



## PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS OF GENDER PARITY IN NIGERIA

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## Abstract

*This paper discusses the problems and prospects of gender parity in Nigerian society. It has been observed that gender discrimination happens to both sexes. However, it is predominantly a problem that occurs among the females. Women, all over the world are faced with various problems arising from gender discrimination on daily basis. The problem is more pronounced in many developing and under- developed countries such as, India, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, China and Saudi-Arabia. For instance, abortion of pre-born children on the basis of preference for male sex is commonly practised in China while women are not allowed to walk outside uncovered in Saudi Arabia. Several cultures in African countries especially in Nigeria consider women as inferior to men. Women are perceived as beings whose voices are not to be heard in the society. In the contemporary society, culture has restricted women from holding positions of responsibilities. However, we argue in this paper that women are naturally endowed with great potentials. They possess qualities such as love, patience, compassion and endurance. These attributes are exhibited in taking care of their children, husbands and members of the extended family. Some of these qualities are also essential for good administration and leadership positions. To attain gender parity in the contemporary Nigerian society, women must understand that they have potentials to do what any rational human being can do. They are to strive for quality education in all fields of endeavour. When this is done, they will be in a position to challenge all forms of male domination in the society.*

Keywords: Gender, Parity, Culture, Discrimination.

## Introduction

The term "gender" and "sex" are sometimes used interchangeably. However, there are some differences between the two concepts. Gender is the word used to describe social and personality differences between women and men. It thus refers to that which society defines as masculine and feminine (Sani and Baba 2013). It is a variable concept defined differently between societies and within the same society over time. This is because it focuses more on social and personality differences that exist among males and females (Sani and Baba 2013). Olajubu (2003) notes that it also involves the expectations held about the characteristics and likely behaviours of both men and women in the society. It thus includes the roles and responsibilities of men and women that are created in our families, societies and cultures. Such roles and expectations can change over time and they vary within and between cultures.

Gender roles are not biologically predetermined, neither are they fixed forever. On the other hand, sex refers to one's biological identity as defined by physical and or chromosomal make-up. It describes the universal differences which are universal and determined at birth. Sani and Baba (2013) posit that, unlike gender, sex is a universal term that describes and differentiates male from female.

We shall examine the effect of culture on gender inequality in Nigeria in this paper and also investigate other problems associated with gender parity such as low level of female education, lack of female empowerment and patriarchy. We maintain that gender parity can be achieved in Nigeria if women folk challenge the cultural beliefs that have worked against their collective interest. Females must understand that they have potentials to do what any rational human being can do. The women leaders and non-governmental organizations also need to



re-orientate the women folk by organizing programmes that will sensitize them about their importance in the society.

What is Gender Parity?

Parity is defined as the state of being equal. Hence, gender parity implies gender equality. Gender equality refers to a situation where men and women have equal conditions for realizing their full human rights and potentials and are able to contribute equally to national, political, economic, social and cultural development and benefit equally from the results (Ekpe, Eni and John, 2014). Furthermore, it entails that the underlying causes of discrimination are systematically identified and removed in order to give men and women equal opportunities. In other words, gender equality involves equal access to social goods, services, resources and equal opportunities in all spheres of life for both men and women. It also requires equal enjoyment by men and women of socially valued goods, opportunities, resources and rewards.

Gender parity is the concern of all. However, this is not to say that men and women are equally affected by gender inequality. It remains true that females have greater share of disadvantage. Generally, people tend to associate the female folk with weakness. They are regarded as the weaker vessel. However, Makinde (2007) says the definition of male and female does not give or require such prefixes as "strong" or "stronger", "weak" or "weaker" as part of the essence of their respective meanings. Hence, the weakness in the conception of female as the weaker sex has not been clearly explained or established. Is it in the physical or mental characteristics or both? The word "weaker" in the phrase "weaker sex" can be regarded as a socially induced terminology. A person is made up of mind and the body, that is the mental and the physical. Even if females are the physically weaker sex, it does not translate to their being the mentally weaker sex, or male being the mentally stronger or superior sex. Even if we agree that males are physically stronger than females, we cannot logically derive from it the statement that males are mentally, intellectually or emotionally stronger than females. Thus, we cannot correctly argue that females are mentally inferior to male (Makinde, 2007).

