International Journal of Gender and Women's Studies
December 2015, Vol. 3, No. 2, pp. 143-155
ISSN: 2333-6021 (Print), 2333-603X (Online)
Copyright © The Author(s). All Rights Reserved.
Published by American Research Institute for Policy Development
DOI: 10.15640/ijgws.v3n2p13
URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.15640/ijgws.v3n2p13

Social And Cultural Perceptions on Women's Education and Physical Embodiment on Their Ability to Wield Power over Men: the Yendi Experience in Northern Ghana

Emmanuel Nyamekye (PhD)[1] & Sarah Yarney (Ms)[2]

Abstract

Distinctive factors of social and cultural life in northern Ghana impinge on or constrain both females and males in their quest for educational empowerment. These social and cultural restrictions create disparities in opportunities for women and men to become equal players in the scheme of things.Cultural practices endorsed by religious principles seem to suggest that women have limited scope to enrol for education beyond a certainlevel. The main reason is that girls' behaviour and social movements are closely monitored by male kin, who are also responsible for their financial provisions.Nevertheless, it is believed that women in northern Ghana wield a considerable degree of domestic power despite hegemonic gender ideologies, especially those professing to reflect the Islamic principles and practices that highlight women's subordination and practices that affect girls and/or women's pursuit of higher education. Some tenets of Islam, like the *hijab* (domestic seclusion), inhibit women's freedom of movement, and this considerably affects women's involvement in educational activities. The point is made that women, without any formal education can utilise several other non-material factors to ensure better terms in gender-based relationships and these factor have been explored in this study.

Keywords: culture, education, gender, Islam, perception.

1. Introduction

Today, boys and girls in Yendi in northern Ghana have equal access to educational opportunities at all levels of education. However, girls and boys are equal beneficiaries in primary, middle and lower secondary education whereas; gender disparities become visible and pronounced at the upper secondary and tertiary level. It is therefore evident that the state's provision for equal opportunity is different from cultural norms of educational opportunity for boys and girls. Two crucial questions arrive from this scenario. What are the cultural factors that restrict women from pursuing education beyond secondary level? What does this imply in terms of women's bargaining power in the household?

To be able to find answers to these questions, this study utilises a mainly qualitative methodology which involves a wide range of basic ethnographic field investigation techniques. The reasons for employing a primarily qualitative research method stem from the fact that the study involves an examination of how men and women negotiate terms in households in northern Ghana. A qualitative research strategy was also adopted because it emphasises the analysis of the behaviour of people in specific social settings (Holliday, 2002). This research is also primarily qualitative because it seeks to understand unquantifiable and immeasurable human behaviour.

[1] Liberal Studies Department, Tamale Polytechnic, Post Office Box 3 E/R, Tamale, Ghana. joenyameuk@yahoo.com, (+233206668217)
[2] Gorsmay Pharmacy Ltd., Post Office Box 570, Tamale, Ghana. sayarney@yahoo.co.uk

The information required for this study was gathered from primary and secondary sources. To collect data from primary sources, blends of several techniques were explored. These include focus group discussions (FGDs), one-to-one in-depth interviews in selected households, and non-participant observation. FGDs were used to capture social norms, barriers, opportunities, perceptions and interests regarding gender relations and household reproductive activities. One-to-one in-depth interviews with members of selected households on the other hand, formed another important part of this research. While direct observations were used during fieldwork to understand intra-household gender relations and bargaining dynamics in Yendi. The following analysis was derived from some of the interviews conducted. A respondent, Adi (28 years) for instance, indicated that she had to abandon her ambition to become a teacher and accept a secretarial job because her brother refused to send her to Tamale (the regional capital) to enrol for a teacher training course. Similarly, Rukaya, opted to seek employment as a trader when her parents and her elder brother in particular refused her permission to go to Tamale for further education:

My brother said he feels anxious about sending any of his sisters to Tamale as he felt that a girl could not adequately fend for herself once she was far from home and so she will ask men for financial support and this can lead her into prostitution (Rukaya, 23 years, trader, Yendi).

Both cases involving Adi and Rukaya suggest that brothers decide upon girl's opportunities for further schooling, an indication that the power of men in the household is stronger than that of the girls or their mothers. Moreover, these same young men who ensure that their sisters conform to cultural expectations of modesty and morality do not necessarily conform to societal norms themselves. In a discussion about modesty and morality, Hampshire (2006) refers to the double standards young Muslim men adhere to in northern Burkina Faso in relation to dress codes and social interaction, imposing restrictions on their sisters while they themselves freely accept western lifestyles. Men are therefore selective in drawing legitimacy from religion and culture.

Cultural practices endorsed by religious principles such as *qiwama*[3] (see Ali, 2001, Fandy, 2007), seem to suggest that women have limited scope to enrol for education beyond the level facilitated in their own nearby community. The main reason is that girls' behaviour and social movements are closely monitored by male kin, who are also responsible for their financial provisions. According to some parents, daughters required more secure accommodation arrangements than sons. One parent observes:

Sons can sleep anywhere in the house, but daughters cannot and they have to be protected, especially in a congested peri-urban place like Yendi (Ahmed, 63 years, Zohe community, Yendi).

In the same vein, another male respondent explains:

We will not let our daughter go to Tamale unless we can afford to rent a place in Tamale where she and her mother or an elder sister can stay (Alidu, 62 years, Zohe community, Yendi).

