

# **GENDER INEQUALITY IN NIGERIA**

by

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## **Abstract**

Gender equality has been one of the most prevalent issues in our society. The difference between the sex and gender roles of men and women are so much being debated on today. Radical feminist believe that biology difference is the reason for gender equality state between men and women while the Marxist/Socialist feminists think it is capitalism that is the problem. Liberal feminist advocates for gradual change in the political, economic and social system and also equal opportunity in education and work sector. It was deduced that Nigerian men do not see their women as equal. The women in Nigerian society are seen as the ‘other’ of the men. It was suggested that women empowerment is the first step in achieving gender equality and also the need to work towards intensified education and enlightenment of the individual women so that she discovers her power and break the cycle of low self-esteem.

## **Introduction**

In every society, there are differences in the distinct behavior patterns of men and women to qualify them as belonging to two different cultural/subcultures. In men dominated societies which is patriarchy, women’s subordination and male’s dominance are so pronounced that their subcultures are literally separated by a world of difference. One such society is Nigeria. Commonsense views on differences between men and women tend to assume that there are distinct, consistent and highly significant biological differences between the sexes. Warton (2005) describes this view in the following way: the claim that sex marks a distinction between two physical and genetically discrete categories of people is called sexual diomorphism. The idea of sexual diomorphism has certainly been very influential and continues to be supported by many people. However, as early as the 1960’s writers were beginning to question some of the assumptions on

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which sexual dimorphism is based to suggest that the differences between men and women were as much societal as biological. The distinction between sex and gender was the starting point for the development of alternative views. The first person to make this distinction was the American Psychoanalyst Robert Stoller (1968). Stoller made the commonsense observation that the vast majority of population can clearly be categorized as male or female according to their physical characteristics. Biological differences are widely believed to be responsible for the differences in both the behavior of men and women and the roles they play in society. Stoller cautioned though against such an assumption when he said: "Gender is a term that has psychological and cultural Connotations. If the proper term for sex are 'male' and 'female', the corresponding term for gender are 'masculine' and 'feminine'. These later might be quite independent of the biological sex".

In other words, it does not necessarily follow that being a woman means being feminine nor that being a man means behaving in a masculine way. Girls are not necessarily caring and compassionate; boys do not have to be aggressive and competitive.

### **The Social Construction of Gender Roles**

Oakley (1974) believes that gender roles are culturally rather than biologically produced. According to Uchem (2005), gender refers to socially constructed roles that men and women are expected to perform in a given society- in the family, community and church. It involves an understanding of what it means to be a man or a woman in given culture including society's expectations of how men and women should feel, look or act for example social norms and cultural values encourage women to be passive and men to wield power and to impose their will upon others especially the women and children. This power very often leads to physical and sexual violence on women. Gender roles are learned from childhood and may vary from one culture to another and also change over time since they are human made. Gender is flu. In other words, they are not natural or biological. Whatever the biological differences between males and females, it is the culture of a society that exerts most influence in the creation of masculine and feminine behavior.

### **Socialization and Gender Roles**

Oakley (1974) outlines how socialization in modern societies shapes the behavior of girls and boys from an early age. Basing her work on the findings of Ruth

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Hartley, she discusses four main ways in which socialization into gender roles takes place.

- The child's self concept is affected by manipulation. For example, mothers tend to pay more attention on girl's hair and to dress them in feminine clothes.
- Differences are achieved through canalization involving the direction of boys and girls towards different objects. This is particularly obvious in the provision of toys which encourage girls to rehearse their expected roles as mothers and housewives. Girls are given dolls, soft toys and miniature domestic objects and appliances to play with. Boys on the other hand are given toys which encourage more practical, logical and aggressive behavior for example bricks and guns.
- Another aspect of socialization is the use of verbal appellations such as you're a naughty boy or that's a good girl. This leads young children to identify with their gender and imitate adults of the same gender.
- Male and female children are exposed to different activities. For example girls are particularly encouraged to be involved with domestic tasks. In addition, numerous studies have documented how stereotypes of masculinity and femininity are further reinforced throughout childhood and indeed adult life. The media have been particularly strongly attacked by the feminist for portraying men and women in their traditional social roles.