Plato and some other philosophers have argued that body (the physical aspect of a person and the seat of human desires) should be subjugated to the seat of human faculty of reasoning (Ekpe, Eni and John 2014). Similarly, Stainton (2010) stated that the human value is directly associated with human reason. In view of this, the value of an individual should not be associated with the biological make-up but the reasoning ability of the person. Makinde (2007) further posits that if females are inferior to males, how do we explain situations in which some bright females outshine their male counterparts in academic excellence and later outshine the males in managerial capabilities and other notable achievements in which both sexes are involved without the slightest considerations for gender discrimination? Consequently, one may argue that no sex is inferior or superior to the other and everyone should be treated equally.

Culture and Gender Inequality in Nigeria

It has been argued that there is a high level of discrimination towards the female gender in African countries especially in Nigeria. Ayeni and Ajibogun (2013) express the view that the moment a child at birth is identified as a "boy" or "girl", it brings along with it discriminatory tendencies of sexism in Nigeria. While the baby girl is referred to as merely a "baby girl", a baby boy is given an added adjective as "bouncing baby boy". The only time there seems to be much celebration in the case of a baby girl is when a couple has remained childless for a long period or that a couple who have had series of male children without a female one, thus, lacking completeness. The girl child would only grow up to observe certain privileges that are reserved for the male child, such that even when the girl is older, the younger male child is treated as if he was older. This shows that that Nigerian culture places more importance on male children.

Culture may be regarded as a way of life. In other words, it is the way of life of a group of people or a society. Culture defines people. It can have positive or negative impacts on members of a society. The feminine gender is considered to be inferior to the masculine gender in the traditional Nigerian society. It is believed that a woman is a man's property or pleasure object. The husband is the head of the home. He provides for the home and takes decisions



on issues that pertain to the family while women are involved in caring for the home, which is inherently an unpaid job. Nigerian culture has many rich moral values that are beneficial to the society. However, there are some aspects of the culture that are not socially constructive. Several women have suffered as a result of negative cultural beliefs in the Nigeria society. For instance, Ebijuwa (2000) also argues that women, in Yoruba culture, in south-western part of Nigeria are perceived as beings whose voices should only be heard in the domestic sphere. Consequently, they are systematically alienated from the decision making process in the society. The implication of this is that, one cannot legitimately talk of the right of women in Yoruba culture.

Female genital mutilation is one of the cultural practices that affect the feminine gender negatively. Kimani (2012) states that it causes bleeding, infection, urinary incontinence, difficulties in child birth and even death. It also forms scars and keloids around the genital tissues which may prevent the husband from having sexual relationship with the wife. Barrenness is also considered an abomination in most cultures in the Nigerian society. Fasoro, (2013) also argues that whenever a woman is found to be childless, she is believed to have done something morally wrong and the gods and goddesses are angry with her. In such a situation, the childless woman is not allowed to inherit the property of the late husband by the family members of the man, leaving the widow with little or nothing to live on for the rest of her life. This shows that a woman does not have any right to the belongings of her husband in the home. In some cases, siblings of the late husband inherit the widow also. It is believed that the wife is the man's property. Therefore, the wife does not have the liberty to re-marry a man of her choice after the death of her husband.

Another aspect of Nigerian culture that places restriction on woman is the issue of bride price. Bride price is an important aspect of marriage traditions in Nigeria. It is usually paid by the man and the marriage is said to be incomplete without it. Hence, it is a prerequisite for getting married. However, bride price sometimes connotes that the father is "selling out" his daughter, particularly among the Igbo people in the south-eastern part of Nigeria where the bride price is high. The huge amount of money

paid by the husband sometimes places restriction on the freedom of a woman after marriage. It becomes difficult for the wife to express her views and rights even when she is being maltreated in the home since she has been "sold off" to the husband.

