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**WOMEN HELD A BASICALLY COMPLEMENTARY RATHER THAN SUBORDINATE  
POSITION TO MEN IN PRE-COLONIAL AFRICA: A DELIBERATION**

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**ABSTRACT:**

**Women are not homogenous but heterogeneous. Their statuses differ according to the class, level of education, ethnicity, race, location, and age. The status of women has been argued over a long period. It is argued that women held a basically complementary rather than subordinate position to men in pre-colonial Africa. Different feminist's perspective and the Marxist will be used as theoretical guidelines for this deliberation. This however depended with the type of societies. This article deliberates on whether women held complementary rather than subordinate position in the re-colonial era.**

**INTRODUCTION:**

Since time immemorial women were regarded as inferior to men. The position of women in pre-colonial Africa can be debated alongside the feminist theories and approaches and the Marxist.

To the Radical feminist women were and still held a subordinate position even during the pre -colonial Africa as they blame the exploitation of women on men. Haralambos and Holborn (2004:102) expounded that “radical feminist see society as patriarchal it is dominated and ruled by men”. From this point

of view, men are the ruling class, and women are the subject class which means the subordinates. Haralombos and Holborn (2004:102) connotes that “women have always been exploited and that only revolutionary change can offer the possibility of their liberation”. This according to the radical feminists indicates that even in the pre-colonial era women held a subordinate position because of their sex. However, the way the pre-states were organised and the gender roles might also suggest otherwise.

**MARXIST AND SOCIALIST FEMINISM:**

Different approaches to women shows how women are treated in different societies and context. The development of women's liberation movement caused the differences and the treatment of women to be debated. Marxist and socialist feminism support that women held a complementary position rather than subordinate in pre- colonial Africa as they do not attribute women's exploitation entirely to men. Haralambos and Holborn (2004:104) see “capitalism rather than patriarchy as being the main beneficiaries”. Thus Marxist and socialist feminist relate women's subordination to the production of wealth. This then shows that before capitalism, women held a complementary position. This is evidenced in the Stone Age period and Early Iron Age before

accumulation of wealth began. In the later Iron Age there was marked division of labour “pottery making had become a routine domestic chore performed by women while men undertook other economic activities” (Sibanda and Moyana, 2007:7). Though there was a clear division of labour, women were not on the receiving end but played a complementary role in pre-colonial Africa. In the Ndebele state for example subordination was due to the class one belongs regardless whether he/she is a male or a female. These classes were abezansi, abenhla and amahole. The abezansi constituted the royal aristocracy and was made up of the original migrants from Zululand. This group dominated the top administrative and political positions. The abenhla composed of the incorporated Sotho, Swazi and Tswana groups, were part of the middle power group from which advisors and trusted tribal chiefs were drawn. The amahole group was made up of conquered Shona groups. This group provided the manpower that was needed for servicing the state in the form of soldiers, cultivators and messengers for the king (Sibanda and Moyana (2007:19). Women in pre-colonial societies held a complementary position to men although patrilineal and patriarchal kinship structures predominated African Societies.

#### **LIBERAL FEMINISTS:**

The liberal feminists argue, that both men and women are harmed by the gender inequalities for example because of the social construction perspectives men might refuse to wash his baby’s nappies in fear of the society. Women also might fail to get opportunities to develop their talents. This might be because of the way they are socialised and the role of the media, for example parents mostly buy baby boys car toys whilst girl child receives a doll. This gives the girl child some social constructed

perceptions that she is a mother therefore need to get married and have children hence socialising them into being house wives and child bearers. Thus society plays a role in determining the status of women and men.

#### **BLACK FEMINISTS:**

Black feminists blame racism for their subordination. Thus colonialism plays a significant role in the subordination of women as compared to the pre-colonial period. During the colonial periods in Africa and even during the post colonial period many black women had been and are still employed as domestic servants in white families. For example, in Zimbabwe most housemaids in white families are blacks. During colonialism, in the acquisition of land many women would be seen working in farms. Haralambos and Holborn (2004:106) argue that “black women suffer from disadvantages because they are black, because they are women and because they are working class”. Thus gender, race and class play a role in the subordination of women.