### **Gender Inequality: Feminist View**

The development of feminism has led to attention being focused on the subordination position of women in many societies. Feminist sociologists have been mainly responsible for developing theories of gender inequality, yet there is little agreement about the cause of this inequality or about what actions should be taken to reduce or end it.

### **Radical Feminism**

Radical feminist blames the exploitation of women on men. To a radical feminist, it is primarily men who have benefited from the subordination of women. According to Bryson (1999), radical feminist see women as an "oppressed" group who had to struggle for their own liberation against their oppressors that is against men. Radical feminism is concerned with women right rather than gender equality. It does not seek to minimize the difference between men and women but instead believes that there is a female or feminine nature that has been concealed and/or

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distorted throughout history, one that needs to be liberated and revalued. Radical feminist see society as patriarchal whereby it is dominated and rule by men.

From this point of view, men are the ruling class and women the subject class. The family is seen by radical feminist as the key institution oppressing women in modern societies. The family is certainly given prominence than in Marxist sociology where as part of the superstructure it is given only secondary importance. Radical feminist tend to believe that women have always been exploited and that only revolutionary change can offer the possibility of their liberation. Some radical feminists such as Firestone (1972) believe women's oppression originated in their biology particularly in the fact that they give birth. Other radical feminist see men's biology as the problem. Daily (1978), for example blames female oppression on male aggression. A number of radical feminists believe that rape and male violence towards women are the methods through which men have secured and maintained their power. Because men are seen as the enemies of women's liberation, many radical feminists reject any assistance from the male sex in their struggle to achieve the rights they seek

### **Marxist / Socialist Feminist**

Marxist / Socialist feminist do not attribute women's exploitation entirely on men. They see capitalism rather than patriarchy as being the principal source of women's oppression and capitalists as the main beneficiaries. Like radical feminist, they see women's unpaid work as housewives and mothers as one of the main ways in which women are exploited. Although men in general benefit, it is primarily capitalists who gain from women's unpaid work. The Marxist and socialist feminist relate women's oppression to the production of wealth while radical feminist attribute greater importance to childbearing.

The disadvantaged position of women is held to be a consequence of the emergence of private property and consequently their lack of ownership of the means of production which in turn deprives them of power. Although Marxist and socialist agree with radical feminist that women as a group are exploited particularly since the advent of capitalism, they are more sensitive to the differences between women who belong to the ruling class and proletarian families. Nevertheless, both the working class and women whatever their class are oppressed groups in society so there is considerable potential for cooperation between have interest in common with the working class and they see greater scope for cooperation between women and working class men than do radical

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feminist. Marxist feminist share with radical feminists a desire for revolutionary change, however, they seek the establishment of a communist society. In such a society where the means of production will be communally owned, they believe gender inequalities will disappear.

### **Liberal Feminist**

Liberal feminist does not have clearly developed theories of gender inequalities as radical and Marxist/socialist feminist. Nevertheless, liberal feminist probably enjoy greater popular support than the other perspectives. This is because its aims are more moderate and its views pose less of a challenge to existing values. Liberal feminist aim for gradual change in the political economic and social systems. To the liberal feminist, nobody benefits from existing gender inequalities, both men and women are harmed because the potential of a woman is never realized and the man are denied some of the pleasures of having a closer relationship with their children. The explanation of this situation according to liberal feminist lies not so much in the structures and institutions of society but in its culture and the attitudes of individuals. The creation of equal opportunities particularly in education and work is the main aim of liberal feminists. They pursue this aim through the introduction of legislation and by attempting to change attitudes. In Britain, they supported such measures as the Sex Discrimination Act (1975) and the Equal Pay Act (1970) in the hope that these laws would help to end discrimination. Liberal feminist try to eradicate sexism and stereotypical views on women and men from children's book and the mass media. They do not seek revolutionary changes in society, they want reforms that take place within the existing social structure and they work through the democratic system.