It is evident that financial reasons further complicate the problem of educating young girls. Very few 'good' secondary schools and/or tertiary institutions exist in the Yendi municipality and even the existence of the only post-secondary institution, a community nurse institution, is a recent development. In the recent past Tamale schools alone provided 'good' secondary level and post-secondary level schooling. However, unless women are freer to pursue education, they will continue to be dependent on their fathers and brothers and once married, upon their husbands. This suggests a link between education and the discourse of power. In relation to gender and the politics of literacy, Rockhill (1993:170) observes, "Once literacy carries with it the symbolic power of education, it poses a threat to the power relations in the family." Zubair (2001:200) makes a similar observation based upon her ethnographic research in rural Pakistan, stating that younger women aspire to wider educational opportunities for self-empowerment while young men are content with the existing gendered forms of education, fearing the consequences the education of women may bring. Respondents for this study even though did not show such power tensions, but they did admit that such tensions did exist in the past.

Another aspect of normative practice which restricts adolescent girls from seeking education beyond the level that can be attained in their immediate community is parental anxiety over the protection of family honour and feminine modesty.

[3] The Qur'anic verse on qiwamah is found in surah (Q: 4) which states: *Men are the protectors and maintainers of women, because Allah has given the one more (strength) than the other, and because they support them from their means*

A number of mothers expressed their reluctance to send daughters to other towns though they recognise that education is as important for girls as it is for boys. One young mother who was against letting daughters move away from home explains:

They are doing well in school and wish to go to Tamale for further studies. My relatives in Tamale have offered to keep one daughter of mine, but I cannot send her. I want to monitor the behaviours of my daughters myself (Mariama, 35 years, Balogu community, Yendi).

Similar observations are made by Jeffrey, Jeffery, and Jeffery (2008) in their research in Uttar Pradesh in India, where parents declined to send their daughters to further their education in other cities fearing unmonitored contact with boys.

Social stratification is also a more disadvantageous factor for rural girls than boys travelling to other islands for education. In a society where gender role expectations require girls to spend time performing domestic chores for families, rural and peri-urban girls are subjected to harsh conditions which leave them hardly any time for revising lessons. This lowers their prospects of achieving the good grades necessary to compete for higher education (Kandiyoti, 1991). Further, families who provide accommodation for girls place restrictions on their social movements, which are in many cases requested by the parents, making it impossible to find alternative accommodation or to escape from domestic difficulties. Salima, who attained secondary education in Tamale, had this to say:

I would never allow my own children to go to Tamale for education. Living with host families and meeting their demands while at school is an unhappy experience I will never want my daughters to encounter (Salima, 32 years, Balogu community, Yendi).

However, it must be recognised that this is not true in all cases. One male respondent suggests his experience was a happy one:

My eldest daughter is currently in a boarding school in Tamale with the same family that offered me the opportunity for education at seven years of age (Shaban, 44 years, Zohe community, Yendi).

The findings of this research suggest that parents are beginning to recognise a felt need to offer girls equal educational opportunities:

My eldest two children are daughters and I have vowed to them that I will ensure that they get education to the level they can compete (Hassan, 36 years, Balogu community, Yendi).

Similarly, Baba Musah (38 years old), who himself is a teacher is devoting all his spare time to ensure that his daughters will be able to compete for further schooling elsewhere. An informant, Mohammed, shed more light on the changing parental attitude towards the education of their daughters:

There was a time when parents refused to send daughters away from home, but now there seems to be no differentiation between sons and daughters for educational provision… education is a priority that has changed this cultural differentiation (Mohammed, 35 years, Zohe community, Yendi).

Despite this trend in recognising the merits of education, it may take a considerable time before a significant change is apparent in this direction among the majority of the population in the Yendi municipality. This is because girls' education in the Yendi municipality has a history of being gendered and limited.

Further, the purpose and objective of promoting girls' education includes maintaining gender ideologies. In an early influential article, Oppong (1973) appealed to the women ofDagbon (part of the Yendi municipality), not to feel that their entire life has to be dedicated merely to skilful embroidery and preparing meals for their husbands. She indicates that anation in progress requires women's contribution and she thus entreats women to ensure that today's children grow up to become able leaders of tomorrow. She continues, to emphasise that mothers who are the frontline of children's care and discipline must be educated to become befitting for this role. The point being made is that even though women's education has been a priority since the 1930s, the orientation for women was that they be educated in order to become responsible wives and mothers. This worldview became a legacy that was befitting to social and cultural expectations until now (see Giddens, 1992).

According to Oppong and Abu (1987), the cultural expectation that women marry at a young age seems to be a compelling reason why their overall educational status is lower than men.

Prospectivegovernments in Ghana have strongly advocated the importance of enabling women to pursue higher education and of desegregating gendered occupations. Despite state appeal, the ideology according to which women's education is necessary, but not significant in terms of employment, seems to prevail among the majority even today. One of the older women in this study for instance says:

Girls should also be educated, but not necessarily to seek employment. Some knowledge is necessary to become dutiful wives and capable mothers (Amina, 35 years, Balogu Community, Yendi).

Further, the increasing numbers of vocational courses that are continuously available for women wishing to pursue gendered careers tend to keep a check on women's opportunities for higher education. For example, as part of a youth development program, dress-making courses are held in almost all communities, making this an attractive and socially acceptable occupation for women. During this study it was discovered that mothers often encourage their daughters to enrol for dress-making and embroidery courses once they finish school as this is considered a *feminine* occupation. As mentioned earlier, nursing and teaching are vocations similarly encouraged by parents and communities. The trend of directing women into traditionally accepted female roles because of gender role stereotyping is found in other countries including the Arab states, but with varied limitations (see Al-Krenawi, et al., 2001).

