

MENTALITY OF CONGOLESE WOMEN IN DIASPORA AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

Women are societal developers for they are responsible for household management, which is a very important unit in the society. However, their roles in the society are often influenced by their geographical locations which play major roles in their psycho-social development. It has been observed that Congolese women in the diasporas, especially in Nigeria, are often passive, idle and dependent on their spouses' income. This study was conducted to determine if the disposition of the Congolese women is based on laziness, language barrier or that their cultural background is the cause of their attitude to life. The study was both qualitative and quantitative research with a purposive oral interview among selected Congolese women living in Lagos State, Nigeria. Most of the women are not educated because their culture dictates that women should not be educated formally. Therefore, most Congolese women end up as housewives who depend solely on their husbands' income. Their level of illiteracy also makes it difficult for them to learn the English language and integrate easily into the Nigerian society. The study recommends that the Congolese society should be re-orientated on the need for the girl-child and women to be educated, in order to be productive at the family and societal level.

Keywords: Women; Culture; Language; Marriage; Colonialism; Democratic Republic of Congo.

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INTRODUCTION

The role of the female gender in the society is one that cannot be overlooked as they stand at par with the male in the making of the human society. In marriage, most developmental roles in the home are considered the purview of the woman, from the conception of the off springs, to birth and the subsequent training of the children in the home.

The former Belgium colony: Congo Belge,

now known as The Democratic Republic of Congo in Africa was ruled by Belgium from 1908 until 1960. The official Belgian attitude was paternalism (Fall 1961). They ruled with the principle that Africans were to be cared for and trained as if they were children. Therefore, by the tail end of colonialism in Africa in the late 1950s, Belgium was not ready to hand over to the Congolese due to their parent-child relationship. Assimilation system was the practice of The Belgian Governance in Congo. In that system of govern-

ment, the Congolese citizen had no legislative role, but traditional rulers were used as agents to collect taxes and recruit labour; uncooperative rulers were deposed.

The Democratic Republic of Congo is known to be vast in land mass, rich in natural resources that can cater for the wellbeing of her citizens, if it is well -managed and proportionally distributed (Fall, 1961). The country is the second largest in the continent and was among the first set of black African countries to be civilised and received independence from the colonial master (Cordel *et al*, 2023). It would have been envisaged that freedom from assimilation system of the colonial master would have brought a lot of development in the society but education that was said to be the source of liberation was a thing of nepotism in the land. Only the European citizens had access to leadership and education.

Partrick Lumumba's dream was to put the Congo citizen, including women in leadership positions that Belgium refused to do. Madam Andree Blouin, was a mixed race woman whose French identity was not approved by the French colonial government and so, had to be raised as an orphan at the central Africa orphanage. She overcame the pain of rejection to become a Congolese nationalist and human rights advocate for women. She stood by Lumumba in the struggle for political independence and also made him believe much in women's ability to develop the nation alongside the men (Joseph-Gabriel, 2020). In his address on the independence day, Lumumba expressed his desire to unite the people of the Oriental Province (mostly the European) and the Congolese to have equal right, harmonious living and national development (Nguye,2018). Unfortunately, there has not

been any significant development in socio-economic and political situations until this current regime of President Felix Tshisekedi. This is because Lumumba's dream for his nation died along with him at his assassination, in the third month of his reign as the Prime Minister. His associate, Andree Blouin was also sentenced to death but she escaped to Paris, where she lived for the rest of her life (Joseph-Gabriel, 2022).

The ascension of Mobutu SeseSeko to power as President brought back oppression of women which led to the passive nature of women in political activities and the development of the nation (Berger, 2016). Nguyen (2022) explained how most historians and researchers such as Nzongola-Natalaja, Kelvin Dunn, Shikha Vyas-Doorgapersad and Tshombe M Lukamba wrote on men's potentials and their political partisanship in Congo without acknowledging their women counterpart in the struggle for independence and their development of the country (Nguyen 2022). The regime of Mobutu was noted for authentication of the value of African traditions and oppression of his female subjects. Women were deprived of education and political role. Although, they were allowed membership of political organizations through voting with few of them participating actively in decision making of the political power; but their little contributions were in no way acknowledged (Nguyen, 2022).

