Socio-Cultural Factors that Affect the Role and Status of Women among the Bayso Community of Gidicho Island

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Abstract: **Socio-Cultural perspectives of a society determine the power relations within that particular society, in which men and male values have superior status over women and female values. In most societies there are cultural beliefs and practices, that undermine women's status and contribute to gender based discrimination. The study was conducted to examine the socio-cultural factors that affect the role and status of women among the Bayso community of Gidicho Island. The methods used to collect primary data include: interview, observation, focus group discussion, and case study. Informants were selected by purposive and convenience sampling techniques based on variables: age, sex, religion, education, occupation and marital status and a total of 34 informants participated in the study. Findings of the study revealed that there are various socio-cultural factors among the Bayso, which adversely affect the role and status of women. These include: culturally held attitudes, norms, values and practices, patriarchal ideology and religious beliefs. As the study has shown, lower socio-economic status leaves women vulnerable and the power balance is always skewed to men. To correct this unbalance and evade the marginalization of women it is necessary for both men and women to comprehend that women are not treated as equal as men. Therefore, there is an urgent need to raise public awareness about the peril of female marginalization. Moreover, intensive gender sensitization programs should be conducted by the concerned bodies, to foster gender equality.**

Keywords: **socio-cultural factors, Role, Status, Bayso, Gidicho.**

I. Introduction

According to [1] women constitute half of world's population. It is also true for Ethiopia, where women comprise 49.5% of the population [2]. Nonetheless, despite their number and their immense contribution to the well being of their family and society, their economic, social and political status in the society is low and their endeavor seldom got the due recognition. Because of deep-rooted cultural and religious beliefs, women are made to have no or low self-esteem and accept their subordinate positions as "God"- given, not subject to change but is resulting from their being born female. Cultural and religious myth and patriarchal conceptions forces women to perceive themselves as helpless without men [3], [4], and [5]. As a result of these socio-cultural factors, women were denied their social and economic rights. For instance, in Benshangul Gumuz [6] and Sidama [7] women have no access to resources (cattle, land, and cash). Similarly, in Gurage and Gonder [8], Hadiya [9], and Sidama [7] women are forced to be inferior to their men counter part because of culturally held attitudes. The aforementioned findings attest that despite the fact that Ethiopia is a multi-ethnic country and diverse in culture, the suppression of women at a country level has almost similar features. However, the depth and the degree of such oppression vary from place to place and from culture to culture. Here, the very fact is at least in all Ethiopian families and cultures there exists marginalization and subjugation of women.

Since the majority of Ethiopian people are illiterate; living contentedly with varied traditional practices, beliefs and culturally held attitudes that substantially hampered our development in general and women in particular. In this regard, the Bayso women, who comprise more than 50% of the total population of the community [2], despite the fact that they contribute a lot in productive activities of the society beyond the culturally ascribed role of women as mothers and wives, their effort has not got recognition and respect within the community. Field data discloses that because of the on- going marginalization they are deprived of their economic, social and political rights. Furthermore, Gidicho is one of the rural areas of Ethiopia, where the ethnic history of the community in general and women's issue in particular has been given no attention by researchers except some socio-linguistic works, which dealt on language similarity and difference between the Bayso and other ethnic groups on lake Abaya and explorers' account.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to identify the socio-cultural factors that adversely affect the role and status of women among the Bayso and to formulate possible solutions to alleviate the problems.

II. Theoretical framework

Although there are various factors for gender inequality in every society, for this particular study I preferred to use social learning theory. A social learning theory is the view that people learn by observing others. Associated with Albert Bandura's work in the 1960s social learning theory explains how people learn new behaviors, values, and attitudes [10]. According to the phrase in [11], a social learning orientation focuses among others on, how cultural learning shapes male and female personality types. Social learning theory emphasizes environmental, non biological influences on behaviors and the importance of learning from watching other people in its environment. Social learning theory also focuses on socialization, the process by which society attempts to teach children to behave like the ideal adults of that society [12]. There is also the issue that some aspects of gender role appear to be universal to all cultures. For example, men are consistently found to be aggressive than women, regardless of culture. Similarly, there is a cross cultural similarity in the features women and men find desirable in potential reproductive patterns [10]. These universal features suggest that some aspects of gender role are the result of innate, genetic influences that social learning theory does not take account for [13].

