Women's Rights in Nigeria

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Women across the world are continuously facing discrimination. Africa is noted for its underdevelopment of women’s rights (Seager 17). Nigeria, in particular, is one of the lowest ranked countries in the world in terms of development no thanks to its location in the Global South; the country is surrounded by others of the same status or lower, in the bottom ten countries (17). Throughout Chinua Achebe’s novel, Things Fall Apart, readers see that the leading male, Okonkwo, degrades his wife/wives through a variety of means. Okonkwo’s reasons for his treatment of the women are rooted in the cultural belief that men are superior. Women are still forced to live “in perpetual fear” (13) of their husbands, the same way Okonkwo’s wives did in the novel. Legislators seek changes that are desperately needed. Various forms of legislation have been drafted to address this injustice; however, they have not had the necessary impact. The implementation of legislation to end female discrimination and provide equal rights has not made significant improvements for the life of women in Nigeria, which can be attributed to the unwillingness to deviate from cultural norms.

The first notable move towards equality in Nigeria was the ratification of the Convention to End All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 2004 (“Nigeria”). CEDAW is a UN treaty that was adopted in 1979 and came into action in 1981 (Seager 14). This treaty was the first to directly address all women’s rights instead of segregating topics into their own treaties; these treaties, however, set the stage for CEDAW (14). CEDAW basically serves as a template for countries to establish women’s rights in their own governing bodies of legislation (14). By ratifying this document, Nigeria was only morally bound to “develop and implement policies and laws to eliminate discrimination against women within their country” (14). CEDAW failed to provide the equal rights in Nigeria that it described because the government failed to create and enforce legislation based off of the recommendations provided.

CEDAW is often referred to as “the Bible of women empowerment” (Nkiruka and Akubue), but not for Nigeria. Following this signing, the public/private divide was still prominent, with women in the private sphere
and men in the public (Nkiruka and Akubue). When women are trapped in the private sphere, their rights are less likely to be deemed as human rights and instead are referred to solely as women’s rights. Women’s rights being separated from human rights as a whole instantly degrades women. This creates issues for women because their private status creates barriers for advancement in the society, specifically in the work realm. Instead of having a respectable position in the village, Ojiugo, one of Okonkwo’s wives, is forced to focus on “[preparing Okonkwo’s] afternoon meal” (Achebe 112) and other unpaid labor. The fact that his wives are also doing unpaid labor instead of, at least, informal labor also contributes to the degrading of women because of how unpaid labor is viewed (Harthcock). Unpaid labor, which consists of housework and other ‘housewife’ duties, is seen as effortless to society (Harthcock). Women will continue to experience work-related oppression until they are thrust into the public sphere alongside men.

The retention of the public/private divide can be derived from traditional and cultural factors (Nkiruka and Akubue). The separation of women from the rest of the public society, also known as men, is apparent in Things Fall Apart. At one point, the moving of chair is referred to as “a boy’s job” (Achebe 44). This addresses the belief that men are the only ones worthy or jobs that demand physical ability in the public sphere. The issue is culturally woven. In northern Nigeria, education access is limited and the head of the family, the male, often pulls daughters out of school for marriage or care giving (Odigie-Emmanuel). This is directly related to the inequality of employment between men and women because women are deprived of their future at a young age without enrollment in school (Odigie-Emmanuel). In Things Fall Apart, instead of going to school, the “children [carry] pots of water” (Achebe 111) for the village. Elders are overlooking what will better the children’s future for the benefit of the village in present day. Without the necessary education to better their chances for a better job and a higher income, women are unable to make advances in society to gain equal status.

A specific treaty to address the discrimination and abuse of women surfaced over twenty years after the ratification of CEDAW. The Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People’s Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa, also known as the Maputo Protocol, is unlike the CEDAW because it targets a single issue instead of being all encompassing (“About”). The Maputo Protocol addresses women’s health, specifically “Total Abortion Legalization” as well as combating Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) (“About”). Some individuals believe that the protocol was created to eradicate Africa of its traditional cultures (“About”). It has been said that the document contains “radical feminist language about the complete transformation of African cultures into a Western, Marxist-style genderless utopia” (“About”). As important as tradition and culture is, comments like this are the reason females do not have equal rights and continue to be
discriminated against. Nigeria’s bond to their roots is the single reason why women continue to experience oppression.

Nigerian legislators have recently made efforts to improve women’s lives. The newest attempt to enforce female equality was drafted in 2010 (Federal Government of Nigeria). The Gender and Equal Opportunities Bill was created to “incorporate and enforce certain provisions” (Federal Government of Nigeria) of legislation such as CEDAW, the Maputo Protocol, and others that have not been previously mentioned. The bill’s overarching goal was to “accord women(s) rights equal to those of men in various spheres of life and to impose certain measures to address past and current discriminatory practices” (“Nigeria”). The attempt to finally enforce the boundaries outlined by previous treaties failed (“Nigeria”). Nigeria’s Senate voted the bill down on March 15, 2015, ending all hope for equal rights in the near future (“Nigeria”). There were even provisions to the 2010 version of the legislation, which was strict in prohibiting “all forms of discrimination against women” (“Nigeria”). The original form of the document “stated that any law, regulation, custom and practice, which constitute discrimination, shall be null and void and of no effect and shall not be enforced against any person” (“Nigeria”). The fact that legislators were willing to revise this bill even though all the changes were necessary shows their dedication to the women of Nigeria and improving their quality of life.

Looking deeper into the Gender and Equal Opportunities Bill, one of the original objectives was to eliminate discrimination derived from culture or tradition (“Nigeria”). It can be argued that this distinction was one of the reasons government officials did not favor this bill. The unwillingness to change or reevaluate legislation due to tradition is one of the leading reasons for discrimination against women. Specifically, the legislation addressed “sought to make modification to sociocultural practices in order to end the subjugation of women” (“Nigeria”). Early in Things Fall Apart, the narrator describes how Okonkwo did not have the same opportunities as other young men because “he neither inherited a barn nor a title, nor even a young wife” (Achebe 18) from his father. Women in Nigeria are still treated as possessions, especially when it comes to the instance of marriage, divorce, or widowhood. The bill tried to give women rights in these areas, but lawmakers were unable to grant women “the right to remarry and the right to marry a person of her choice” (“Nigeria”) as well as other necessary freedoms. In over sixty years, there has been little to no advancement in the status of women in Nigeria. The failure to give women relationship rights reaffirms that the roots of discrimination are culturally bound, and the outlook for change is bleak.
Nigeria is a state based on traditional, cultural, and religious values, as are most African states. However, Nigeria is underdeveloped and continues to take steps backward because of their cultural unwillingness to free women from discrimination. Over fifty years after the publication of Things Fall Apart, the experiences of the Okonkwo’s wives are still applicable to women in present society. Although the actions may have become more sophisticated, the discrimination is blatant. Nigerian society will continue to resist change if legislators continue to look at ‘morality’ in terms of tradition instead of legality when making decisions on women’s rights.
Works Cited