Nonetheless, education which is consistent with gender ideologies can still be considered a personal resource, since skills in any field are likely to influence personhood positively. In other words, the enhancement of personhood through any type of skills development and training would enable women to broaden their informational bases and allow them to make independent decisions. It is suggested in this study that education and skills development produce multiple discourses which the individual has not accessed before and therefore, by virtue of education, irrespective of the field of learning, the individual is likely to experience a positive change in intersubjective relations. It is therefore argued in this study that over-emphasis on the content of education diffuses the impact education has on personhood and individuality.

Returning to the discussion on the social and cultural perception on women's education in Yendi, it must be pointed out that women in the Yendi municipality have never had to fight for equal rights for educational opportunity as has been the case in some Islamic countries. Afshar (1997, 1998) for instance, writes about the statutory limitations imposed in Iran after the Islamic Revolution, which barred women from 97 academic areas, including the faculty of law. Islamist feminists there fought for their rights to education based on the Quranic injunction according to which all Muslims must become learned. Women in the Yendi municipality have also accessed the previously male domain of religious preaching. Recently, the authority to preach religious sermons has been conferred on three women in the Yendi municipality. It is therefore not wrong to say that in the case of the Yendi municipality, the obstacles to women's pursuit of education lie within cultural norms rather than state provisions.

One of the more conventional arguments for refusing to send daughters to other towns, particularly to Tamale, for education is that some parents, although a minority, feel it is totally unnecessary, as daughters will soon get married and settle down. As one informant reflects:

I did not send my daughters to Tamale for education because I did not see the need as they would become merely housewives… I never expected women to be employed. I regret discriminating between sons and daughters now (Hassan, 65 years, Balogu community, Yendi).

Here the informant has observed education as an avenue for employability. The comment also suggests that if employment for girls is not a possibility, the value of educating girls is low. Sen (1990) argues for education from a similar perspective in his cooperative conflict model. The argument in this study is that this need not be so. In other words, education for women should not be regarded only in terms of employability and subsequent bargaining power within households, empowering women through employment, but instead as an avenue for the advancement of women's personhood. Enhanced personhood promotes the extent to which women had *voice* in negotiating terms of the marriage contract instead of following the *exit* option frequently employed. This becomes increasingly relevant in the context of Yendi, since very few girls who leave school are able to find jobs. Education, therefore, needs to be seen as necessary for increasing the personal resources of women, rather than making employment the only positive end result of education.

The above analysis substantiates the fact that education for women is culturally and socially accepted as a personal resource. Education is seen as a powerful asset that enhances personhood and allows persons to reconstruct subjectivities and self identities. Raising consciousness through education appears to provide women with increased bargaining power within marriage in the Yendi municipality. The findings of this study again suggest that education may allow for more companionate marriages. In the traditional context, marriages are based on socio-economic needs. The impact of education on personhood, therefore, allows for an important transformation of marriage which appears to contain within it elements that make marriages last longer than in the past.

Linking these observations to Sen's cooperative conflict model where cooperation is higher where women are more vulnerable, it is argued that education results in companionship and cooperation which makes marriages less conflictual (Sen, 1990). For instance, the case is being cited of Naima, who is a trained midwife but unemployed, and her marriage seems to be benefiting from her enhanced personhood. Here, the point is made that employability is one of many aspects that result from education and has positive impacts on women's influence in intra-household relations.

To be examined in the next section is how other aspects of personal resources such as embodiment and presentation of self, including norms of dress and beauty, impact upon women's power.

1.0.1 Gender Identity, Embodiment, and Personhood

The ways in which persons form subjectivities and represent physical embodiment are crucial to this analysis because the study focuses on how women's presentation of self is both restrictive and constitutive of their power. Two aspects which relate to the presentation of self and management of body, that is, appropriate attire and beauty shall be examined.

1.0.2 Women's Dress, Appearance and Social Identity

Giddens (1991:99) writes that dress is also a "Signalling device of gender, class position, and occupational status." The distinctive style of clothing of women is the outward expression of feminine difference (Brownmiller, 1984). In other words, it creates social identity. The purpose of discussing dress in this analysis is because dress is an aspect of presentation of self. It is a clear manifestation of agency, and it represents a strategic use of the body towards social ends including control and influence over spouses and kin, and also of status management. Islamist women's dress is usually discussed in terms of social control, but this study chooses to explore it also as an avenue for agency.

Goffman (1959), Shilling (2010), and Giddens (1991)have contributed extensively to theoretical discussions on the significance of managing the body towards social gratification. Goffman (1959), in particular, has coined the phrase "presentation of self" as an important aspect that determines everyday experiences. Furthermore, all these authors stress the potential for management of the body in social interaction by suggesting that cultural values and moral aspects define the boundaries within which the strategic use of the body can occur. In a similar line of thought, Moore(1994) and Hollway (1984, 1989) explicate the construction of subjectivities through social interaction, and argue that bodily experiences are intersubjective. Moore (1994), however, allows the notions of intention and agency as individual potentials through processes of social interaction that are also self-reflexive. She brings to the forefront the fact that individuals do not necessarily accept constraints towards bodily experiences unquestioningly. Rather, by choosing subject positions from among several discourses available to them in their daily experiences and through the notion of the 'lived anatomy', as Moore (1994:25) terms it, persons sway their own experiences. The following analysis, explore within these conceptual elements how women in Yendi use codes of dress in the process of management of the body, and use norms of dress as an avenue for agency. This sheds light on the significance of embodiment and personhood as personal resources that women can implicitly bring into their daily negotiations within their households.

Women's dress in the northern region of Ghana, generally, and especially among Muslim women, is not free from cultural and/or religious restrictions. However, norms of dress among these women are not regulated as strictly as in countries such as Iran and Saudi Arabia.

