

THE ETHICS OF CULTURAL RELATIVISM VERSUS UNIVERSAL HUMAN RIGHTS IN ADDRESSING GENDER ISSUES IN NIGERIA

Ogochukwu Agatha Okpokwasili, PhD

Department of Philosophy, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka

ao.okpokwasili@unizik.edu.ng

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Abstract

The ethics of cultural relativism versus universal human rights is an ongoing debate in the realm of international human rights. This is particularly relevant in the context of gender issues in Africa, where traditional cultural practices often conflict with modern human rights standards. Cultural relativism is the idea that a person's beliefs and values should be understood within the context of their own culture, rather than being judged by external standards. This approach recognizes the diversity of human experiences and the importance of preserving cultural traditions. However, this approach can also be used to justify practices that violate human rights, such as female genital mutilation, child marriage, and honor killings. In these cases, the cultural relativist argument clashes with the principle of universal human rights, which asserts that certain rights are inherent to all human beings regardless of culture or context. This paper recognizes the tension between cultural relativism and universal human rights in addressing gender issues in Africa is complex and its multifaceted nature. It also recommends that cultural practices that perpetuate gender inequality and discrimination must be challenged and transformed. On the other hand, this must be done in a way that is respectful of cultural traditions and does not perpetuate colonialist or neocolonialist attitudes. The challenge is to find a balance between respecting cultural diversity and upholding universal human rights standards. This requires a nuanced approach that takes into account the complexity of gender issues in Africa, and recognizes the agency and voice of African women and gender non-conforming individuals in shaping their own futures. The approach the researcher will use in confronting this problem is the philosophical method of analysis.

Keywords: Ethics, Culture, Cultural Relativism, Gender issues, Human rights

Introduction

The ethics of cultural relativism versus universal human rights is a significant and complex debate when addressing gender issues in Nigeria. Cultural relativism argues that moral principles and ethical standards are contextually determined by culture, and each culture should be respected and understood on its own terms. On the other hand, universal human rights uphold the belief that certain fundamental rights are inherent to all individuals, regardless of culture or context. This ethical dilemma arises when attempting to reconcile cultural practices that may infringe upon women's rights and gender equality with the universal principles of human rights. In Africa, there are diverse cultural beliefs, traditions, and practices that impact gender relations. While many of these cultural practices are rooted in historical, social, and religious contexts, some can perpetuate gender inequality, discrimination, and violence against women. Examples include female genital mutilation, child marriage, and restrictions on women's education and economic empowerment.

Proponents of cultural relativism argue that outsiders should respect and refrain from imposing their values and standards on African/Nigerian cultures. They argue that cultural practices should be understood within their specific contexts and that change should come from within the culture itself. They contend that Western notions of human rights are ethnocentric and fail to

appreciate the richness and diversity of African cultures. On the other hand, proponents of universal human rights argue that certain rights, such as the right to life, freedom from torture, and gender equality, should be upheld universally. They maintain that human rights provide a moral framework that transcends cultural differences and that no cultural practice should be allowed to violate these basic human rights. They advocate for challenging and changing harmful cultural practices that undermine gender equality and women's rights.

Navigating this ethical dilemma requires a nuanced and balanced approach. It involves respecting and valuing cultural diversity while also upholding universal human rights. Rather than promoting a one-size-fits-all approach, it is important to engage in dialogue, promote cultural sensitivity, and work collaboratively with communities to challenge harmful practices within their own cultural frameworks. It is essential to find common ground that respects cultural identities and traditions while ensuring that the basic human rights and dignity of individuals, particularly women and girls, are protected.

The goal is to promote a transformative and inclusive approach that seeks to address gender issues by empowering women, challenging harmful practices, and fostering a cultural shift towards gender equality. By engaging with communities, promoting education and awareness, and encouraging grassroots initiatives, it is possible to find solutions that uphold both cultural diversity and universal human rights in the context of gender issues in Africa.

Some Philosophical research questions

- a. Is it ethically justifiable to prioritize cultural relativism over universal human rights when addressing gender issues in Africa?
- b. How can we determine the boundary between cultural practices that should be respected and those that violate universal human rights, particularly in the context of gender equality?
- c. To what extent should cultural traditions and practices be preserved and respected if they perpetuate gender inequality and discrimination?
- d. Can universal human rights be effectively implemented without considering cultural diversity and specific contexts, especially in addressing gender issues in Africa?
- e. Is it possible to find a middle ground between cultural relativism and universal human rights by incorporating culturally sensitive approaches to promote gender equality in Africa?
- f. What are the implications of imposing Western concepts of human rights on African cultures? How can we ensure a respectful and inclusive approach that values cultural diversity while addressing gender issues?
- g. Should international human rights standards be flexible and adaptable to accommodate cultural variations, or should they remain steadfast and non-negotiable in the pursuit of gender equality?
- h. How do power dynamics and colonial legacies influence the debates surrounding cultural relativism and universal human rights in addressing gender issues in Africa?
- i. How can we strike a balance between respecting cultural autonomy and protecting the rights and dignity of individuals, particularly women, within their cultural contexts?
- j. Can dialogue and engagement with local communities lead to transformative change in cultural norms and practices without compromising cultural identities?