The work of Pugliese (2020) shed more light on gender discrimination in the work place in Congo. His examination of the female work condition in the mining companies revealed that women were not allowed to work therein until the late 1960s. The Congolese culture gives men the authority to subdue their wives to mere housewife and thus limit them to craftsmanship in needle and knead-

ing work. The Mining company was one of the prosperous companies that employed workers during the Colonial era and women were hardly employed because of the existing tradition. However as time went on, few women were able to get educated and occupied some less vigorous positions like nursing, administrative officer, chef and cleaning. In the course of the interview with one of the experienced retired senior staff at Gercamine (the government-owned mining company), Pugliese (2020) reported that:

Few women whose parents knew the value of education and also determined to be financially supportive wives to raise elite children made effort to be educated as nurses, mid-wives or office clerks and those were the few people who got employed at the mining company with written work permit approved by their husband before they could work.

Pugliese (2020) argued that Sylvie (A Congolese woman), gave it all the effort it required to become a nurse and even got to the position of an Executive-Director at her place of work. Sylvie, was not just seen as a family builder, she was also a society builder. Even when she earned more than her husband, she remained humble and supported her spouse to give all their six children formal education. She encouraged other women to be educated and stand in the gap for their family financially. Unfortunately, some women in the community criticised her for deviating from the tradition that restricts women to the house. Nguyen (2022) shows that there are some aspects in the present-day discussion on women in the mining sector that are pertinent to other organizations and also pertinent to their

role in the society in areas such as, women working at night, the couple's negotiations, gender roles, harassment and jealousy at the workplace. Can this also be one of the reasons behind the joblessness of the Congolese women in Nigeria?

Lumumba often said that the training of a few women is of more effect in nation building than the education of millions of men. The role of education in the life of mankind is immeasurable, as it is the only weapon for women liberation (Rivera, 2019). At the general convention of Ministère de Combat Spirituel in DR Congo in August 2015, Pastor Dr Myles Munroe described women as incubators that can keep and multiply one entity into multiple ones. He urged men to give their spouses good entity like affection, education, good conduct, money and they will multiply it and return not only to them, but also to their society. It is believed that the preacher might have studied and noticed some default in the Congolese society for him to talk about female emancipation in marriage and the society.

Congo was one of Africa's fastest developing countries during the Colonial era. Her school enrolment rate ranked sixth among African countries for the elementary level and twelfth for the secondary level, while university instruction remained meagre. Despite the desire of the colonizers to get the results of the colonial education that was put in place, the illiteracy rate was estimated at 60-65%. Fredrickson (2005) confirmed that admission into year one at the elementary level which was sixty-six percent (66%) was far higher than the finishing percentage of twenty-nine percent (29%), because about fifty percent (50%) drop out of school, leaving children of between the age of nine (9) and fourteen (14) years, uneducated.

Between 1885 and 1908, during the era of Congo Free State, the citizens were given

beginner education by the catholic at a cheap rate in exchange for acquisition of lands. The purpose of the education was to acquire knowledge on mere manual work-force. For a long time the four native languages (Tshiluba, Lingala, Kikongo and Swahili) remained the instructional language until 1948 when the need for potential elites for the nations' independence arose. Only men were considered for education at this period and this can be said to have encouraged the tradition of not wanting the women to study because women were regarded as too weak to engage in rigorous work. Hence, they were limited to home science management subjects (Depaepe, 2022).

Depaepe (2022) further reveals that, only five percent (5%) of the populations in high schools were Congolese and they were taught with active Belgian Curriculum. At that time, University education was reserved for the white children only. The first academic year of the university recorded the admission of eleven (11) Congolese out of the thirty-three (33) students that were admitted. In 1960 for example, less than 1% of the Congolese school population was enrolled in tertiary institution. This gave the proportion rate of 1% of Congolese children to 4% of other African countries' access to higher education and, not even a single girl was able to attain to university education level. Their education was focused on feminine professions such as nursing, teaching, and serving as nuns. Discrimination of female education was affirmed by Bashir *et al* (2005) and Fredriksen's work where he argued that fifty six percent (56%) of females obtained primary education as compared to 72% of male children (Fredriksen, 2015).