The degree in difference in norms of dress for women and men vary from one country and/or region to another. Similarly, the emphasis placed on upholding these norms also depend upon the extent to which appropriate attire is a cultural expectation.

The links between attire and femininity become more significant in the Islamic cultural context, because the issue of religious commitment is also engaged and therefore dress is expressive of women's personhood, beliefs, and identity (Yamani, 1996; Afshar, 1994, 1998; El-Saadawi, 1980). According to Afshar (1994), women's attire and behaviour has become an important part of their role as custodians of religious beliefs in representing and reflecting religious commitment. Next is a discussion of the significance of appropriate dress for women in Islamic countries which is increasingly becoming a point of contention in the northern region of Ghana, where there has been a history of liberal norms of dress.

Appropriate dress for women in Islam is a disputed topic in Islamic thought, and one that converges into controversies over issues pertaining to gender relations and feminine modesty. Reference is made in particularly to the "Islamic dress" or *ziyyIslami*, which includes the *hijabburqa*[4], or veil. While some believe that the veil is the visible expression of female subordination and the need to be protected (Marsot, 1996), others emphasise that, "The veil is a liberating and not an oppressive force" by making women observers rather than the observed, preventing sexual harassment and gaining respect (Afshar, 2003: 182). Veiling in this sense commands respect, and therefore can be seen as an element of power. Azzam (1996) also argues that an observation of the wearing of the *hijab* has facilitated women's entry into the public space, assisting them in their quest for equal treatment. A further line of thought suggests that the wearing of the veil arises more from social circumstance than from Quranic injunctions (Fakhro, 1996). Mernissi (1991) questions not only the textual interpretations that have imposed the veil on women, but stresses the degree of the element of choice for women in relation to the veil.

This study now examines how women's attire impacts upon their daily experiences through their creation of self-identity, and how it influences their bargaining strength. It is important to understand that the veil or *burqa*, has never been a social compulsion for Yendi women, and therefore it is not worn by a majority of the women. However, even if it is not a cultural expectation, more and more women are adopting the veil as part of their attire.Women's attire in the past was strongly regulated according to social stratification. According to Oppong (1973), women's dress in the Dagbon (part of the northern region of Ghana) corresponded to three social classes and these are; the royal family, the nobility, and the commoners. Historically, attire in northern Ghana was one of the visible forms of social hierarchy, and liberation from the binding forces of social stratification has since then been expressed through changing dress habits. Initially, women who adopted the styles of African Muslims and those who began wearing the Indian sari covered their heads casually.

However, the recent attitude towards veiling differs significantly and is illustrative of less freedom for women, in terms of personal choice and of greater male dominance as the following analysis illustrates. Group pressure enforces modes of dress, and in this regard, appearance and presentation of self is more determining in social identity creation than a personal one (Giddens, 1991).

According to a young woman in this study:

Wearing the burqa is a personal choice I made when I was very young. But my brother's views about appropriate women's dress also influenced my choice (Sanatu, 22 years, Balugu community, Yendi).

However, Sanatu explained that when she chose to wear the *burqa*, her brother, who is a teacher, instructed his female students to do the same and thus producing a generation of young women who wore the *burqa*. Younger women who have chosen to wear the *burqa* are often encouraged to become more modest in their outfits by male kin or husbands who have been educated in Islamic schools and/or societies that impose such attires on their women. This substantiates further the argument made earlier about patriarchal dominance.

In Yendi, the majority of women partially shroud their heads in the *burqa*. The findings of this study suggest that this is not a direct result of strong religious convictions, but due to a strong religious outlook imposed by educated men in the community. Yendi is one of the communities from which men travelled to other towns and/or countries including Saudi Arabia for the annual pilgrimage and for religious education.

---

[4] *Hijab* refers to the seclusion of women from men in public places, while *burqa* (also sometimes spelled *burka*) is the garment that covers women most completely: so that either only the eyes are visible, or nothing at all is visible.

These men, upon their return, saw a significant change in the religious outlook of the community. Further, schools owned and operated by Muslim clerics; sometimes including state owned schools, ensure thatall female students have to wear the *burqa* as part of their uniform.

A respondent, Munira, explained that all four of her daughters wear the *burqa* even after school and has this to say about her own reason for wearing the *burqa*:

Because almost all married women in Yendi do so (Munira, 46 years, Zohe community, Yendi).

Conforming, therefore, partly explains her reason, and conformity in some instances is a better bargain than not conforming. The point being made here is that traditional values of female modesty and dress code do not include veiling, and there remains ambiguity about the religious requirement to wear the veil even among those who have opted to do so. Moreover, from the response discussed above, it would not be wrong to conclude that veiling is not a personal choice, but as mentioned earlier, a sign of male dominance over women's appropriate presentation of self. In a sense, these are instances where presentation of self and management of the body is restricted. However, as discussed above, constraining factors need not to be accepted without question. Instead, the self-reflexive process of day-to-day experiences allows women to manoeuvre their lives with intent and agency (Moore, 1994).

Women who refuse to conform are held in contempt not by women, but by men primarily. One of the few young women who chose not to wear the burqa was educated in Tamale, and upon her return to Yendi she was pressured by the community to veil. This woman was spoken to and she explained that she does not wish to conform to such dress codes because she believes that this is a personal choice. She made an important comment, shared by some other women in Yendi who do not veil:

Burqa alone does not make a woman modest or religious… modesty comes from within (Muna, 23 years, Balogu community, Yendi).

A male respondent in Yendi pointed out that Muna is being stubborn and has refused to conform:

Many elders in the community have repeatedly asked her to wear the burqa… being stubborn, she has refused to listen to the elders; this is not necessarily a virtue in our small communities, maybe she wants to remain single for life as no man in this community will want to marry a stubborn woman (Ahmed, 49 years, Balogu community, Yendi).