These philosophical questions delve into the complexities of the ethical debate surrounding cultural relativism versus universal human rights in addressing gender issues in Africa. They provoke critical thinking and reflection on the moral dimensions of this topic, offering a foundation for deeper analysis and discussion.

Conceptual and theoretical framework

Ethics

Ethics is a branch of philosophy that deals with moral principles, values, and judgments about what is right or wrong, good or bad, and how individuals should conduct themselves. Richard William Paul and [Linda Elder](#) (2006) defines ethics as "a set of concepts and principles that guide us in determining what behavior helps or harms sentient creatures". John Deigh (1995) states that the word "ethics" is "commonly used interchangeably with '[morality](#)' ... and sometimes it is used more narrowly to mean the moral principles of a particular tradition, group or individual". It explores questions about the nature of morality, the sources of moral obligations, and how we should make ethical decisions. Ethics seeks to provide frameworks, theories, and principles that guide human behavior, helping individuals and societies navigate moral dilemmas and make informed ethical choices. It involves reflecting on the moral implications of actions, considering the consequences of our decisions, and evaluating the principles that underlie our ethical beliefs. Ethical standards and guidelines for universalism in culture and its relationship to human rights have been developed by various organizations and institutions.

The ethics of cultural relativism versus universal human rights is a complex and often debated topic in the fields of philosophy, anthropology, and human rights law. These two concepts represent different approaches to understanding and applying ethical principles when it comes to cultural practices and human rights issues.

Cultural relativism is a moral and anthropological theory that suggests that ethical standards and moral values are relative to the culture or society in which they are practiced. In other words, what is considered morally right or wrong varies from one culture to another, and there is no universal standard for morality. According to cultural relativism, judgments about cultural practices should be suspended, as they are products of unique cultural contexts.

Proponents of cultural relativism argue that it promotes tolerance, understanding, and respect for diverse cultural practices. They claim that imposing one culture's values on another can lead to cultural imperialism and disrespect for the autonomy of other societies.

Critics of cultural relativism argue that it can lead to moral relativism, where any cultural practice, no matter how harmful or oppressive, is excused simply because it is part of a culture's tradition. This raises concerns about the universality of human rights and the protection of vulnerable individuals within societies.

Universal human rights, on the other hand, are based on the idea that all individuals, regardless of their cultural background, possess certain inherent rights and dignities by virtue of being human. These rights are considered to be universal, indivisible, interdependent, and inalienable. The concept of universal human rights is enshrined in various international declarations and treaties, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) adopted by the United Nations in 1948.

Advocates of universal human rights argue that certain values and principles should transcend cultural boundaries and serve as a moral foundation for all societies. They believe that some practices, such as torture, slavery, discrimination, and genocide, are inherently wrong and should be condemned and addressed globally.

However, critics of universal human rights often argue that these rights are rooted in Western liberal values and may not align with the values and traditions of non-Western cultures. They raise concerns about cultural imperialism and the imposition of Western values on other

societies.

The debate between cultural relativism and universal human rights is not easily resolved. Striking a balance between respecting cultural diversity and promoting human rights is a complex challenge. It's essential to recognize and respect cultural differences while also upholding certain fundamental rights that protect human dignity and well-being. Many human rights proponents argue for a "cultural relativism with limits" approach, where cultural practices are respected up to a point that they do not violate fundamental human rights principles. This approach seeks to find common ground between cultural diversity and the protection of universal human rights.

In practice, international human rights bodies and organizations often work with governments and societies to promote dialogue, education, and awareness about human rights while considering local cultural contexts. The aim is to encourage societies to evolve positively and protect human rights without completely dismissing their cultural traditions. Overall, finding a balance between cultural relativism and universal human rights remains an ongoing challenge, requiring thoughtful consideration and a nuanced understanding of both perspectives.

Culture

Culture refers to the shared patterns of beliefs, customs, behaviors, values, traditions, language, arts, and social institutions that characterize a particular group of people or society. It is a dynamic and comprehensive system that shapes the way individuals perceive the world, interact with one another, and develop a sense of identity within their community.

Culture consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behavior acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievement of human groups, including their embodiments in artefacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e. historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values; culture systems may, on the one hand, be considered as products of action, on the other as conditioning elements of further action. (Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1952, p. 181)

Oyserman & Sorensen (2009, p. 25) usual way of viewing culture is to regard it as a single unified whole "isomorphic [sic] with one's country of origin" Culture in Nigeria is diverse and rich, reflecting the country's multi-ethnic makeup and historical influences. Eliot (2000) noted that: "the culture of the individual is dependent upon the culture of a group or class and that the culture of a group or class is dependent upon the culture of the whole society to which that group or class belongs to". This means that the meaning of any culture is determinant in the society where the said culture is practiced. Every society determines what works and what does not work for them.

