



## GENDER INEQUALITY IN NIGERIAN SOCIETY: MATTERS ARISING AND WAY FORWARD FOR 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

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### **Abstract:**

It is desirable and inevitable that women should participate effectively in national development activities, given their number and strategic role in society. However, in Nigeria, there are insinuations of marginalization of women in all ramifications. This paper, therefore, principally examined why such huge disparity exist between the men and their female counterparts. The legal basis for gender inequality was also reiterated. An overview of women status in Nigeria shows that priority attention towards gender equity was not given. The paper close with some conclusion and way forward meant to remedy the situation so as to give a sound and sustainable gender balance in Nigeria.

**Keywords:** sex, gender, inequality and gender equity

### **1. Introduction**

The issue of gender inequality in the society had ever been a topical issue and it is as old as history itself in Nigeria. Right from time immemorial, women constitute greater proportion of the society, but their role remains a compelling one. There exists sex differentiation in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Nigerian Society that prevented women from national development. As noted by Uchendu (1993), the fact that traditional sex assignments vary from one society to another indicates that sexual division of labour is not rooted in biology but rather in custom and tradition.

Perhaps, it was from these perspectives that Haralambos and Heald (1980) presented gender inequality from a sociological background when they noted that:

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*“Women produce children: women are mothers and wives; women do the cooking, mending, serving and washing”. They take care of men and are subordinate to male authority; they are largely excluded from high status occupation and from position of power (p. 367).*

However, it will be recalled as Anikpo, (1996), put it that, before the white man came, gender division of labour was restricted to farm and household activities. Irrespective of all these odds, colonialism was able to bring about a parallel shift that gave rise to urban centres, new pattern of work as well as new gender division of labour too.

At the post-colonial Nigeria, the educational boom for women served as a catalyst and eye opener that brought a breakthrough that end the women in strategic positions with their men counterparts. Today, Nigerian women have collectively and individually shown a real commitment to national development by reviving their full potentials in all ramifications.

## **2. Conceptual clarifications**

Word has meaning only within the given or particular context in which the words are utilized. The essence of conceptual clarifications was well articulated by Mezieobi and Mezieobi (2015 P. 132) when they emphatically noted that it is *“to provide a common frame of understanding between the communicator and his audience”*.

On the strength of the above, four (4) concepts need to be succinctly explained. They include: sex, gender, inequality and gender equality.

### **2.1 The concept: Sex**

This will refer to the biological construct a person could either be male or female. It is therefore, used to refer to the physical differences between men and women. Amadi-Ali (2003) sees sex to be a factor that determines the difference in individual behaviour. The above view may show different characteristics in terms of physical appearance, level of intelligence, performance, personality and role differentiation

### **2.2 The concept: Gender**

Gender refers to the cultural, socially constructed differences between the two sexes (Nzewi 2016). It is a trait associated with men and women or a social attribute designated to an individual as male or female. According to Oluyemi-Kusa (2003), gender is often seen as loosely synonymous with sex lazily synonymous with women. Eagle and Steffen in Oluyemi-Kusa (2003) opined gender to be a socially constructed based on the assumed power and position that a group of humans should possess, whereas sex is a biological division.

Amaetefe and Amaetefe (2007) sees gender asocial construct that establishes and differentiates status and role between men and women particularly in the way they contribute to, participate in and are rewarded by economy and most social institutions.

### **2.3 The concept: Gender Inequality**

This is a process of being unfair or not given the same chances in life to men and women. To Njoku (2015), the term gender inequality refers to the disparities that exist among individuals based solely on their gender rather than objective difference in skill, abilities or characteristics. Tabotndip (2010) conceptualized gender imbalance as rise where there is no equality of access or opportunities for both boys and girls.

### **3. Legal Protection Available to Women in Nigeria**

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights as a historic document adopted on December 1948 by the UN General Assembly states in Article I that: *“All human beings are born equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood?”* (p.1)

The constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (Promulgation Decree 1989) adopted in October 1992 is aware of the gender gap and was committed to ensuring gender equality Section 18, article 2(a) of the constitution states that, in order to advance the social order *“every citizen shall have equality of rights, obligation and opportunities before the law”*.

Section 41 Article 1(a) and (b); section 41 Article (3) of the same document emphasize equality of persons before the law. McDonell (2003) also reported that section 18 Article 3 (e) of the same document goes a step further assuring women of *“equal pay for equal work without discrimination on account of sex, or on any ground whatsoever”*.

Chapter iv, section 34(1) of 1999 Nigerian Constitution on fundamental Rights States that every individual is entitled to respect for the dignity of his person accordingly (a) no person should be subjected to torture or inhuman or degrading treatment chapter II on Equality of Justice, the constitution states that every citizen shall have equality rights, obligation and opportunities before the law.

To crown it all, chapter IX, Article 34 (1) of the Amended Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria states that: Every individual is entitled to respect for the dignity of his person, and accordingly (a) no person shall be subjected to torture, or to inhuman or degrading treatment (b) no person shall be held in slavery or servitude and (c) no person shall be required to perform force or compulsory labour (F.G.N, 2011).

A critical look at the above Decree and constitutional provisions for women’s status in Nigeria mostly exist on paper, serving as a lip-service without implementation or suffered from unfavourable judicial interpretation as well as cultural prejudice.

### **3.1 Evidence of Gender Inequality in the World**

A brief look at the statistical release by the United Nations 4<sup>th</sup> Women Conference in Perkin (Beijing Conference) concerning women and violence are as follows.

1. More than four million French-women, with the age of 23 years fall victim of battery (beating, flogging, mugging etc).