Ahmed implies that Muna is lowering respect for herself in spite of the fact she is educated and is employed. In a sense, Muna's intentional rejection of the veil in a community that imposes veiling demonstrates that for her, dress is an avenue for agency. The question that now arises is how this will reflect in negotiating power within the household.

It is worth noting that veiling has never been a compulsion for all women in Yendi, nor in northern Ghana except for married women in Muslim communities. Therefore, the fact that respondents for this study associate veiling with Islamic injunctions is not surprising. In the case of Muna, it is clear that she does not gain any bargaining power within her household by being a non-conformist. On the contrary, she finds it difficult to establish good relations with her family members, who also feel let down by her attitude. However, despite bringing herself to endure life under pressure, clearly, Muna appears to have a sense of self-fulfilment. Her rejection to conform is, therefore, an act of agency. As Kabeer (1999) observes, exercising agency does not always result in positive outcomes such as social approval, neither does it necessarily provide material benefits. In the case of Maame, a 46 years old respondent, by accepting the veil as a social obligation in her immediate community, she finds that she has, "nothing to lose by wearing it" and feels more at ease among her community. As Moore (1994:65) points out, "Those individuals who do challenge or resist the dominant discourses on gender and gender identity frequently find that this is at the expense of such things as social power, social approval and material benefits."

Some women, particularly the aged, shroud their heads once they return from Mecca after performing the Hajj pilgrimage:

I wear the burqa since I returned from hajj (Sahadatu, 53 years, Balogu community, Yendi).

Hajj pilgrimage is regarded as a formidable achievement in life that brings people respect from society and women's adoption of the veil may be associated with a visible claim for such respect. Azzam (1996) states for instance that some Muslim women wear the veil with the belief that they are fulfilling a religious duty. Sahadatu appears to have a vested interest, that is, status management. As Hollway (1989, 2006) argues, the reason why women and men choose from among several discourses of femininities and masculinities within the same cultural setting should be seen as an 'investment' for vested interest and emotional satisfaction.

Returning to the topic of veiling as a strategy to manage the presentation of self, it must be said that the extent to which veiling is associated with feminine modesty is ambiguous in the context of Yendi. Not all of the veiled opt for loose-fitting dresses and this practice provides women who prefer not to wear the *burqa* with a point of defence. As one respondent from Zohe community in Yendi commented:

Wearing burqa with a close fitting dress that shows every curve of the body is meaningless. Covering your hair is not the purpose of wearing the burqa, but rather dressing decently (Azara, 25 years, Zohe community, Yendi).

To place the above quote in context, it is important to examine the design of Muslim women's dresses and how they ascribe to modesty and femininity. Muslim women's dresses in recent decades can be associated with femininity and beauty as it accentuates the contours of the feminine physique. The traditional dress, for instance, with a low, finely embroidered neckline both at the front and the back is purposefully designed to emphasise feminine beauty – not only women's bosom but also the shape of the nape of the neck is a mark of femininity in Ghanaian women generally.

The befitting hair-do and the jewellery worn with this dress highlight the shape of the upper body. Further, the skirt worn with this dress is slit at the back on the left side such that the calf is visible. These details of design show that the emphasis is on enhancing women's beauty within cultural expectations of feminine modesty[5]. This point is made to highlight the cultural significance for women to consider presentation of self and the enhancement of beauty intheir daily lives. Furthermore, observation and interview data shows that the veil is worn more casually by the majority of those who wore it with variations of the traditional dress. Again, the emphasis is on appearance and beauty. Next to be discussed is why beauty is stressed and thenan examination will be made as to whether or not beauty impacts upon women's bargaining power in a significant manner. This will be after a discussion has been carried out of dress and modesty in the context of Yendi.

Traditionally, girls are required to observe strict codes of maturity and modesty upon initiation into womanhood. In rural communities in northern Ghana, initiation into womanhood is coupled with the traditional custom of wearing *libaas* or adult dress. As mentioned above, the custom has its roots in social stratification, which dictates the type of dresses women of certain social classes can wear. Until the early twentieth century, commoner women used to be topless until they reached maturity, or pending such time that they looked "awkwardly dressed" (see Goodwin, 1994). The alternative term used to describe women who have reached this stage was 'marriageable age'. Today, change in modes of dress with respect to age and maturity is not so discernible, but young women are still expected to dress appropriately upon reaching womanhood. This further illustrates the argument that presentation of self and management of the body are subject to cultural and moral values.

Styles of dress and the presentation of self has been an important aspect which influences women's experience. A woman's attire is seen not only as a reflection of her personality and her values but also of her natal family, if she is unmarried, or of her husband, if married. As mentioned above, dress signals gender and social status and is regulated within cultural norms. In a sense, it consolidates the argument that women have to adhere to certain societal norms in relation to dress habits, and they discredit themselves and their families if they transgress these norms. This produces boundaries within which a woman can make choices with respect to dress and in certain ways limits her expression of individuality and self-identity. Human embodiment, therefore, is subject to restraint according to social norms. Bodily experiences are intersubjective because construction of self-identity and subjectivity is always in relation to others (Hollway, 1989; Moore, 1994).

[5] This may not correspond entirely on feminine modesty in a strict sense as such modesty is generally associated with less exposure of women's body.

However, this does not necessarily mean that women's influence within the household is restrained due to dress norms. For instance, some women who make a conscious attempt to wear socially appropriate dress consider this to be an element of power. It restricts avenues for criticism from family, in-laws, and community, and as Abiba commented:

If you dress decently, then there is little room for people to gossip. The way you dress is the first thing that people register about you. Even beauty and looks are judged after that (Abiba, 25 years, Zohe community, Yendi).