Culture often encompasses a set of beliefs and values that guide individuals' understanding of the world, their moral principles, and their perspectives on various issues. These beliefs can be religious, philosophical, or based on historical experiences. Cultural customs and traditions are the rituals, practices, and ceremonies that are passed down from generation to generation within a community. They can include celebrations, weddings, funerals, and other significant events. Cultures have established social norms that govern how people interact with one another, including rules of etiquette, gender roles, and codes of conduct.

Language is an essential part of culture, as it allows people to communicate, express ideas, and share their experiences. Different languages reflect unique worldviews and ways of thinking. Cultural expression which is a form of language or communication is often manifested through art, music, dance, literature, theater, and other forms of creativity. These artistic expressions can

be deeply connected to a community's history and identity. Some aspects of culture, such as clothing, architecture, tools, and artifacts, which are often shaped by the environment and historical influences. Culture is transmitted from one generation to the next through various means, including family, education, media, and social institutions.

Cultural Relativism

Different strokes for different people should be an apt definition for cultural relativism in terms of morality Rachel (1986) noted that:

"Different cultures have different moral codes"—has seemed to be the key to understanding morality. The idea of universal truth in ethics, they say, is a myth. The customs of different societies are all that exist. These customs cannot be said to be "correct" or "incorrect," for that implies we have an independent standard of right and wrong by which they may be judged

Cultural relativism is an anthropological and ethical concept that suggests that all cultural beliefs, values, practices, and norms should be understood and evaluated within the context of their respective cultures. It emphasizes the idea that different societies have their own unique cultural systems, and what may be considered right or acceptable in one culture may not necessarily be so in another. Advocates of cultural relativism believe that there are no universally accepted codes for morality. However in this context we are trying to relate it to some aspects of our culture that readily accepts some practices that encroaches on the rights of the individual as a person. The core principle of cultural relativism is to avoid making ethnocentric judgments, where one culture is considered superior to others based on the standards of one's own culture. Instead, cultural relativism encourages individuals to approach cultural differences with an open mind and suspend personal biases and assumptions.

The interplay between cultural relativism and human rights in Nigeria, as in many other countries, presents complex challenges and opportunities. Nigeria is a diverse nation with over 250 ethnic groups, each with its unique cultural practices, traditions, and beliefs. Balancing cultural relativism and universal human rights in the country requires understanding and navigating this rich cultural landscape while upholding fundamental human rights principles.

Key considerations regarding cultural relativism and human rights in Nigeria:

- **Cultural Diversity:** Nigeria's cultural diversity is one of its greatest assets, but it can also lead to clashes with universal human rights standards. Various cultural practices and traditions may be deeply entrenched, some of which may conflict with human rights principles, particularly regarding women's rights, children's rights.
- **Women's Rights:** Nigeria faces significant challenges in promoting gender equality and protecting women's rights. Harmful practices such as child marriage, female genital mutilation (FGM), and domestic violence persist in some communities, raising questions about the balance between cultural relativism and human rights.
- **Child Rights:** The rights of children are sometimes affected by cultural practices, including child labor and early marriages. Advocating for children's rights while respecting cultural practices that protect children's well-being remains a delicate task.
- **Religion and Human Rights:** Religion plays a significant role in Nigeria's cultural fabric, but it can also influence attitudes toward human rights issues. Striking a balance between religious freedom and human rights, especially regarding religious conversions and apostasy, can be challenging.

- **Legal Framework:** Nigeria's legal system reflects a mix of customary law, Islamic law (Sharia), and English common law. The interaction between these legal systems and their compatibility with human rights protections can be complex.
- **Government Efforts:** Nigeria has ratified several international human rights treaties, including the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). The Nigerian government faces the challenge of harmonizing these international obligations with cultural practices and norms.

Addressing the tension between cultural relativism and universal human rights concerning gender issues in Africa requires a thoughtful and nuanced approach that respects cultural diversity while upholding essential human rights principles. **Education and Awareness:** Promote education and awareness about both cultural relativism and universal human rights. Encourage discussions that highlight the importance of respecting cultural diversity while acknowledging the existence of universal human rights standards, including gender equality. Efforts should be made to involve local communities, leaders, and stakeholders in discussions about gender issues. Listen to their perspectives, understand their cultural values, and collaboratively seek solutions that align with both cultural contexts and human rights principles. Focus on empowering women and girls through education, economic opportunities, and leadership training. Empowered women can play a crucial role in challenging harmful cultural practices and advocating for gender equality within their communities. Facilitate dialogues and collaborations between cultural authorities, civil society organizations, and human rights activists. Encourage the sharing of experiences and perspectives to find common ground and bridge cultural gaps

Distinguishing between cultural practices that respect individual rights and those that violate human rights, especially those that harm women and girls. Work towards eradicating harmful practices while preserving cultural elements that do not infringe upon human rights. Advocacy should be put in place for legal reforms that protect women's rights and gender equality while taking cultural sensitivities into account. This might involve working with policymakers to ensure that laws respect cultural values without compromising fundamental human rights. This also might involve utilizing international agreements and conventions that promote gender equality and human rights, such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). These frameworks can serve as points of reference for encouraging change while respecting cultural diversity.