However, I believe that social learning theory offer an intellectual tool to identify the socio-cultural factors that affect the role and status of Bayso women by analyzing ethnographic data under the socio-cultural and economic context of this particular community.

III. Socio-cultural history of the Bayso and the place of women

Gidicho is the name of the largest island in Lake Abaya [14], in Southern Nations, Nationalist and Peoples Regional State, Gamo Gofa *Zone /*province*/* of Mirab Abaya *woreda/*district*/.* There are twenty one other islands on the lake [15] and three villages on the Gidicho Island; namely: Shigma in north, Bayso in south and Haro on the eastern shore. The Bayso people, who speak Cushitic language, occupy Shigma and Bayso villages, while the Haro people reside in the village also known as Haro. Gidicho is widely misused to refer to the people living there as well as the language spoken on the island. However, there are two distinct communities indigenous to Gidicho Island speaking different languages, Bayso and Haro. Informants confirmed that 'Gidicho' is the name of the island where as Bayso is the name of a particular people, who inhabited the two villages (Shigma and Bayso) and their language. The population of the Bayso community is estimated to be 5491, of which, 2760 (50.3%) are female and 2731 (49.7%) are male [2]. These people reside; on Gidicho Island, on the mainland in the village called 'Alge' and in different parts of the country. The Bayso are one of the five ethnic groups found in Gamo Gofa *zone* and they have one seat in the House of Federation [16].

The traditional administrative system of the Bayso people was known as "*Wono*". This system was ruled by a king called '*Wono*' by the Bayso. The title *Wono* was not inherited from father to child. Anyone who needed to be a *Wono* had to compete to win the office of *Wono*. The only criterion in the competition for the office of *Wono* was economic potential. However, in the *Wono* system women were not allowed to take part in the competition to achieve the title *Wono* as their male counterpart. According to informants, women in Bayso were not expected to take part in political affairs; rather they were

entitled to leave under the canopy of their husbands. They argue that even the wife of the *Wono* (*Oriwono*) was a ceremonial figure. The *Wono* (king) had both political and religious power. Politically he was expected to administrate his people, give justice, and keep the peace of the people.

The traditional belief system of the Bayso was emanated from the *Wono* system, which had both political and religious power. In religious terms, the *Wono* was considered as a head priest who communicated for the people of Bayso with '*Wa'* the sky god of the Bayso. Thus, in their religious life, the Bayso considered the *Wono* as a person who represented by god among them and during his office regarded as holy. The *Woyicha* (clan leader) and *Odobado* (father of *mary*) were second on the echelon. Next to the *Wono* they performed both political and religious duties. In times of environmental hazards, epidemics, invasions, war and draught women were expected to pray in order to get rid of such calamities. The prayer was led by the wife of the *Wono*, (*Oriwono*), and the *Woyicha's* wife, (*Magananchos*), coordinated by the *Odobado*, (father of mary), and was held along the shore of the lake. The office of '*mariyam'* which includes 'Abado', (mother of *mary*), and *Odobado*, (father of *mary*), were responsible for cleansing woman who have a miscarriage. In Bayso, if a woman had a miscarriage (*metabiyallo*) she was considered unclean, as a result she was alienated until she went into the service of '*Abado'*. The cleansing process (*Ilabo*) was done by the *Maganacho*, (wife of clan leader) who slaughter a sheep to bless their god to purify the woman with miscarriage by spurting the blood in the house. The Bayso women, who had such a decisive role and prestige within that belief system, had lost that status with the decline of their traditional belief system as result of the conquest of king Menelik II and the ensuing introduction of orthodox Christianity.