Barbara *et al* (2020) described Psychosocial theory as the focus on the nature of self-understanding, social relationships, and the mental processes that support connections between the person and his/her social world. Psychosocial theory has the concept that highlights the interaction between individuals and the social surroundings in order to discover their identity and personality through the organized societal structure, law, tradition and culture that will shape their development into becoming mentally stable adult (McLeod, 2023). He further explained the human developmental stages from infancy to adulthood of which each stage is very crucial and essential to mankind; failure to succeed in one stage will affect the other stages that follow. For example, at the stage that a child is to interact more with the society to develop self-confidence and develop their identity and roles:(stage 4: 7-11 and stage 5: 12-18 respectively) female children in DR Congo were restricted to house work alone while the males were allowed to go out and explore.

In reference to the above theory: vis-a-vis, experience in the DR Congo, the Congolese original identity was wiped off and replaced by that of the Belgian culture. In the assimilation governance of the Belgium, females were denied the right of self-discovery, but followed the already laid down rules and tradition. This happens to be the first identity confusion that affects the Congolese up till date, especially the women.

Traditional African values held the belief that women were just mothers and housekeepers that need to obey the authority of men. Despite all forms of oppression or restriction, a woman was elected as the president of Congolese in Diaspora in Nigeria and was inaugurated on October 9, 2023.

Also, in the Congolese community in Abuja, a female emerged as their president. This shows that, the Congolese women in Nigeria are waking up to their political right. However, the aspect of concern which prompted this research is the issue of joblessness among the women in the Congolese Community of the Lagos chapter. According to the Congolese Diaspora office in Lagos, majority of the Congolese women living in Lagos State are full housewives, who solely depend on their husbands' income. However, the present economy situation in Nigeria makes the husband's income less sufficient in catering for the family, thus resulting in increase in poverty rate among the Congolese family living in Lagos. This study was set to identify the reasons for the common practice of being full time housewife among Congolese women and proper recommendations for improvement.

Problem of the study

This study looked at the mentality behind Congolese women's joblessness in Nigeria. The following questions were thus, put to test,

- What are the factors influencing the social life of the Congolese women in this 21st Century?
- What are the factors responsible for the Congolese women's attitude to economic/commercial matters?

Significance of the study

This research is significant as it intends to identify the cause of Congolese women's joblessness. It will also help to change the mentality of women to become financially independent and productive in the society. It will help to provide solution to the high rate of poverty level among Congolese women and families that are living in Lagos State, Nigeria.

METHODOLOGY

Both qualitative and quantitative methods were used in this work. One hundred (100) Congolese men and women were randomly selected as sample size for this study from five hundred (500) of total population of Congolese residents of Lagos State, according to Congolese Diasporal office report in Lagos. Only sixty (60) of the women agreed to participate in the administration of questionnaire because of their immigration status and low educational background. Two sections of Focus Group Discussions' (FGD) among women which containing (25) respondents were conducted. Five(5) In-depth interviews were also conducted among women. A single section of Focus Group Discussion (FGD) containing twenty (20) respondents and five (5) In-dept interviews were conducted with Congolese men who are residents of Congolese community in Lagos State. Simple percentage was used to analyse statistical data gathered from questionnaire administered to the respondents. Other related materials as journal articles, internet materials were also considered to get more information on the Congolese socio-political and economic history.

FINDINGS

Interaction with a female respondent, who is a nurse by profession and the newly-elected President of Congolese community in Nigeria, Lagos Branch acknowledged that majority of the women did not exceed secondary education. This is in agreement with the fact gathered from the focus group interview that two (3.3%) respondents have University Degrees in Microbiology and Medical Laboratory respectively (**Table 1**), yet they remained full house wives whose husbands do not allow to work. Eight (13.3%) of the women finished from Polytechnics (Institute supérieur pédagogique : teacher training school,

Institute supérieur technique; technical school, Institute supérieur du commerce: Business School) with certificate called Graduat; thirty two (53%) did not go beyond secondary school with certificate known as diplôme d'état (SSSCE) from either General, vocational, (Table 1). Very few of the women finished from vocational school with the skill in hairdressing, tailor-

ing and makeup with which they earn money but majority of them find it difficult to acquire one skill or the other in Nigeria because of communication barrier. Sixteen (26.6%) stopped at primary school level. Two (3.3%) out of the 60 respondents refused to participate effectively.