2. In United States of America, a woman falls victim of domestic violence every eight seconds, while every six minutes a woman is raped.
3. In Egypt, if a woman is caught with another man by her husband, she should be killed (by her husband) without any law holding him.
4. In India, in 1994, 6200 married women were burnt because their families couldn't provide enough dowries as the earlier promised.
5. In African two million young girls are victims of horrible circumcision every year.
6. 91.8% of Egyptians (female) surgically undergo circumcision every year, while 1,300 girls less than ten years of age are circumcised outside the hospitals (i.e in the local ways)
7. In Sweden, the Worst circumcision method is used: they stitch the two lips (of the vagina) usually without anaesthesia.
8. During the Second World War, 75,000 to 200,000 women in Asia were used as prostitute by Japanese soldiers in the house that were given to them by the government. Some Koreans (women) who survived that action just received their official and public "sorry" from the Japanese government in 1994.
9. In Cambodia, thousands of women accused the members of the peace intermediaries of U.N. of having abuse them sexually at public places, in 1992 during the Cambodian War.
10. In Bangladesh, in 1971, Pakistani soldiers raped 20,000 girls are women (Amadi-Ali 2003).

#### 4. Women Status in the Nigerian Society

To a large extent, women status in Nigeria suffered devaluation from one culture or society to the other. Sexual differences are sometimes culturally socially or traditionally determined. The below discussion examined the various ways by which women status differs from that of men.

- 1) **Sex related differences:** In different tradition or cultures in Nigeria, the birth of a baby boy is celebrated and viewed with merriment while that of girls may be shunned, rejected received with mixed or feeling and not celebrated. Some men may even neglect or divorce their wives for not given birth to a baby boy.
- 2) **Women battery:** A lots of husbands in Nigeria viewed the payment of dowry or bride price as a fundamental factor used on their marriage as a right or license to batter their wives or incite aggressive behaviour or human violence at home and even in the public.
- 3) **Rape on women:** This has become one of the fasted growing social ill or crime by Nigerian men. The worth of all, is that a woman could be raped by the husband or someone she knew and trusted.
- 4) **Institution of widowhood:** Most custom and traditions treat woman as inheritable property upon the death of their husbands. In fact, the maltreatment of the widow may start immediately the husband died, period of mourning and burial. A

deceased brother or relation has the right to claim or inherit the widow (Levirate marriage) without the widow making or having choice to make. Customary law in Igbo and Yoruba is in support of this.

- 5) **Ownership of property:** Most women in Nigeria are not entitled to own property while the husband is alive. Both single and married women require her husband's consent or are at liberty to obtain land like that of their male counterpart. In fact, the women are even regard as one of the husband's property or assets.
- 6) **Adultery:** Customary law do not allow or permit a women to commit adultery whereas men are free to do so and also a husband whose wife committed such may choose to either divorce his wife, and claim damages in terms of dowry or bride wealth even at old age that he can no longer satisfy the wife sexually.
- 7) **Right to family name:** In some communities, especially among the Ibos, a husband and his family have a right to re-name a new wife, once the bride price has been paid, and all the marriage formalities completed (McDonnel, 2003). A married woman is expected to change her surname to that of the husband after marriage.
- 8) **Change of religion:** It is not easy or possible for a woman to maintain her former religion after marriage. It is obvious and mandatory for a married woman to change her religion to that of the husband.
- 9) **Female circumcision:** Female general mutilation is done to increase their sexual urge for men, and this is considered on significant custom among different ethnic groups in Nigeria, Africa and the World at large.
- 10) **Female prostitution:** Whereas sex is supposed to be a free and pleasant thing, the act of prostitution turns it to be a thing that subdues and insults women. Man's inordinate desire for sex and female Laziness and quest for material wealth call for prostitution in the society.
- 11) **Marriage system:** The introduction of different forms of marriage such as pawn, force, early marriage is a form of devaluation on the part of women.

## 5. Conclusion

The contribution of women towards the overall development of the society can never be over emphasized. The cultural stigmatism as well as the traditional approach to issues broadening on gender in equality that divide the role of women to domestic activities and that of men to the productive arena can no longer stand the test of time. Women today make increasingly important contributions to social, economic and political discourses (World Bank, 2012).

In truth, many women today want what many men want, for example, to make decent living, to have a rewarding personal life and to get on in the World without rocking too many boats (Amadi-Ali, 2003). In as much as we theoretically believed that both men and women are equal, social orientation should change practically and given to the women the full right they deserved for them to contribute meaningfully in the society.

### 5.1 Way Forward In 21<sup>st</sup> Century Nigeria

- 1) The efforts of the women should be revitalized by encouraging each other to participate in political activities rather than answering such name like “first lady”.
- 2) Legislative provisions and protections should be strictly adhered to by the entire society.
- 3) Gender related issues should be introduced or instituted into the school curriculum for students to study right from the basic level of education in Nigeria.
- 4) Government should adequately fund and support training and development programmes designed to redress the gender imbalance.
- 5) Qualitative education is seen as a sure tool for self-realization and actualization; women should strive to acquire the highest level of it and should not allow the earlier stereotyped mentality about certain course being the exclusive preserve of the men to discourage them.
- 6) Women should be properly sensitized through attending conferences, worship seminars and refresher courses so as encourage them to further develop themselves academically.
- 7) There should be the formation of women alliance to sustain a broad-base struggle by women to eliminate all the inequalities or barriers that women are subjected to.
- 8) Cultural orientation towards the value of women needed to avert gender stereotype in girls, in particular.
- 9) Government should adequately fund and support training and development programmes design to redress gender related issues and imbalance.
- 10) There should be national campaign to discourage gender violence in Nigerian society.

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