Based on the tradition, it is estimated that almost twelve clans are found among the Bayso. Clan stratification among the Bayso was based on two factors: migration and number of population. Accordingly, among these clans the '*Mulmale'* clan had a significant number of populations, as a result other clans were afraid to make them *Wono* fearing their dominancy. Even though, the '*Mulmale'* were denied the office of *Wono*, on the basis of the Bayso culture they were entitled to bless all other clans. For instance, married couples had to go to the '*Mulmale'* clan leader to get a blessing. This ranking and symbolic seniority is demonstrated in settling clan disputes or in occasions like matrimony.

IV. Methodology

Descriptive survey was used to carry out this research for the reason that the study needs to examine the socio-cultural factors that affect the role and status of women, so that possible suggestion could be forwarded for tackling the problem. Samples were selected using purposive sampling techniques. This means participants were selected because they are expected to generate useful data for the study. As result, the total informants who participated in the study were 34. Among these, 9 men and 12 women had involved in the in-depth interview. Similarly 13 individuals participated in the Focus Group Discussion. The FGD was held in two sites with the total number of 13 participants, of which 7 reside on Gidicho Island and the rest 6 at Alge. For better accomplishment of the study, the researcher used four types of data gathering tools namely: Interview, field observation, focus group discussion, and Case study. Guidelines for interview, focus group discussion and observation were designed based on the review of literature and the findings of previous studies.

Interviews: were held with 9 men and 12 women. Guideline questionnaires were prepared in advance, but sometimes modified when the interview was in progress based on the response of the informant. Interviews were conducted in their mother tongue, that is Bayso, with the assistance of interpreter, and also Amharic was used in some instance, because the majority of the Bayso are multi- lingual. They speak Bayso (their mother tongue), *Oromifa*, *Amharic* and *Wolaytigna*. Informants were asked both general and specific questions with the aim of getting detailed information.

Focus group discussions (FGD): were conducted with a total of 13 informants in two sessions. Of these, one was held at Alge village with 6 (FGD**1**) participants and the other on the island with 7 (FGD **2**) participants. It was very helpful to know more about the outlook of individuals on women's role and status. At times a tape recorder was used with the consent of participants. The discussions which were conducted in the vernacular were later translated to Amharic by the assistance and then translated to English by the researcher. On average each FGD took about 2.5 hours.

Field Observation: was conducted to have an insight in the role and status of women in the study area in terms of examining the environmental settings, how women interact with their community, and accessibility of varied facilities whose existence has direct or indirect impact on women's life. So, it helped the researcher to collect field data on the actual activities of these people.

Case study: Among the informants who participated in the focus group discussions, two were selected, from Gidicho Island and Alge village based on the way they expressed their attitudes. And they were let to narrate their experience.

Ethical considerations: Before entering the field to collect data, local authorities and community leaders were briefed about the objective of the study. Respondents' participation in the study was voluntary and each respondent was asked to give verbal consent to participate.

V. Data Analysis

In organizing the primary data, the researcher systematically well thought-out information obtained through, interviews, focus group discussions, observation, and case study. Furthermore, audio recorded materials were carefully transcribed. After identifying patterns of relationships, the author had categorized and interpreted the data to construct coherent account of socio-cultural factors that affect women's role and status in the study area. Generally, descriptive method of data analysis was used; that is narrative explanation, illustration of cases and summarization of findings.

VI. Findings and Discussions

The age range of the sample population was from 19- 84, from the very young to the oldest. From the total sample population 7 (20.58%) were youth whose age range was 20-30. On the other hand, the dominant number of the sample population was found within the age range 30-70, which hold 23 (7.64%) of the sample population and the rest comprised 12.03%. Similarly, the educational status of informants was mainly dominated by illiterate group having 18 (52.94%) of the informants and 8 (23.53%) were at primary level while the rest from higher institutions. On the other hand, the marital status of informants shows that 29 (85.29%) were married, 3 (8.82%) single and very few widowed. Concerning the number of children, the informants had a minimum of 2 and a maximum of 14 (in average 5.96 children) per respondent. This is almost similar to the average birth rate which is 6.0 in rural Ethiopia [17]. As a result, one can deduce suffer of women in continuous birth and caring the offspring. The religion profile of informants is clearly dominated by Protestants who hold 20 (58.82%) and the rest 14 (41.18%) are Orthodox Christians. Hence, one can realize that how much the aggressive expansion of Christianity uprooted all traditional beliefs and customs of the people which had long tie with the society. Informant's source of income from different activities is 14 (41.18%) agriculturalists, 13 (38.23%) herders and insignificant number of employee and dependents.