Table 1: Educational background of re-

Educational Level	Primary	Secondary	Poly- tecnic	Univer- sity
Women	16	32	8	2
Men		8	10	7
Educational Quali- fication	Certificat D'étude Primaire CEP	Diplome D'Etat	Gradu- at	Licence
Women	60	General: 29 Vocational: 3	8	2
Men	25	General: 22 Vocational: 3	10	7

Most of the respondents (78%) were confirmed to be full housewives and they partner with relatives or friends in Congo to be selling goods on their behalf. From the remaining respondents (15%) work in the following domain: teaching, office attendance, care giver, business, catering and (2.3%) are practicing nursing in private hospitals without due registration with the Nursing and Midwifery Council of Nigeria (NMCN). The nurses indicate language barrier as major reason behind their inability to write nursing council examination that qualifies them to obtain nursing license and also to get government job and integrate fully into the Nigerian society. Also inability to meet

up with the legal immigration status is another hindrance to further their education or partake in professional exams. It was also gathered that Congolese are of the mentality that skilled work are meant for the paupers and so belittled their worth by practicing such menial jobs. One of the respondents attested to the fact that, apart from the mentioned reasons, her husband refused to allow her to get a job because of jealousy and fear of losing her to another man. Lack of trust and corrupt practices that is very common among the Congolese especially back in the country has made a lot of Congolese women here in Nigeria withdrawn from the partnership business of buying and selling that their

husband approve of, and this results to financial dependant on their husband alone while some result to immoral act such as prostitution in getting money.

It was noted also that the younger generation who were born in Nigeria or came to Nigeria and had their Basic and secondary education or those that were born of Congolese Nigeria parents are making efforts in acquiring tertiary education and acquiring skill knowledge with which they earn money to support their personal needs and contribute in attaining higher education. This shows that they have been acculturated by Nigeria mentality, leaving their parents in their tradition.

In the course of the interview conducted among the Congolese women, it was revealed that majority of Congolese that came to Nigeria in early 1990s came as refugees in order to flee the war in their country and travel to Europe. As at that time, the Nigerian economy was very strong and most of them were engaged in buying goods in Nigeria and sending to their home country to sell while waiting for traveling to the western world through the refugee Commission in Nigeria. They lived comfortably with the money given to them monthly by the High Commission of Refugees in Nigeria and the income they made from their businesses. At that period, they only learnt the market English (pidgin English) and did not see any reason to learn the standard official English language or add value to themselves because they only see Nigeria as a transit country to their dream land (the western world).

Unfortunately, the present Nigeria economy

and corruption has made the traveling process to almost come to a standstill as the respondents revealed that 2017 was the last time any of the Congolese travelled through the Refugee commission leaving them in hopeless situation.

The research purposefully selected 40 men as a representative sampling for interview to examine why their wives have not been working. Only 25 men responded to the interview. It was revealed that out of the twenty-five respondents, seventeen (68%) study up to tertiary education level of which seven (28%) are confirmed to be University graduates with certificate called licencié or gradué and ten (40%) of them finished from Polytechnic (Institute supérieur pédagogique or institute supérieur technique) with the certificate graduat en pédagogie appliquée, ingénieur techniciens, while the rest eight respondents (32%) obtained Senior Secondary School Certificate SSSCE equivalent to diplôme d'état from either General, vocational, technical and teacher training school (Table 1). It is to be noted that the diplôme d'état from vocational school does not give access to University education (Baudury, 2008). None of the male respondents have certificate below SSSCE. Despite the higher number of female respondents, the number of male folk with tertiary education is seventeen respondents compared to that of ten female respondents (Table 1). This confirm the work of Bashir *et al* (2005), Depaepe (2022) and Fredriksen (2015) that women are less privileged to education than men. The women's low level in education can also be seen as one of the factors that make men to subdue women to house wife.