#### **POST-MODERN FEMINISTS:**

Post-modern feminists tend to reject the claim that there is a single theory that can explain the position of women in society. Different women in different societies, culture, religion, class, race and level of education are treated differently for example there are religions and cultures that make women cover their hair and head and wear long dresses. Highly educated women can find a job in a highly influential position. Women nowadays are also seen in leadership positions or roles like Opra Winfrey, Mother Theresa, Princess Diana, the former Vice president of Zimbabwe being female, the late Vice Chancellor of Zimbabwe Open University being female and the likes of Hope Sadza, Rita Makarau, Thokozani Khupe , Grace Muradzikwa and

Priscilla Misihairambwi-Mushonga. This shows that even today there are some women who are in complementary positions rather than subordinate positions and some actually have leading positions.

#### **COLONIALISM:**

Colonialism furthered the subordination of women. The colonialism and industrialisation in Africa saw men leaving their wives and families in rural areas whilst they would be working in industries in urban areas. Women were involved in and still are involved in unpaid work of being house keepers and children minders. The initial studies of women's work during the colonial period showed how they had lost power and economic autonomy with the arrival of cash crops and their exclusion from the global market place, in contrast to men who were more likely to benefit from these economic changes (Africa Human Development Report 2016). Thus most women's work in colonial periods was centered on cultivation and raising children.

This has seen some of their husbands indulging into prostitution hence leading to the spread of diseases which include HIV/AIDS. However, the first Chimurenga in Zimbabwe saw Mbuya Nehanda playing a significant role in the liberation of Zimbabwe. Women also played a significant role in the second Chimurenga in Zimbabwe contributing to the attainment of Zimbabwe's Independence. Some women took up guns and fight and some cooked for comrades in the villages and sang liberation struggle songs to instil motivation in so doing bringing out Marx's concept that the people are the water and the fighters are fish without the water, automatically the fish dies. In so doing during the liberation struggle women played a complementary role in fighting for independence. The welfare

approach is found in the theory that women are solely passive recipients because their major roles are reproductive whereas men are identified in production. This approach follows the western social welfare models and was common in colonial times.

#### **THE ROLE OF CHRISTIANITY:**

Colonialism came also with Christianity which talks on the origin of men and women. Haralambos and Holborn (1998:581) assert that original sin in the Garden of Eden was women's. She tested the forbidden fruit, tempted Adam and has been paying for it ever since. In Genesis, the Lord says "I will greatly multiply the sorrow that shall bring forth children, and the desire shall the husbands and he shall rule over thee". 'Sociologies would regard the above quotation as a mythological justification the position of women in society. Many people would then see the summary it contains of women's relationship with their husbands that is women produce children, women are mothers and wives and that they do the cooking, sewing and washing. They take care of men and are subordinates to male authority. Thus making women being at the receiving end. This was worsened by the biblical explanation that women came from the men's rib hence subordinate to men. However, a man cannot sustain without a rib which however shows that women play a complementary role.

#### **WOMEN IN PRE-COLONIAL ZIMBABWE:**

In the precolonial period, women mostly held complimentary position rather than the subordinate position. If we look on the complimentary roles they were performing. Women were advisers and repositories of wisdom as evidenced by their roles in story telling (ngano). Women were always protected as it was illegal to kill women even after

invasion. Women were rarely allowed at the war front which might point to their being protected rather than exploited. Women were regarded as teachers of the society, they were the school and the library. The Kings could consult their women before passing judgements. Even in the post-colonial era the women of the managers and leaders have a great influence to the decision making of the men. In the precolonial era, women were the hospital of the society, they assisted in child bearing effectively. They are the doctors as they had great knowledge of the Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) that was being passed from generation to generation. They were the custodian of the spiritual world for example Mbuya Nehanda's role. Without women, no ritual's for the appeasement of the dead was done. In the precolonial era women had a very powerful role of deciding the number of children in a family through all the traditional means of family planning. Even today still have that power of determining the number of children, however the introduction of male pills can be a hindrance to this power of women. In that era, men would not just bring other women in the home. They had to seek permission or the women would select the new wives of their husbands.

