On the other hand, in situations in which the woman has established an estate prior to her marriage, if she predeceases her husband, he claims all or her estate. This is traditional, and the belief that this is right is perpetuated through traditional home education, even though it is again patently unfair.

Through traditional home education, the disadvantaged status of women is perpetuated in the consequent attitudes of both males and females, and this cultural tradition of disadvantaged female status undermines the national process of economic and social development.

Realizing the economic risks and hazards of marriage, many Nigerian women enter into matrimony with mixed feelings. They feel ambivalent, both blessed and cursed. In their own self defense, many women establish secret accounts and acquire assets which they hide from their husband as an insurance against the possibility of his premature death. The quality of a marriage relationship is substantially diminished when there is so much fear, suspicion and mistrust.

Bride price, or bride prize, has already been mentioned. This is a form of dowry in which parents of a daughter negotiate with the prospective husband to pay an agreed sum of wealth in the form of cash and/or assets, such as livestock and property, in exchange for the hand of the daughter in marriage. Through home education, bride price

or bride prize is something which both males and females learn to accept and expect. It is a way assuring that the husband's intentions are serious, that he has the wealth to maintain a family and that the family which is handing over the daughter receives sufficient compensation to replace the earning power of the daughter.

The negative side of the bride price or bride prize is that it turns the process of contracting to marry into a commodities exchange. The daughter is reduced to goods and chattel. It is a situation in which the woman is handed over to the husband as if she were a cow or a goat, to be bought and sold. Having paid a high price for his bride, the husband sometimes thinks of his bride as a breeding cow, and he expects her to become pregnant immediately and to produce a male baby in the bargain, or else he will go looking for another bride.

In addition to the onerous side of the bride price or bride prize, through home education both males and females learn to accept and expect that the wife's proper role is to remain locked in the home away from the outside world and to remain preoccupied and contented with home duties, child bearing, child rearing and farming. While women are afforded the least opportunity for school and self improvement, they are at the same time, with inadequate preparation, assigned the task of providing the vast majority of home education for their own children. In terms of national development, it is a system of self perpetuation which fails to break the inadequacies and the harm which certain features of traditional home education engenders.

What Can be Done to Make Things Better

The consequences of harmful traditional home education can be viewed from many different perspectives.

There are individual consequences relating to the well being of the individual child's health, values, attitudes and economic opportunities and chances for a well balanced, prosperous and happy life. There are group consequences relating to the general fairness, justice and stability which a society might reasonably expect to achieve.

The welfare of a nation depends upon the well being of its individuals. If a significant proportion of the individuals who constitute the nation have been abused, made to feel subhuman, made to be social outcasts, there are obviously grave consequences for the well being of the society.

For the sake of both the individuals concerned and the well being of the larger society, steps need to be taken to eliminate child abuse in Nigerian society and especially to improve the status of girls and women.

The situation can be improved by approaching it from several different directions. Obviously one approach is that of legislative reform, and this is the responsibility of the federal government. The federal government needs to undertake structural adjustments in its policies and programs, e.g. make school for girls both fee free and compulsory. With compulsory schooling, there is a legislative basis for removing children from the streets who, during school hours, are engaged in hawking, begging, trading and otherwise soliciting. The laws regulating inheritance can be reformed to include rights for wives and women, thus giving them a firm financial basis within their marriages and families.

In addition to legislative reforms, there needs to be the creation of an infrastructure of agencies which have the authority, power and resources to implement the reforms. Agencies such as social welfare and youth services, and organizations such as Girl Guides and Boys Brigade have

important roles to play in the education of children, youth and parents.

It is arguable that the Nigerian child is abused because the Nigerian family is abused. A mother sends her child out on the streets to hawk her wares because the family is impoverished. A family sends its male child as an indentured servant to work as a farm labourer because the family is desperate for money. Young girls are hired out by their families as house maids to earn the family much needed income. Poverty within the family makes parents desperate, and it leads them to abuse their children. One of the important elements required to break this cycle of abuse is economic development which provides new opportunities for the parents and adults of the family to generate income.

Legislative protection, effective enforcement agencies and policies to engender economic opportunities are but part of this complex picture of reform. The harmful elements of traditional home education must also be eradicated through appropriate educational programs, and this will require education at the community level of all members of the family, and especially of the women. The woman is the house wife, the mother and the child carer. Women have always contributed hugely to the economic, social and political life of their communities. Women are the ones who initiate infants into the culture of their society, and this is why so much of the matter lies in the hands of women.

References

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