This response links self-identity to the cultural discourses of gender identity and power. In other words, by wearing appropriate attire, the individual has embarked on a proactive strategy to control "the definition of the situation" (Goffman, 1959:17). Furthermore, in Hollway's (1989) terms, appropriate dressing can be seen as an investment to achieve emotional satisfaction and vested interests. Therefore, while physical embodiment may be beyond the control of the person, the presentation of self and representation of personhood can be a source of power through planned 'investments'.

Having discussed attire as one aspect of presentation of self and how this interacts with social and male control and is not only an individual choice, the next focus of this study is to explore the significance of beauty as a personal asset which can increase women's power base.

1.1 Beauty

An old saying among some communities in Yendi has it that: "The beauty of a wife lies in her kindness." Implicit in this expression is that beauty does not necessarily make a wife attractive. However, the power of beautiful women is universally accepted and the northern region of Ghana is no exception. This study in Yendi shows that beauty is, on one level, a personal resource that women can utilise to gain control of difficult situations, particularly in marriage. On another level, a woman's beauty can also become a family asset, which increases their chances for a rise in social status.

Zuwera, a divorced woman with two children, married her second husband who is much older than herself. She explained that she was able to exert power over her second husband to divorce her two co-wives:

I was younger, fairer and beautiful… my wishes were his priority (Zuwera, 50 years, Balogu Community, Yendi).

Not only did she become the only wife of this man who belonged to the rural elite and who held a powerful position in the community, but she also encouraged him to purchase land in Tamale, the regional capital. If not for her physical beauty, Zuwera may not have been able to be in such a commanding position in her family, because several other intervening factors placed her in a position lower than that of her co-wives. For instance, both co-wives already had children by their husband and both co-wives were from the same clan as their husband.

An older female respondent, Fati, indicated that a woman's beauty can be associated with bargaining strength:

Life can be easy and good if you are beautiful. I was able to pick and choose whoever I wished to marry from different suitors, from all over the town (Fati, 52 years, Zohe community, Yendi).

Her comment suggests that she did use her beauty as power in her day-to-day life. She spoke of how after she had just married her current husband, she would relax under the shade of a tree when she went to fetch water, allowing a male friend attracted to her to fetch water from the stream for her. When asked what would havehappened if her husband found out she replied:

He wouldn't dare divorce me simply because then I would marry the other man (Fati, 52 years, Zohe community, Yendi).

These cases suggest that physical beauty can be a source of power for women, and that they do use it to negotiate better terms within marriage. The case of Zuwera for instance shows that she had a strong position within her household although she was originally from a different clan. The suggestion is that Zuwera's physical beauty seems to have brought her considerable power within her marriage, as being a fair complexioned woman, she had a quality that attracts men in northern Ghana, as it does in many other places of the world.

Hassan, a respondent, gave an account of the circumstances that led to his second marriage:

The lady was very beautiful, fair, and young, almost half my age. I feel flattered even remembering our courtship… Many of my friends wished to court her as well (Hassan, 63 years, Zohe community, Yendi).

He had not divorced his first wife but lived separately with his second wife and according to some other informants he had limited contact with his first family. It is therefore reasonable to state that for women in particular, physical beauty is a personal resource that has potential for achieving influence over husbands.

Women can and do acquire social mobility through marriage to men of status. Some parents aspire to social status through children's matrimonial relationships and this becomes a likely possibility if a daughter has been blessed with physical beauty. In some instances where the beauty of a woman is taken advantage of by a second party such as the family, physical embodiment becomes a constraining element. As Shilling and Mellor (2010) observe, bodies are constraining as well as facilitating.The preoccupation women particularly have in projecting themselves as beautiful persons suggests the materialistic power of beauty. In an article written in the 1930s (as quoted by Jawad, 1998), a prominent Maldivian author criticises women's indulgence in wearing expensive clothes and decorating themselves with precious jewellery, urging them to recognise that decent clothing, feminine modesty and discipline is what brings women respect and power. However, the increasing awareness of the significance of the presentation of self in society is encouraging individuals to engage in the management of their bodies and how they appear to others (Goffman, 1959). Further, as Giddens (1991) suggests, appearances are becoming increasingly important with the advent of modernity. In this study so far, an examination has been made of education, women's attire, and beauty, as aspects of personal resources that give them positions of influence within the household. In the next section would be a discussion of another aspect of personal resources; friendships and social networks.

1.2 Friendship and Social Networking

Establishing friendships and social networking becomes an important resource for women because it strengthens their fallback positions, especially within marriage. This study has revealed that social networking is an important strategy that women use when natal family support is difficult or lacking. It therefore becomes a conscious investment that promises security.

Women who have migrated to their husbands' home in Yendi upon marriage have no natal family members in close proximity and they appear to invest in social networking more than the average rural woman. Sherifa, for instance, migrated to her Yendi upon marriage. In her case, social networking provides her with security and assistance during emergencies. Her husband's job as a motor bike repairer, leaves her alone with her three children most of the time. With none of her family members close by, Sherifa relies on a neighbour, another migrant woman, for help during difficult times such as ill health. In turn, Sherifa helped during her neighbour's pregnancies:

By caring for her other children, collecting firewood and preparing meals (Sherifa, 30 years, Balogu community, Yendi).

Social networks also involved exchange of gifts such as home-cooked meals, new dresses and ornaments, especially during Eid-ul-Fitr and Eid-ul-Adha celebrations[6]. Self-earned income provided women the opportunity to maintain ties through exchange of gifts. Sherifa has always been a wage-earning employee in addition to making a substantial income from petty trading. At the time of the interview she was working as an attendant at a local health centre.