In Zimbabwe's pre-colonial era there was a marriage custom called kuganha whereby the girl was given a chance in choosing the men they want to get married to which is called kuganha in shona. A girl could just go to the men she wanted to get married to and the men was not supposed to refuse. This shows that women were given an opportunity to make decisions, however, nowadays it is a taboo that girls propose to men though it sometimes happens. However, there were some cultures in the pre-colonial Africa that left women in subordinate positions for example kuzvarirwa of which a young girl was

given into marriage to an older man in exchange for financial benefits. However, this still happens in some cultures and religions for example "vapostori" especially the Marange church evidenced child marriages (Chamisa et al, 2019). There were also some cultures like "chigara mapfihwa" of which when a women dies her husband would take his wife's sister as a wife which also did not give women the chance to choose however this also applies to men. There were however laws and policies that protect women and the girl child today for example the Girl Child Network and the Msasa project. The empowerment approach and the education of the girl child have contributed in making girls and women achieve their dreams and even go beyond being complementary to men.

#### **WOMEN IN THE PRE-COLONIAL NIGERIA:**

Women in the pre-colonial Nigeria held a complementary rather than a subordinate Position to men in pre-colonial Nigeria. "Yoruba society offered the greatest opportunities for women to participate in other economic activities to provide for their family. Women believed that providing such resources met their responsibility as women and citizens. Their society considered the work the women did complementary to the work of men and some women achieved impressive status in the economic and social realms of Yaruba life" (<http://www.postcolonialweb.org/Nigeria/pre-colonial.htm>). "However, the fact remains that the societies of pre-colonial Nigeria believed men are superior to women and to some extent in control of women"

(<http://www.postcolonialweb.org/Nigeria/pre-colonial.htm>). e. Women contested, negotiated, complemented, and transformed their societies through their diverse roles in the political, social, religious,

and economic realities of pre-colonial life in West Africa

### **BIOLOGICAL DIFFERENCES BETWEEN MEN AND WOMEN:**

George Murdock in Haralambos sees biological differences between men and women as the basis of the sexual division of labour in society. However, Murdock does not suggest that men and women are directed by genetically based predisposition or characteristics to adapt their particular roles. Women's involvement in the liberation struggle, law, medicine, leadership and engineering shows that women can also be involved in works that are believed to be men's as compared to being nurses and secretaries. However, though emancipation of women began, a large number of men occupies leadership positions. Tanno (1998:58) posits that "for ethnic women, achieving a personal coherence of self is a struggle in the face of negotiating experience of marginalisation and displacement. The Daily News (18/08/04) assert that" at the moment there are only 45 women representatives out of 333 councilors in urban councils and far less in rural district council". Tuchman et al (1978) expounded that the mass media are the major cause of general reproduction of patriarchal sexual relationships. Throughout the media women are represented in ways which are equally unrealistic and unsatisfactory. Government Minister of Burkina Faso in Herald (24/08/2004) argues that the patriarchal structure that is predominating in most societies excluded women for the decision making process.

### **FUNCTIONALIST APPROACH:**

However, the functionalist approach calls for the importance of everything in life. Both men and women are equally important and they both complement each other. In order

to have a family there is need for a man and a woman resulting in child bearing. Thus though to a large extent women held a complementary rather than a subordinate position in pre-colonial Africa, before the introduction of land and property ownership, the post-colonial period sees the advancement of the emancipation and liberation of women to reach their goals. However, sometimes these developments are made without involving women's views hence resulting in their failure. The Beijing international conference for example just reminded people of women's rights but did not bring out progress except to some extent in education. The colonial period is the one that greatly shows the subordination of women as compared to the pre-colonial and the post-colonial period.

### **SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION THEORY:**

Social construction theory shows gender aspects as socially constructed. If something is socially constructed, it can be socially reconstructed (Mutongi, 2020). Thus the roles of women are ever-changing. Giddens (2009:602) connotes that gender differences are not biologically determined, they are culturally produced. Gender inequalities result because men and women are socialized into different roles. This shows that men and women are complementary to each other.

### **CONCLUSION:**

Women to a larger extent in pre-colonial held a complementary rather than subordinate position in the pre-colonial Africa before ownership of land and property. The colonial period came with much exploitation of women in farms and as house maids of whites colonisers and children minders while men were most in urban areas working in industries. The post colonial Africa saw the independence of African countries with to

some extent brought women's independence. The current era saw women in leadership positions and in influential and challenging jobs.

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