



## TOWARDS AMELIORATING THE CONDITIONS OF WOMEN IN NORTHWESTERN NIGERIA: THE LESSONS OF THE 19TH CENTURY JIHAD IN HAUSALAND

### History

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### KEYWORDS

#### Introduction

The northwestern Nigeria constitutes the northwestern geopolitical zone of Nigeria comprising the states of Sokoto, Zamfara, Kebbi, Katsina, Kano, Jigawa and Kaduna states. These were the areas constituting the core Hausa city states known as Hausaland where the jihad of the 19<sup>th</sup> century under Usman dan Fodio took place between the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century jihad in Hausaland came about as a result of the oppression the people suffered in the hands of their rulers. The oppressions brought about sharp division between the ruling class and the people. The oppressions were in the form of over taxation, forced labour, killings and enslaving of people. A clear testimony of these oppressions were reflected in the writings of the Jihad leaders who in their attempt to explain the conditions of the Hausa society and proffer solutions wrote hundreds of books and pamphlets (Ismail, 1996). This paper attempts to draw lessons from the experiences of women during the pre-jihad period and how the establishment of the Sokoto Caliphate address such problems and improve their lots. These experiences and good lessons and inspirations are guide to contemporary challenges affecting women in Northwestern Nigeria.

#### The Pre-Jihad Women in Hausaland

In the Pre-Jihad period women suffered the most. They were no more than second class citizens exposed to all manner of injustices. This was why the dreams of many parents were to have male children similar to what obtained in the jahiliya period of Arabia. This was why the question of the right of women did not arise in this period. Forced marriages were common practices: girls could be given out in marriage to persons they had never seen or met under the guise of religion. Even after the marriage women were exposed to series of abuses not limited to their husbands but even in the hands of their in-laws. In education the women were relegated. The male children were the preferred ones. This was why education received the attention of the jihadists. Yusuf (2002) explained how Shehu Usman dan Fodio in one of his writings lamented that:

[...]most of our educated men leave their wives, their daughters and their captives morally abandoned, like beasts, without teaching them what Allah prescribes should be taught them and without instructing them in the articles of the law which concerns them.

Thus women were not only deprived educationally but suffered a lot of deprivations to which Shehu frowned at. According to Yusuf (2002) Shehu had this to say:

Men treat these beings like household implements which became broken after long use and which are then thrown out on the dung heap. This is abominable crime.

From the foregoing it is obvious that women were not well treated in the hands of their women folk. They suffered a lot of deprivations and oppression. This was why one of the fundamental concerns of the jihad period was the suffering of women and their liberation. This concern of the leaders and the resolve to find solutions to them necessitated the numerous writings regarding the jihad and women oppression and their liberation. In order to bring about positive changes in the condition of women the jihad leaders continued to write and preach against women oppression. They also provided practical examples of educating their wives and children which greatly contributed in addressing the problem of women and improving their social welfare.

#### The Lessons of the Jihad and Liberation of Women

In the jihad period (1774 – 1900) the leaders tried to reawaken women towards knowing their obligations towards Allah and their fellow human beings. This no doubt contributed in restoring their honour and rights. According to Dangana (1986) the jihad had to a large extent uprooted and destroyed the bad conditions of women in Hausaland. In restoring the dignity of women the jihad leaders rightly instrumentalised education as key to liberation. As a result they emphasized on women education. The campaign on education started with Shehu dan Fodio's family which produced educated women in the persons of Nana Asma'u and Maryam (Boyd and Mark, 1999). The practical example resulted in women freely attending Shehu's lecture and sermons during his preaching tours.

In this period women education was emphasized by Shehu because he saw it as a fundamental factor as far as social transformation was concerned (Yaro, 2010). To totally liberate women the jihad leaders advocated and emphasized on women education at all levels. This was a complete breakaway, indeed a revolution, from the position in which women found themselves during the pre-jihad period (Yusuf, 2002).

As far as Shehu and jihad leaders were concern educating women is as important as that of men. This was why Shehu in one of his books called *Irshal-al-Ikwan* (Dauda, 2010) said:

That the ruler or judge in whose court a housewife takes her husband for refusing to allow her attend school where she could acquire the first class type of school should compel the husband to get his wife educated as he should compel him to give her adequate maintenance, in fact knowledge is superior to maintenance.