Supporting grassroots initiatives that challenge harmful cultural practices and promote gender equality should be paramount. These initiatives often have a deeper understanding of the cultural context and can implement effective strategies for change. Implement community-based awareness programs that engage men, women, and youth in discussions about gender equality, human rights, and cultural diversity. These programs can help dispel misconceptions and foster mutual understanding. Recognizing that changing cultural norms takes time and patience. Adopting a long-term approach that combines incremental changes with consistent efforts to promote gender equality and human rights should be the best approach.

Ultimately, the goal is to find a balance between cultural relativism and universal human rights, where respect for cultural diversity is upheld, while ensuring the protection of fundamental human rights, particularly in the context of gender issues in Africa. This requires an inclusive and collaborative effort involving all stakeholders to foster positive change and sustainable progress.

Gender issues

Human Rights Careers (2023) mentioned some gender issues that Africans should speedily look into and we are going to explain them one after the other:

➤ **Education access**

Education access as a gender issue in Nigeria has been a significant concern. Women and girls in Nigeria have faced various barriers and challenges in accessing quality education compared to their male counterparts. Several factors contribute to this gender disparity: In some parts of Nigeria, there are deeply ingrained cultural norms and practices that prioritize boys' education over girls. This often results in girls being pulled out of school early to marry or take up household responsibilities. Early marriage is a prevalent issue in Nigeria, especially in rural areas. Girls who are married off at a young age are more likely to drop out of school and forego educational opportunities. Additionally, many girls engage in child labor to support their families, further limiting their access to education. In regions affected by conflict and insurgency, such as the Boko Haram insurgency in the northeast, access to education is severely disrupted for both boys and girls. However, girls are particularly vulnerable to attacks on schools and often face targeted violence and abductions, leading to heightened security concerns for parents and guardians. In some areas, the lack of proper school infrastructure and resources disproportionately affects girls. The absence of safe and private sanitation facilities in schools, for example, can discourage girls from attending classes, especially during menstruation.

Instances of gender-based violence, including sexual harassment and assault, can create a hostile environment for girls in schools, leading to their withdrawal from educational institutions. In rural areas, the distance to schools can be considerable, and concerns about safety and security on long journeys to and from school may discourage parents from sending their daughters to study. Families with limited financial resources may prioritize investing in boys' education rather than girls', perceiving it as a better return on investment in the long run. This can lead to the underfunding of girls' education.

Efforts have been made to address these challenges and promote gender equality in education. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs), international agencies, and the Nigerian government have implemented initiatives to enhance girls' access to education, including scholarships, awareness campaigns, and policies aimed at reducing gender disparities in education. Despite these efforts, there is still much work to be done to ensure that girls in Nigeria have equal access to education. Ongoing advocacy, improved infrastructure, community engagement, and targeted interventions are essential to breaking down the barriers that hinder girls' education in the country.

➤ **Maternal death rate**

Premium times (2023) noted that: “It is no longer news that Nigeria's Maternal Mortality Rate is one of the highest in the world. The United Nations Economic Commission for Africa says that one in seven global maternal deaths occurs in Nigeria. That is more than 50,000 women dying per year in Nigeria”.

Maternal death rate, also known as maternal mortality rate, is a critical gender issue in Nigeria. It refers to the number of maternal deaths per 100,000 live births in a given period. Maternal mortality is a crucial indicator of the overall health and well-being of women during pregnancy, childbirth, and the postpartum period. In Nigeria, maternal mortality remains alarmingly high, and it disproportionately affects women compared to men. Several factors contribute to the gender disparity in maternal death rates.

Many women in Nigeria, especially in rural areas, lack access to adequate healthcare facilities and skilled healthcare professionals during pregnancy and childbirth. This limited access to essential maternal health services increases the risk of complications and maternal deaths. In many cases, cultural norms, economic constraints, and lack of awareness can lead to delays in women seeking medical care during pregnancy or childbirth. This delay can have severe consequences for maternal health outcomes.

Limited access to family planning services and reproductive healthcare contributes to unintended pregnancies and may increase the risk of maternal complications and deaths. Child marriage is still prevalent in some parts of Nigeria, leading to early childbirth for many girls. Early pregnancies are associated with higher risks of complications during childbirth, posing a significant threat to maternal health.

➤ **Abortion and birth control access**

In Nigeria, like in many other countries, reproductive health issues have been deeply influenced by cultural, religious, and societal norms. The lack of comprehensive reproductive health education and services has contributed to challenges for women in accessing safe and affordable birth control methods and reproductive healthcare.

Nigeria has restrictive abortion laws, with abortion generally only permitted to save the life of the pregnant woman. In cases where it is allowed, it often comes with strict conditions, making access to safe and legal abortion services difficult for many women. Abiodun O et al; (2009) noted that: “Since abortion is illegal in Nigeria (unless medically recommended to save a mother's life), many abortions are carried out clandestinely, and often in an unsafe environment” The restrictive laws lead to unsafe abortion practices, which can result in severe health consequences and even death. Oye-Adeniran (2004) also noted that: “Induced abortion is not only widespread in Nigeria but is also provided and practiced in a number of different settings, from traditional medical practitioners, herbalists, and private practicing clinicians to modern pharmacists”. Many women face barriers to obtaining birth control due to factors such as cost, lack of availability in rural areas, stigma, and cultural beliefs. As a result, unintended pregnancies are common, impacting women's ability to pursue education, careers, and financial stability.