The socio-cultural factors which undermined the role and status of women within the community and responsible for the ongoing gender stratification includes; culturally held attitudes, norms, values and practices (son preference, socialization of children, it is taboo for men to take part in domestic activities, lack of women's right to access to and control over property, lack of women's right to inherit their family and husband's property, marriage practice, lack of recognition to women's role and contribution), patriarchal ideology (male dominancy both at home and public in all spheres of life), and religious beliefs (women's inferiority as God given and natural) are the major ones. These findings are almost match with the views of [6], [7], [12] and [18] who made the culture of their study community responsible for the marginalization of women as mentioned above.

The major factors that disadvantaged Bayso women's role and status are mainly related to the society (Bayso) culture. As it is indicated at the literature of this thesis, every culture consists of a set of patterns of behaviors that are contained in its social institution and within the personalities of individual. Culture is a social construction that provides guidelines for appropriate behaviors, social norms including those related to gender. It also determines women's and men's access to and control over

economic resources, and their ability to make decision at the family and community levels. Furthermore, it plays a significance role in the construction of gender inequality in which men have dominant power over different sphere of activity than women. Though gender relations vary among societies, the general pattern is that women are subordinate to men.

Women in Bayso albeit their contribution in all aspects of life to their family and their community in general, they are denied due recognition and the right position within their society. They have been marginalized and suppressed both by their family and husbands as the finding reveals. Sources of their marginalization are rooted from the cultural norms, beliefs, societal expectation and attitude towards females. This is similar to the finding of [12] which makes cultural norms and beliefs responsible for suppression of women.

As the research reveals, Bayso women spend much of their time in backbreaking domestic chores since many of the activities have to be carried out on daily bases. Even though there are some incidents where men take the initiative to support their wives, because of the patriarchal outlook and conservative members of the community, men feel pressured into not continuing to do such activities on a regular basis and therefore women are unquestionably disadvantaged. This finding is also in line with [6]. Women couple productive activities with the reproductive activities and as a result one can suppose that men's workload is much lower than that of women. It is worthwhile to maintain the fact what appears as exclusively male dominated activities, they are always complemented by women's labor; however, this is not true for the other way round.

Among the Bayso, social norms which prescribe women to play certain role in the community includes the following phrase '*ibado orro tomato*' that is to say that she is not visible in community activities and a say 'those who made agreement sold an ox and those who failed to made agreement sold a cow' at least giving women the chance to take part in community affairs including decision-making. However, because of patriarchal outlooks and socially held attitudes such as 'women to kitchen and men to the public', women face difficulty to enjoy their rights in public. Similarly, according to [18] in Ada'a, Oromiya region women are marginalized from participating in community activities including leadership and decision-making because of patriarchal outlooks and socially held attitudes.

Bayso prefer to have male baby boy, as they reason out that in their culture a son is accountable for shouldering the duties of his father, administrating the property of the family, and supporting their family in respect that males can ensure the continuity and protection of the family lineage since the preservation of the family name is granted through the son. Which is also true in the findings of [6] where in Gumuz community, son preference at birth is other discriminatory practices that put female child in secondary status within the family and community as well.

Women in Bayso, because of the cultural beliefs and attitudes of the society, are shackled not to demand and enjoy their rights. This is also similar with [18] findings in which cultural beliefs of the study community is accountable for the marginalization of women of that community (Ada'a, Oromiya). In Bayso, women even contend that this is already the established norm of their society and therefore women have no option except to obey it and socialize their children in the same pattern.