Child marriage is also a common practice among the Hausa people in the northern part of Nigeria. A young girl is sometimes regarded as an economic burden and her marriage to a much older man is believed to benefit the child and her family both financially and socially. In such situations, girls are exposed to early marriage and thus early pregnancy and its attendant ramifications including high maternal risks due to their young age. Nigerian traditional cultures also promote high level of dependence of women on the man. In most cases, the woman depends upon the man for livelihood. The husband provides for food, clothing, shelter and other needs in the home. In this situation, the wife lacks financial freedom and this makes it difficult for her to make certain decisions in the absence of the husband.

The discrimination against female gender has a negative impact on the political life of the nation in the modern society. Kadala (2015) argues that the society celebrates the male folks as unique beings, who are considered stronger and fit for public positions while women are merely weak, feeble-minded and so reserved for domestic use at any point in time. Hence, politics in Nigeria is majorly dominated by men. There is a general belief that women do not possess certain qualities and attributes that are necessary for occupying political offices. However, women are not as powerless as the society portrays them. Women have desirable qualities such as love, compassion, patience, endurance, etc. These qualities are usually demonstrated in caring for the children and other members of the family. Such enviable virtues are also necessary for leadership positions in the society. Women are capable of playing active roles in the building and development of the nation.

#### Problems of Gender Parity in Nigeria

One of the major problems of gender parity in Nigeria is low level of female education. Allanana (2013) states that lack of education is a strong barrier to female participation in the formal sector. In some



families, investing in girl education is regarded as investing for the benefit of the family she will eventually marry into, unlike in the case of boys. This argument holds in particular for higher education, which involves greater expenditure and is seen to be less necessary for females whose main role will be home keeping and child bearing. Matera (2015) argues that education can help women all around the world realize their potentials and empower them to change the world for the better. It will boost their confidence. It also promotes good health and sound minds helping women to feel more empowered to stand up for themselves.

Women and girls generally perform long hours of unpaid domestic work. Consequently, they lack the financial power to care for their health and other basic needs. Women empowerment therefore also has a major role to play in achieving gender parity.

Gender violence has become a major issue in recent times. It reflects the extent to which human rights are violated and the victims threatened to submission, leading to the "voicelessness" of women in many issues concerning and affecting their lives. Major violence against women includes rape, battery and women/girls trafficking. The understanding force behind this behaviour is the wrong belief that women are inferior and weak and are supposed to be treated as second class citizens.

The Nigerian society is patriarchal in nature. The material base of patriarchy is men's control over women labour power. Men exercise their control in receiving personal service work from women, in not having to do house work or rear children and in feeling powerful and being powerful (Allanana, 2013).

#### Conclusion

This paper has discussed the prospects and problems of gender parity in Nigeria. It referred to gender equality as equal access to social goods, services and resource and equal opportunities in all spheres of life both men and women. It also noted that when there is gender inequality, women are more likely to be disadvantaged and marginalized.

We pointed out in our discussion that the traditional culture in Nigeria places discrimination on the female gender, it considers the men as being superior to women in the society. We also noted that some

other problems of gender parity include: violence against women, lack of quality education, lack economic empowerment, etc. it was stated in our discussion that there is a need for the government to ensure that laws and acts formulated to protect the rights of women are enforced in the society.

#### Recommendations

To achieve gender parity in Nigeria, women must also give attention to quality education. They must make effort to develop themselves. Education involves teaching, training and learning to improve knowledge, to develop skills and acquire worthwhile attitudes. It helps women to appreciate their value and understand their roles in the development of the society. It also give them understanding that in spite of the biological differences between the male and female gender the women have equal rights to hold positions of responsibilities in Nigeria. Skills acquisition is also very important to improve the economic situation of women.

The Nigeria women folk must challenge most of the cultural beliefs that have worked against their collective interest. Women are to assert their humanity positively and stop seeing themselves as subservient to men. They must understand that they have potentials to do what any rational human being can do.

Women leaders and non-governmental organizations also need to re-orientate the women folk by organizing programmes that will promote political awareness and consciousness. Women should also take advantage of their numerical strength in voting for female political office seekers during election.

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