Table 2 Professional life, Religious and Employment of respondents

Profession	Medical Dr	Nursing	Pastor	Teacher	Medical Scientist	Micro Biologist	Accountant	Lecturer	Business	House wife	care giver	caterer	Others
Women	1	2		2	2	1	2	0	2	47	2	1	
Men		1	7	2	1	0	2	1	18				3
Employment in the area of specialization													
Women		2		2				1					
Religion													
	Christianity						Islamic						
Women		60											0
Men		25											0

Findings revealed that 84% (Includes men with higher education and basic education) have their source of income from cargo business, middle men or agent between the business merchants in Congo and that of Nigeria. They feel comfortable with what they earn; hence refusing their wives from working and compelled them to take care of the home front, this shows why the percentage of housewife is high in table 2. Unfortunately, the present state of Nigeria economy is not making business situation friendly thereby making it difficult for men to meet earnings needs and this has resulted to marital crisis. About sixteen percent (16%) out of the 68% of the elite with higher qualification are employed in their area of specialization (a lecturer, a medical doctor, two French teachers), this shows low state of integration into Nigeria labour market (Table 2). The 32% that owned school leaving certificates and Senior Secondary School Certificate SSSCE of which some of them owned vocational certificate (Brevet/certificate d'aptitude professionnelle) on mechanics, electricians or tailors but refused to practice due to language barrier and mentality of considering menial job as unbecoming work because they earn more from the cargo business and middle man work. It was also confirmed verbally by most respondents that, the hope of traveling abroad through refugee commission of Nigeria was another reason for not furthering their education or practicing the skilled knowledge that they acquired. This also corroborates with the women response on low engage-

ment to skilled work for financial independence and sense of responsibility to the family and integration into the society for better growth.

Religion was discovered to be another weapon that men use to retain their wives to full house wife. All the respondents are Christians, 28% are Pastors (Table 2), showing the strong Christian background that they had from home under which the women were trained to be submissive to their husbands hence, encourage men superiority and authority over the women.

More than half (68%) male respondents supported the full housewife tradition and not career women (Table 3) because they believe that they are capable of providing for their family and women are meant to front the home. They said that they can only allow their wives to engage in the Congo/Nigeria partnership, where distribution and selling of goods are done by their business partners (family members or friends) in Congo while they remain full house wife here in Nigeria. However, these come with a lot of risk, if the business partner at the other end is not honest, they may lose both the capital and profit of the goods that were sent for sales. The hyper inflation in Nigeria of recent has increased the cost of living and thus makes it difficult for one to meet ends needs, especially among people that do not have stable income. This shows that women are less profitable to themselves and the society.

Table 3: Sources of income and career life

	YES		NO	
	women	men	Women	Men
Salary	7	4	16	21
Business	2	21	50	4
Full dependant	43	0	7	25
Partial dependant	15	0	43	25
Support career woman	47	2	5	17
Support petit trade	4	5	51	18
My partner is a career person	10	2	42	23

Twenty percent (20%) allow their wives to do ‘petit’ trade (raw Congolese food stuffs that circulate only among the Congolese) that are restricted to the house and remain full time housewives. Some 8% refused to allow their wives to work, out of jealousy; this is in accordance with the female respondent on the issue of her husband not allowing her to work due to jealousy. Only two men (8%) of the respondents who are married to Nigerian allowed their wives to do white collar jobs because the women are educated and from different orientation and 68% did not (Table 3). Above further confirm the work of Depaepe (2022) that shows the fact that Congolese women are mostly restricted to home science manager. The attitude of Congolese men to their wives’ outside engagement is based on the traditional believe that women are meant to take care of the children and the house at large and men are to provide for the needs of the family. This implies that the tradition of Congolese still influence them in decision taking as regards the right to work as married women.

CONCLUSION

This work has examined the experience of Congolese women in Nigeria and the reasons for being dependent on their husbands. Most of the Congolese women are aware of their civic rights, but their contributions are not always acknowledged like those of their men counterpart. The Congolese women idleness experienced in Nigeria is a reflection of their social-economic background; the traditional belief which restricts them to home science manager, and the low level of education due to the limited opportunity given to the girl child by their colonial master. This trend has been existing for long, while their political elite who took over from the colonial Belgians have also sustained the status quo. It is imperative for the government and the policy makers to see to the evolution of new idea of gender balance and women 30% political participation for growth and sustainable development. Hopefully the children and the young adults that have imbibed in Nigeria mentality will one day return home and enlighten their society the beauty of female education and skill work for growth and sustainable development of their society.

Recommendation

- Based on the findings, the Congolese girl-child should be educated and encourage their men to allow their women to work outside the home.
- The DRC government should encourage their women to be active in the political and social affairs of their nation.
- The uneducated adult should be given adult education and vocational training. Lots of programmes should be put in place to educate men for them to see reasons why their wives need to be gainfully engaged.

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