In some instances, social networks proved to be a protection for women against violent husbands. For example, women who do not wish to discuss marital difficulties with family members often use friends' homes as a safe haven. In addition, friends who are in better social positions or who have the right connections with community elders, can act as intermediaries, giving women increased bargaining strength.

Another respondent, Amina, also explained that maintaining good relations with people of her neighbourhood is important for her daily life. She is divorced, and her natal family has disowned her for shaming them with two births out of wedlock. According to Amina, her parents help her children financially. However, she depends upon her social networks for companionship.

[6] Eid-ul-Fitr and Eid-ul-Adha are both Muslim festivals. Eid-ul-Fitr is celebrated at the end of the 30 day fast embarked upon by Muslims while Eid- ul- Adha is a festival of sacrifice.

A similar view was expressed by Faiza, according to whom, friendships are essential even if natal family support exists, because friends provide companionship and support on a different level based on a mutual give and take basis. These responses suggest a link to Giddens' idea of 'pure relationships' (1991:89) which are not 'anchored in external conditions of social and economic life,' but rather free floating as opposed to kin relationships which are binding through blood ties. Friendships as in 'pure relationships,' have elements of commitment which can be binding, but the strength of the commitment is subjective, mutual, and also reflexive. Social networking can also ensure bargaining power for women particularly in matters such as refusing to accept forced marriage proposals, provide safe haven during marital disputes and give assistance in judicial divorce proceedings. Intervention by friends who are in better social positions or who have connections with community elders can make women less vulnerable in such circumstances.

1.3 Conclusion

This study has highlighted the extent to which personal resources including education, embodiment and personhood, presentation of self, beauty and friendship networks allow women to make a positive difference to their daily experiences. The merits of education on personhood and how it empowers women to construct better selves rather than show how education provided the route to employability through human resource capabilities have been discussed. The findings of this study suggest that not only does education increase women's marriageability, but it is also and influencing factor in increasing the duration of marriages. Educated women appear to have increased their capability to negotiate the terms of marriage instead of attempting to fit in to the traditionally uneven patterns of internal division of labour between marital partners. By being able to reconstruct marital obligations in ways which do not necessarily contradict cultural gender ideologies, women can transform the marriage contract to one that embraces companionship. As shown in the analysis, this makes the marriage contract less conflictual, as power relations in companionship marriages are more balanced.

The findings here are different from those made byJeffrey, Jeffery, and Jeffery (2008), who argue that education does not necessarily allow women to make independent decisions within marriage. It is argued that women do gain significant influence in intra-household decision –making processes through the merits of education. However, this influence needs to be qualified, as it does not translate into women becoming totally independent from their husbands and male kin. In other words, educated women are also subject to restrictions on social mobility and control in some spheres of life. Nevertheless, the analysis suggests that education is a personal resource that ensures that women experience positive outcomes in intra-household relationships. Within the context of marriage, such improvements lessen the need for women to choose to *exit* marriages frequently although they have better fall-back positions as a result of education. This is where it would be realised that there is a conceptual limitation in the cooperative conflict model put forward by Sen, who argues that women with better fall-back positions choose to be non-cooperative more than those who have weaker fall-back positions (Sen, 1990).

By bringing in literature on embodiment and personhood, the significance of analysing women as persons who are individuals holding power in specific domains, instead of categorising women as a subservient group of persons across cultures has been established. Therefore, this study illustrates that women are not mere victims of circumstance and should not be regarded as completely vulnerable and weak. They can, and do act as individuals who are capableof influencing the course of their own lives. Attempts have been made in this study to highlight the distinctive difference between the classical sociological view of the body as a physical entity that by itself has no significant role apart from being the locus of the mind, and the revival and re-evaluation of the body as an action-system that has the potential to mediate in social interaction. These perspectives of the body as active agents provided by social constructionists, post-structuralist and anthropologists are relevant to the analysis of this study because the study focused on embodiment and personhood as elements of personal resources that can influence women's position within their households.

To analyse presentation of self as an aspect of personal resources, the study examined norms of dress and attire in the context of this research. The point has been stressed that dress is a clear manifestation of agency, and represents a strategic use of the body towards construction of self and social identity, which impacts on women's everyday lives. Therefore, focusing on dress is not only in terms of social control as the Islamist way of dressing is frequently discussed, but the approach in this study is to also consider dress as an avenue for agency.

Codes of dress in Yendi, as in other parts of northern Ghana, are generally liberal and not subject to severe restrictions as in some Islamic countries. However, there is considerable social pressure among some communities for women to don the veil.

This study has revealed that while the veil or *burqa* worn by women in Yendi illustrates men's dominance and influence over women's presentation of self in appropriate attire, veiling can also be a liberating experience for women as observed by Afshar (1997). In some instances, women believe that conforming to gendered norms by adhering to acceptable dress codes brings them social power since it allows them to gain immediate control of the situation in social interaction. The findings in this study also suggest that some women reject the veil as a show of agency. However, it is recognised that the self-fulfilment achieved by women who resist wearing the veil is a trade-off between social approval and power and self-fulfilment.

This study has also examined two sources of personal resources, that of beauty and friendship networks. The analysis suggests that physical beauty impacts positively in intra-household relationships and that women do consider beauty as materialistic power in negotiating processes. However, where a woman's beauty and embodiment are considered an asset by a second party, such as family, it can be a constraining factor for the woman. In a sense this sheds light on Shilling's suggestion that bodies can be facilitating and constraining depending on the circumstances of social interaction (Shilling, 2010).