These issues disproportionately affect women, as they bear the physical and emotional burden of pregnancy and childbirth, leading to potential health risks and disruptions to their lives. Furthermore, the lack of access to family planning options hinders women's autonomy and decision-making power over their bodies and reproductive choices. Gender inequality is at the root of these challenges. In Nigerian society, traditional gender roles often place the responsibility of family planning and child-rearing solely on women, leaving them with little control over their reproductive health decisions. Addressing these issues requires comprehensive efforts, including providing comprehensive sex education that includes information on contraception and family planning can empower individuals to make informed choices about their reproductive health. Expanding access to affordable and quality reproductive healthcare services, including family planning and safe abortion, can significantly improve women's reproductive health outcomes. Raising awareness about the importance of reproductive rights and gender equality is essential for challenging societal norms and reducing the stigma surrounding abortion and birth control. Advocating for legal reforms to broaden access to safe and legal abortion services and improve family planning programs is crucial in advancing women's rights and reproductive healthcare in Nigeria.

It's important to recognize that the issue of abortion and birth control access in Nigeria is complex and deeply intertwined with cultural, religious, and political factors. Addressing these challenges requires a multi-faceted approach that involves the government, civil society, healthcare providers, and communities working together to protect women's reproductive rights and promote gender equality.

➤ **Informal employment**

Informal employment refers to work arrangements that lack formal contracts, legal protections, and social security benefits typically associated with traditional formal employment. In informal employment, individuals may engage in various economic activities to earn a living, but they operate outside the official regulatory framework. Characteristics of informal employment include:

- **Lack of Formal Contracts:** Workers in informal employment often do not have written contracts with their employers, leaving them with little legal protection or job security.
- **No Social Security Benefits:** Informal workers usually do not receive benefits such as health insurance, retirement plans, or unemployment benefits.
- **Low Wages:** Informal jobs often pay lower wages compared to formal employment due to the absence of legal protections and regulations.
- **Limited or No Labor Rights:** Informal workers may have limited access to labor rights, such as collective bargaining, fair working hours, and safe working conditions.
- **Cash Payments:** In many cases, wages are paid in cash, making it difficult for workers to track and prove their earnings.
- **Flexibility:** Informal employment can offer greater flexibility in working hours and arrangements, but it often comes at the cost of stability and security.

Informal employment is prevalent in many developing countries, where a significant portion of the workforce is engaged in subsistence agriculture, street vending, domestic work, and other informal economic activities. However, informal employment can also be found in developed countries, particularly in sectors like construction, hospitality, and domestic work.

➤ **Gender-based violence**

Okpokwasili (2022) noted that “when we talk of gender based violence we are talking of one gender using a brutal force against another gender”. She went further to say that:

Gender based violence is usually targeted at women and children. They are the ones who are always at the receiving end. Violence against girls, women and children has gained momentum in this present age and time, seen in the ugly menace ravaging our society these days. Violence has metamorphosed into something more dreadful eating deep into the fabrics of our societal norms and values which is the sum total of what our culture reflects.

Gender-based violence (GBV) refers to any form of violence that is primarily directed against an individual based on their gender or sex, disproportionately affecting women and girls. GBV is rooted in gender inequality and social norms that perpetuate discrimination and harmful behaviors. It can take various forms and occur in different settings, including homes, communities, workplaces, and institutions. Gender-based violence can affect anyone, regardless of their socioeconomic status, age, ethnicity, or nationality, but women and girls are the most common victims. Common forms of gender-based violence include:

- a. **Physical Violence:** This includes any physical force or action that causes bodily harm or injury, such as beating, slapping, punching, or any other form of physical abuse.
- b. **Sexual Violence:** This refers to any non-consensual sexual act or activity, including rape,

sexual assault, sexual harassment, and forced marriage.

c. Emotional or Psychological Abuse: This involves behaviors aimed at undermining a person's self-esteem, causing emotional distress, or controlling their thoughts and actions. Examples include verbal abuse, humiliation, intimidation, and threats.

d. Economic Abuse: This occurs when someone controls or restricts another person's access to financial resources, limiting their independence and ability to make choices.

e. Sexual Exploitation: This involves forcing someone to engage in sexual activities against their will, often for financial gain or other benefits.

f. Child Marriage: Child marriage involves marrying girls off at a young age, often without their consent, putting them at risk of numerous negative consequences, including violence and limited access to education and opportunities.

g. Female Genital Mutilation (FGM): FGM involves the partial or total removal of the external female genitalia, typically carried out for cultural or traditional reasons. It is recognized as a form of gender-based violence due to the severe physical and psychological consequences it inflicts on girls and women.

h. Human Trafficking: Trafficking in persons, particularly women and girls, for the purpose of forced labor, sexual exploitation, or other forms of exploitation is also considered a form of gender-based violence.