Findings reveal that the Bayso socialize their offspring in a way that they succeed their fathers' and mothers' role in accordance with the expectations of the family and the community. The research also reveals that there is no such a role switching between the two sexes. For this, they reason out that the culture denies the option of role reversal and that it is a taboo for man to switch to females role.

The role of women in decision making is not more than consultation and the final say is the absolute right of the husband. This view is also supported by the findings of [18]. In Bayso community, women have no the right to control any sort of property not only wealth but also the wife itself is considered as the property of the husband and even in some cases as a slave. Furthermore, they have no the right to inherit property of their parents or their husbands. Here again, the current study seems to agree with [6], [7], and 18], findings in that all these researchers underlined the problem of women in getting access to resources.

Bayso exercise two types of marriages: *Bulacha* (arranged marriage) and *shigedesesena (*if a Bayso girl lost her virginity by chance when living with her parents, she was forced to be given without her agreement and any matrimony). However, in the marriage system of Bayso, bride-wealth /gamado/ by no means become that much burden for the bridegroom, because it may also be delivered after marriage based on the ones agreement between the two families. However, the girl is not consulted about the marriage that her family arranges for her. Even more, in times of divorce, the wife comes out without having any valuable goods for her future life, which is completely contradictor to the country's (Ethiopia) constitution and the revised family code which offer equal property right for couples.

In Bayso, because of the prevailing traditional outlook, cultural influence and economic dependency, women are relegated to the lowest status and position in the society. Even though, in some cases, there are some indications that men have positive attitudes towards and respect for their wives, it is not supported by their commitment to share the burden of women's work and extend recognition to their contribution.

Despite the fact that Bayso are too conservative to their culture, beliefs and attitudes they held may be for centuries, currently there is a sign of attitudinal change that sparks here and there though the progress is sluggish and the achievement is relatively insignificant. Generally, the above socio-cultural factors influenced not only the status of Bayso women, but also what they can play for the development of their community. Therefore, this covers from the domestic to the public level and in all cases; women are accorded with low positions.

VII. Conclusion

Socio-Cultural perspectives of a society determine the power relations within that particular society, in which men and male values have superior status over women and female values [6]. In most societies there are cultural beliefs and practices, that undermine women's status and contribute to gender based discrimination. This view match with the case in Bayso, where, even though women accomplish almost all domestic activities and they coupled the burden of productive activities in the hope to improve their family life and contribute to their community; their endeavor is not recognized by the society.

Although there is some consultation on decisions making, majority of Bayso women are denied this right because of the patriarchal view held among men. Similarly, women are deprived of access to and control over property in Bayso, which enforced women to be economically dependent on their husbands. Furthermore, for the reason that the cultural sanction that may be imposed on them, women in Bayso never demand their constitutional right to inherit their parent and husbands. Despite the fact that the constitution guaranteed equal rights for women, the reality is that they are not seen as equal, their roles are closely tied to their reproductive and household activities. Similarly, girls have no right to select their mate and if they lost their virginity by chance when living with their parents, they are forced to be given without their agreement and any matrimony. This also contradicts to the constitution and revised family code of the country which provides them with equal chance in mate selection and decides on their affair.

The study findings backup the principles of social learning theory. Similar to its assertion this study finds out that the cultural beliefs, attitudes and practices of the Bayso, which they acquired from their social environment had played significant role in undermining women's role and status among the Bayso. Whatever the contribution of women is, because of the prevailing traditional outlook and the ensuing economic dependency women are relegated to the lowest status and position. Bayso women are mostly ignorant of their rights and even took the situation where they are living as normal and inevitable due to their being female. Thus, women never consider their situation as wrong and unfair though they are suffering from the consequences.

As the study has shown lower social and economic status leaves women vulnerable to men domination and the power balance is always skewed to men. To overcome this imbalance and to avoid the marginalization of women, it is necessary for both men and women to realize that women are not treated as equal as men. Therefore, there is an urgent need to raise public awareness about the danger of female marginalization mainly through education. Unless girls' education is prompted so that

they realize their full potential, the status of women in Bayso will remain low, and their rights are likely to continue to be violated.

Acknowledgment

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