The seriousness with which the jihadists saw the education of women cannot be overemphasized. The example of Nana Asma'u and Maryam is a case in point. Indeed Maryam was credited to have written up to 90 works pertaining to the jihad and women education (Boyd and Mark, 1999). When it comes to educating the women there was no compromise. This was why he called on women not to pay blind respect to their husbands especially when it comes to denying them access to education. This was what the Shehu had to say to the women:

O Muslim women do not listen to the words of the misguided ones who seek to lead you astray by ordering you to obey your husbands instead of telling you to obey Allah and His messenger. They tell you that a woman's happiness lies in obeying their husband. This is no more than a camouflage to make you satisfy their needs. They improve on your duties which neither Allah nor His messenger imposed on you. They make you cook, wash clothes and do other things which they desire while they fail to teach you what Allah and His Apostle have prescribed for you. Neither Allah nor His Apostle charges you with such duties.

There is no doubt that the jihad leadership had established women's right to education. The example of Shehu's family was the underlying fact. They placed the responsibility of the education of women appropriately. The father accordingly was vested with the responsibility of educating his children, women inclusive while husband was to educate his wife, failing which they must be sent to school. Women religious education was made a priority before anything else. This ruling on women's right to education became accepted.

With women attending Shehu's classes, and later Nana Asma'u's the jihad had succeeded in bringing about what can be described as

educational revolution and liberation of women from subjugation, discrimination and bondage in the hands of their parents and husbands who prior to the jihad denied them access to education. The jihad leaders were able to restore women's right to education, freedom of speech and moral obligations. The positive roles played by women during and after the jihad underscored the positive achievements of the jihad towards ameliorating the hardship of women in Hausaland.

Women liberated as they were, played significant role in propagating the course of the jihad and explaining its importance to the people. Kani (1985) highlighted the significant role of women during the jihad period. He asserted that women's role was not limited to mere cooking and the like but went beyond to cover areas such as teaching and learning. This newfound role for women was championed by the example of Nana Asma'u and Maryam who in their various writings and poems underlined this revolutionary role of women. In fact, Nana Asma'u and Maryam were consulted on various religious problems even after the death of Usman dan Fodio. They continued to recognize the role of women in maintaining a stable and happy home. When these were done women could pursue their different activities outside the home within the context of the shariah. Regarding this Lemu (1977) suggested that:

For a Muslim woman, whatever job she is doing outside the home she needs to ensure that it does not lead her into undesirable relationships with men. She must firstly ensure that her dress conforms to what Allah has prescribed in the Holy Quran and secondly train for or select a job that will not require her to work on close or intimate terms with men.

### **The Post Jihad and Contemporary Muslim Women in Northwestern Nigeria**

There is no iota of doubt that the jihad led by Usman dan Fodio succeeded in ameliorating the poor and degrading conditions of women in Hausaland during the period of the jihad and after. The bad conditions of women had to a large extent been uprooted and destroyed (Dangana, 1986).

However, as time went by the deprivations women suffered in the pre-jihad period began to show their ugly faces. There is no exaggeration to suggest that majority of people in contemporary Hausaland believe that the main duties of a woman is to get married and produce children. In her matrimonial home she is expected to have absolute loyalty to her husband. This, it is believed, is the path to paradise. In giving birth it is always the male child as the preferred sex by the parents. When it comes to training of children in schools the girls are always relegated. This is why among people it is the men's world where the male predominates. For many housewives the home is like a prison never allowed to go out until under very special circumstances like death of her parents or relations. Women had, therefore, continued to be marginalized and dominated by the men.

### **Conclusion**

From the foregoing it is clear that despite the gains recorded by women during and after the jihad it appears that in contemporary Northwestern Nigeria (Hausaland), they have a long way to go in being treated equally with their male counterparts. This no doubt is as a result of the entrenched cultural beliefs and prejudice, which sees women as inferior to men. For women to be relatively free from men's absolute control there has to be a break from the entrenched cultural beliefs. This can only be done if we go to the true teachings of Islam as contained in the Qur'an and Sunnah and reflected in the teachings and practice of the jihad leaders. The religion is very clear on the status of women. Therefore, education must be taken seriously as it is the main instrument of liberation. The jihad leaders tried and succeeded to a large extent. Finally, therefore, the true status of women as equal to men with full rights will continue to face challenges unless women are well educated and their rights and dignity respected.

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