Gender-based violence is a pervasive global issue that violates human rights and has severe physical, emotional, and social consequences for survivors. It is crucial to address the root causes of GBV, challenge harmful gender norms, and work towards creating an inclusive and equal society where all individuals can live free from violence and discrimination. Governments, civil society organizations, and individuals play a vital role in advocating for policies, laws, and programs that combat gender-based violence and support survivors.

➤ Political representation

Okpokwasili (2023) noted that: “Traditional African societies from experience show that women have been marginalized and discriminated on from realizing their full potentials outside their already known domestic responsibilities”. Okpokwasili (2023) again quoting Sally Osei-Appiah (2019) noted that women politicians have long been marginalized in the political arena, aided in part by gender roles which prescribe what a woman can and cannot do, and patriarchal systems which establish, reinforce and sustain these roles. Increasing the visibility of women politicians is therefore a form of contestation against these structural barriers. It breaks the male dominance in politics while serving as a reference point to encourage more women into politics. However, studies on women politicians' media coverage point to gender biases that favor male politicians in both quantity and quality. While coverage of male politicians is generally issue-based, demonstrating their policy views, that of female politicians is refracted through the gendered lens of marginalization and sexist reporting. Given the increasing medicalization of contemporary politics, a trend that has positioned the media as the prime provider of political information, this media bias against women politicians undermines not only their political careers but also the very fiber of representative democracy

Women are severely underrepresented in political positions at both the national and local levels. In the National Assembly, which comprises the Senate and the House of Representatives, women hold a small percentage of seats. Similarly, women have limited representation in state governments and local councils.

Traditional beliefs and societal norms play a significant role in limiting women's political participation. Some communities hold patriarchal values that prioritize male leadership and may discourage women from seeking political office. Female politicians in Nigeria have faced various

forms of violence and intimidation, including physical attacks, threats, and harassment. These acts often deter women from actively engaging in politics for fear of their safety and that of their families. Women often lack the same access to resources and networks as their male counterparts, making it more challenging for them to fund their political campaigns and gain the necessary support.

Within political parties, women frequently encounter barriers in securing party nominations for electoral positions. Party leadership structures may not be supportive of women's candidacy, leading to fewer opportunities for female politicians to contest in elections. Stereotypes about women's abilities in leadership positions persist in Nigerian society, affecting public perception and hindering women's chances of gaining voter support. While Nigeria has made efforts to promote gender equality through legislation, there are still gaps in implementing these laws effectively. There may be challenges in enforcing laws that promote women's political participation and protect them from discrimination.

Despite these challenges, it's essential to recognize that there are ongoing efforts from women's rights organizations, activists, and some progressive political leaders in Nigeria to address gender disparities in politics. They advocate for policy changes, gender-sensitive reforms, and increased awareness to foster greater inclusion and representation of women in political decision-making processes.

➤ **Human trafficking**

Reports by Nigerian government human (2022) trafficking efforts reads that:

The Government of Nigeria does not fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking but is making significant efforts to do so. The government demonstrated overall increasing efforts compared to the previous reporting period, considering the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on its anti-trafficking capacity; therefore Nigeria remained on Tier 2. These efforts included investigating more traffickers, including two members of the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) involved in alleged sex trafficking; investigating officials allegedly complicit in trafficking crimes; identifying and providing more services to victims; and developing and implementing a rapid assessment form to identify trafficking victims. However, the government did not meet the minimum standards in several key areas. The government has not prosecuted any members of the CJTF for prior child soldier recruitment or use, potential sex trafficking in government-run IDP camps remained a concern, and officials removed fewer children from conditions of forced labor. Further, corruption remained a significant concern in the judiciary as well as immigration services, and the Ministry of Defense did not finalize its handover protocol to refer child soldiers to care for the seventh consecutive year.

Human trafficking is a serious and complex global issue that involves the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring, or receipt of people through force, fraud, deception, or coercion for the purpose of exploitation. It is a grave violation of human rights and affects millions of people worldwide, particularly women and children. Human trafficking can occur within a country (domestic trafficking) or across borders (transnational trafficking). It has gradually become a global menace eating deep into the fabrics our society.

Traffickers often target vulnerable individuals, including those living in poverty, victims of violence or abuse, migrants, refugees, and people with limited education or job opportunities. Traffickers use various tactics to recruit victims, such as false promises of a better life, job opportunities, or marriage proposals. Traffickers are individuals or organized criminal networks

that profit from exploiting vulnerable people. These networks operate across borders and exploit gaps in law enforcement and border control

Human trafficking is driven by the goal of exploitation. The forms of exploitation can include forced labor, forced prostitution and sexual exploitation, forced begging, child soldiers, forced marriages, organ trafficking, and other forms of modern-day slavery. Traffickers may use technology, particularly the internet and social media, to recruit and control victims, as well as to facilitate their movement and exploitation.

Trafficking routes can vary based on the origin and destination of victims. These routes may involve land, sea, or air transportation and may span multiple countries and regions. It's important to differentiate between human trafficking and human smuggling. While both involve the movement of people across borders, human smuggling is generally consensual, where migrants pay or agree to be smuggled to enter a country illegally. Human trafficking, on the other hand, involves coercion, deception, or force, and victims do not give genuine consent to their exploitation.