Again, the analysis in this study also indicates that friendships and social networks are resources into which women can tap, to access stronger bargaining power within households. Friendships are not as binding as kin relationships and subsequently they are more flexible than the latter. Social networks therefore provide women with a wider resource base making them less vulnerable in intra-household relationships.

References

Afshar, H. (1994). 'Muslim women in West Yorkshire: growing up with real and imaginary values amidst conflicting views of self and society', in H. Afshar and M. Maynard (eds.) *The Dynamics of 'Race' and Gender: Some Feminist Interventions*. London: Taylor & Francis.

Afshar, H. (1997). 'Women and Politics in the Third World.*The Journal of Developing Areas*, 31 (3) pp. 435-437.

Afshar, H. (1998). *Islam and Feminisms: An Iranian Case-study*. Basingstoke: Macmillan.

Afshar, H. (2003). 'Women and wars: some trajectories towards a feminist peace' *Development in Practice* 13(2&3): 178–88.

Ali, A.Y. (2001). *The Qur'an: Text, translation and commentary.* New York: TahrikeTarsile Qur'an, Inc.

Al-Krenawi, A., Graham, J.R. and Izzeldin, A. (2001). 'The Psychosocial Impact of Polygamous Marriages on Palestinian Women'. *Women and Health.* 34(1): 1-16.

Azzam, M. (1996). 'Gender and politics of religion in the Middle East'. In M. Yamani (Ed.) Feminism and Islam: Legal and Literary Perspectives, New York: New York University Press. (pp.217-230).

Brownmiller, S. (1984). *Femininity*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

El-Saadawi, N. (1980). *The Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the Arab World*. London: Zed Books Ltd.

Fandy, M.(2007). 'Enriched Islam: The Muslim Crisis of Education'. Survival, 49 (3), pp. 77–98.

Fakhro, M. (1996). 'Gulf women and Islamic Law'.In M. Yamani (Ed).*Feminism and Islam*: Legal and Literary Perspectives, (pp.251-262). New York: New York University Press.

Giddens, A. (1992). *The transformation of intimacy: Sexuality, love and eroticism in modern societies.* Cambridge: Polity Press.

Giddens, A. (1991). *Modernity and Self-Identity*. Self and Society in the Late Modern Age. Cambridge: Polity.

Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life.*Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Goodwin, J. (1994). *Price of Honor: Muslim Women Life the Veil of Silence on the Islamic World*. Boston: Little Brown.

Hampshire, K. (2002). 'Fulani on the Move: Seasonal Economic Migration in the Sahel as a Social Process', *Journal of Development Studies.* 38 (5): 15-36.

Holliday, A. (2002). *Doing and writing qualitative research.*London: Sage Publications.

Hollway, W. (1984). 'Gender difference and the production of subjectivity'. In: Henriques, J. et. al. (eds). *Changing the subject: psychology, social regulation and subjectivity.* 228-252. London: Muthuen.

Hollway, W. (1989). *Subjectivity and method in psychology: Gender, meaning and science*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Hollway, W. (2006). *The capacity to care: Gender and ethical subjectivity.* London: Routledge.

Jeffrey, C., Jeffery, P., & Jeffery, R. (2008). 'Dalit Revolution? New Politicians in Uttar Pradesh, India.'*Journal of Asian Studies*, *67*(4), 1365-1396.

Jawad, H. (1998). *The Rights of Women in Islam: An Authentic Approach*. London: Macmillan Press.

Kabeer, N. (1999). 'Resources, Agency, Achievements: Reflections on the Measurement of Women's Empowerment'. *Development and Change.* 30: 435-464.

Kandiyoti, D. (1991). 'Identity and its Discontents: Women and the Nation,' Millennium Journal of International Studies, London School of Economic, Vol. 20, no.3: 429-43.

Marsot, A. (1996). 'Women and Modernisation: A Reevaluation', in *Women, the Family and Divorce Laws in Islamic History,* Amira El AzharySonbol (ed.) (Syracuse,NY: Syracuse University Press).

Mernissi, F. (1991). *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam.*London: Perseus Books Publishing.

Moore, H. (1994). *Passion for difference.* Cambridge: Polity Press.

Oppong C. (1973). *Growing Up in Dagbon.* Accra: Tema.

Oppong, C. and Abu, K. (1987). *Seven roles of women: Impact of education, migration and employment on Ghanaian mothers.* UNFPA, Geneva: ILO.

Rockhill, K. (1993). 'Gender, Language, and the Politics of Literacy'. In B. Street (Ed.), *Cross-Cultural Approaches to Literacy* (pp. 156-175). NY: Cambridge University Press.

Sen, A.K. (1990). 'Gender and Cooperative Conflicts'. In: *Persistent Inequalities Women and Development* (Ed. Tinker, I.) London: Oxford University Press. 123-149.

Shilling, C. and Mellor, P. (2010). 'Saved from pain or saved through pain? Modernity, instrumentalization and the religious use of pain as a body technique'.*European Journal of Social Theory,*13:521-537.

Shilling, C. (2010). 'Exploring the society-body-school nexus: theoretical and methodology issues in the study of body pedagogics'.*Sport, Education and Society*, 15:151-168.

Yamani, M. (1996). 'Some Observations on women in Saudi Arabia'. In M. Yamani (Ed). Feminism and Islam: Legal and Literary Perspectives (pp.263-282). New York: New York University Press.

Zubair, S. (2001). 'Literacies, gender and power in rural Pakistan'. In Literacy and Development – Ethnographic Perspectives. Brian Street, ed. Pp 188-204. London: Routledge.