Trafficking survivors often endure physical and emotional abuse, suffer from trauma, and experience long-term psychological consequences. They may face language barriers, fear of authorities, and lack of access to support services. Governments, international organizations, and civil society groups should work together to combat human trafficking. This involves implementing and enforcing laws against trafficking, providing support and protection for victims, raising awareness, strengthening border controls, and collaborating across borders to dismantle trafficking networks.

Efforts to combat human trafficking require a multifaceted approach, addressing the root causes of vulnerability, focusing on prevention, providing support and rehabilitation to survivors, and holding traffickers accountable through the criminal justice system. Additionally, international cooperation is essential to address the transnational nature of human trafficking and to ensure a comprehensive and coordinated response.

➤ **Discriminatory laws**

Nigeria is home to over 250 ethnic groups, each with its unique cultural practices, languages, and traditions. The major ethnic groups in Nigeria include the Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba, and Igbo, but there are many other smaller ethnic communities. Some aspects of our cultural laws that is harmful especially on women and can also hinder on their human rights as fully fledged members of the community are:

- **Male Dominance and Female Subordination:** Traditional cultural beliefs in Nigeria often prioritize male authority and power, placing women in subordinate roles. Women are expected to be submissive, obedient, and fulfill traditional gender roles as wives, mothers, and caretakers.
- **Gendered Division of Labor:** Cultural beliefs assign specific roles and responsibilities to men and women. Men are typically seen as providers and decision-makers, while women are expected to prioritize domestic duties and child-rearing. This division of labor can limit women's opportunities for education, employment, and economic independence.
- **Preference for Male Children:** In some Nigerian cultures, a preference for male children persists. Sons are seen as carrying on the family name, inheriting property, and providing support for parents in old age, while daughters are considered to belong to their husbands' families. This preference can lead to gender-based discrimination, neglect, or limited opportunities for girls.

- **Limited Mobility and Freedom:** Cultural norms and traditions can restrict women's mobility and freedom. Practices such as purdah (seclusion of women) or puritanical interpretations of religious beliefs may limit women's participation in public spaces, education, employment, and decision-making processes.
- **Harmful Traditional Practices:** Certain cultural practices, such as female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C), child marriage, and widow inheritance, continue to be practiced in some Nigerian communities. These practices violate women's rights, perpetuate gender inequality, and have adverse physical, psychological, and social consequences for women and girls.
- **Influence of Religious Interpretations:** Religious beliefs and interpretations can reinforce traditional gender norms and hierarchies. Nigeria is a country with diverse religious beliefs, primarily consisting of Islam and Christianity, along with some traditional indigenous religions. While it is important to note that not all adherents of these religions interpret their teachings in the same way, there are certain religious beliefs and interpretations that reinforce traditional gender norms and hierarchies in Nigeria.

It is essential to recognize that culture is not static; it evolves and adapts over time in response to internal and external influences, such as globalization, migration, technological advancements, and interactions with other cultures. As a result, cultures are diverse and continually changing, reflecting the complexity and richness of human societies worldwide.

➤ **Human rights**

Human rights are fundamental rights and freedoms that belong to every individual, regardless of their nationality, ethnicity, gender, religion, or any other status. These rights are inherent to all human beings, and they are often considered universal, indivisible, interdependent, and inalienable. Human rights form the basis of human dignity and equality, and they are protected by international laws and conventions. These are rights that should not be tampered by culture, tradition or conventions. These are rights that applies particularly to the individual as a being that partakes in all everything Beingness.

Some of the key elements of an individual's human rights include:

- **Universality:** Human rights apply to all individuals, regardless of where they live or their citizenship. They are not contingent on factors such as race, gender, religion, or nationality.
- **Indivisibility:** Human rights are interconnected and interdependent. No right is more important than another, and the fulfillment of one right often relies on the realization of other rights.
- **Inalienability:** Human rights cannot be taken away from individuals under any circumstances. They are inherent to human beings and cannot be surrendered or transferred.
- **Equality and Non-Discrimination:** Human rights are based on the principles of equality and nondiscrimination. Everyone should be treated with fairness, respect, and dignity, without any form of discrimination.
- **Rights and Responsibilities:** While individuals have rights, they also have the responsibility to respect the rights of others and contribute to the well-being of society.
- **State Obligations:** Governments have a duty to protect, promote, and fulfill the human rights of their citizens. States are obligated to create an environment where human rights can be enjoyed by all and to take measures to prevent human rights abuses.

Core human rights recognized internationally that applies to every individual irrespective of race, culture, tradition or convention include:

- **Right to Life:** The right to life is the most fundamental of all human rights, and it includes the right to live without the threat of arbitrary deprivation of life.
- **Right to Freedom from Torture and Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment:** This right prohibits torture, cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment.
- **Right to Liberty and Security of the Person:** Individuals have the right to be free from arbitrary arrest, detention, or exile.
- **Right to Equality before the Law:** All individuals are equal before the law and have the right to equal protection of the law without discrimination.
- **Freedom of Expression:** This right protects the freedom to express opinions, ideas, and information without interference.
- **Right to Education:** Everyone has the right to access education on the basis of equality.
- **Right to Health:** This right encompasses the right to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health.
- **Right to Freedom of Religion or Belief:** Individuals have the right to practice their religion or belief freely and without coercion.
- **Right to Privacy:** This right protects individuals from arbitrary interference with their private life, family, home, and correspondence.

Unfortunately, Nigeria faces challenges with the effective implementation and enforcement of its laws. The rule of law is essential for safeguarding human rights, but corruption, inefficiency in the judicial system, and lack of accountability often hinder the proper application of human rights protections. The Nigerian police have been criticized for human rights violations, including excessive use of force, extrajudicial killings, and arbitrary arrests. The Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) came under particular scrutiny for its alleged abuses, leading to widespread protests in 2020.

Nigeria has grappled with security issues, including terrorism, insurgency, and banditry in various regions. These security challenges have led to human rights abuses by both state and non-state actors, often affecting civilians caught in the crossfire. Women and girls in Nigeria continue to face gender-based violence, including domestic violence, sexual assault, and harmful traditional practices such as female genital mutilation (FGM) and child marriage. The enforcement of laws to protect women's rights and combat gender-based violence remains inadequate in some areas. Many Nigerians, particularly those in marginalized and rural communities, face barriers in accessing justice due to factors like limited legal representation, lack of awareness of their rights, and high costs associated with legal processes.

Nigeria's diverse ethnic and religious landscape sometimes leads to tensions and conflicts. Human rights violations can be exacerbated by discrimination and violence based on religious or ethnic identity. The Nigerian government has faced criticism for suppressing freedom of expression, including through restrictions on media and the internet, and targeting journalists, activists, and critics.

Widespread poverty and income inequality in Nigeria hinder the realization of economic and social rights, such as access to education, healthcare, and adequate housing. Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and Refugees: Nigeria has a significant population of internally displaced persons and refugees due to conflicts and insecurity. Ensuring their rights and providing humanitarian support pose considerable challenges. Despite efforts to address child rights issues, challenges persist, including child labor, child trafficking, and lack of access to quality education and healthcare.

Addressing these challenges requires concerted efforts from the Nigerian government, civil society organizations, and the international community. It involves strengthening the rule of law, enhancing access to justice, promoting accountability for human rights abuses, and creating an enabling environment for the protection and promotion of human rights for all Nigerians. Additionally, raising awareness, educating the public about human rights, and empowering marginalized communities are essential steps toward improving the human rights situation in Nigeria.

Evaluation/ Conclusion

The debate between cultural relativism and universal human rights regarding gender issues in Africa is complex and multifaceted. Cultural relativism argues that practices and values should be evaluated within the context of the culture in which they occur, and that no culture should be judged superior to others. On the other hand, universal human rights assert that certain fundamental rights should be upheld universally, regardless of cultural differences. When considering gender issues in Africa, both perspectives offer valuable insights, but they also present challenges in addressing the persistent inequalities and human rights violations faced by women in the continent.

Cultural relativism has its merits in recognizing the importance of cultural diversity and respecting the autonomy of communities. It acknowledges that cultural practices are deeply ingrained and that imposing external values may not always be effective or respectful. However, this approach can sometimes lead to the justification or tolerance of harmful practices, such as female genital mutilation, forced child marriages, and domestic violence, under the guise of cultural preservation. It can hinder progress in promoting gender equality and protecting the rights of women, as cultural norms may perpetuate discrimination and subordination.

On the other hand, universal human rights provide a framework for holding states accountable and ensuring that women's rights are protected across borders. It emphasizes the inherent dignity and equality of all individuals, emphasizing that no cultural tradition should supersede fundamental human rights. However, universal human rights face challenges when implemented in diverse cultural contexts. Resistance and backlash from traditional and conservative groups may arise, viewing external human rights standards as a form of cultural imperialism.

In addressing gender issues in Africa, a balanced and nuanced approach is required, recognizing the significance of culture while upholding the principles of universal human rights. Emphasizing human rights does not mean dismissing cultural values; instead, it entails finding common ground to promote gender equality while respecting cultural diversity.

Engaging with local communities and grassroots organizations is crucial in creating sustainable change. Empowering women within their cultural context can lead to the evolution of cultural norms that uphold gender equality and respect human rights. Education and awareness-raising are essential tools in challenging harmful practices and promoting positive cultural shifts.

Furthermore, national governments and international organizations should collaborate to ensure that cultural relativism is not used as an excuse to perpetuate human rights violations. A balance must be struck between respecting cultural autonomy and safeguarding fundamental rights, with clear mechanisms in place to address human rights abuses.

In conclusion, the ethics of cultural relativism versus universal human rights in addressing gender issues in Africa demand a thoughtful and context-specific approach. By combining an

appreciation for cultural diversity with a commitment to upholding human rights, we can work toward a more just and equal society for women in Africa. The process of challenging harmful cultural practices while respecting cultural identities may be complex and slow, but it is necessary to ensure the full realization of women's rights and dignity.

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