### **Gender Relations in Nigeria**

Millet in her book *Sexual Politics* (1970) argues that politics is not just an activity confined to political parties and parliaments, but one which exists in any power structured relationships, arrangements whereby one group of persons is controlled by another. Such relationships of domination and subordination can exist at work when a man instructs his secretary to make a cup of tea for him or in the family when a husband's meal is cooked by his wife. Political relationships between men and women exist in all aspects of everyday life. According to Millet, such relationships are organized on the basis of patriarchy, a system in which male shall dominate female. She believes that patriarchy is the most concept of power. It is more rigorous than class stratification, more uniform and certainly more enduring. Millet suggests that gender is the primary source of identity for individuals in

modern societies. People react to others first and foremost as men and women rather than in terms of their class membership. It is a rigid system of stratification. Sex is ascribed and almost impossible to change.

### **The Basis of Patriarchy**

Millet (1970) identifies eight factors which explain the existence of patriarchy:

1. She claims that biology in the form of superior male strength has played some part in creating gender inequality. However, early socialization is even more important because it encourages male to be aggressive and female to be passive. Male and female are taught to behave and think in ways which reinforce the biological different that exist.
2. Millet points to ideological factors in her search for the patriarchy. Again, she attaches importance to socialization. Men are socialized to have a dominant temperament. This provides men with higher social status which in turn leads to them filling social roles in which they can exercise mastery over women.
3. Millet also considers sociological factors to the importance. She claims that the family is the main institution of patriarchy as it plays an important part in maintaining patriarchy across generations, socializing children into having different temperaments and leading them to expect and accept different roles in later life.
4. She discusses the relationship between class and subordination. She believes that women have a caste like status that operates independently of social class. Even women from higher class backgrounds are subordinate to man. That relationship is maintained by the ideology of romantic love which obscures the real situation in which women become dependent on men in families.
5. She also believes that educational factors handicap women and that is reinforced by women's economic dependency. Even in contemporary societies, the paid work that women do is usually menial, badly paid and lacking in status, much of it like housework is unpaid. Women tend not to study high status subjects such as the sciences which lead to the best jobs opportunities.
6. She argues that men also retain patriarchy power through myth and religion. Religion is used as a way of legitimizing masculine dominance. As Millet puts it, 'patriarchy has God on its side'. To illustrate this further, she notes that the Christian religion portrays Eve as an afterthought

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- produced from Adam's spare ribs while the origins of human suffering are held to have their source in her actions.
7. An additional source of men's power is psychology. Patriarchy ideology is interiorized by women because of all the above factors, women develop a passive temperament and a sense of inferiority which is reinforced by media images of women.
  8. She identifies physical force as the final source of male domination. Patriarchy is ultimately backed up by force. She points to many examples of the use of violence against women such as the stoning to death of adulteresses in Muslim countries. Rape and other forms of sexual violence are ever present threats and ways in which all women are intimidated by all men.

Gender relations in Nigeria are characterized by a lot of imbalance to the disadvantage of women. This is the twenty first century yet tradition, culture, religion and other factors have continued to widen the disparity between Nigerian men and women, by keeping women in a subordinate position to men. The larger society and the male subculture still see women and their aspirations as subordination, resulting in a situation in which the marginalization, trivialization and stereotyping of women are glaring aspects of Nigerian life. Ojiakor (1997) effectively captures the master-servant relationship between the sexes when she says, "The Nigerian men have always believed that Nigeria belongs to them and women are at best the rent paying tenants". Over the centuries, women have struggled to say no to this misconception. The end of this struggle is apparently not in sight as culture and tradition continue to exact overbearing influences on Nigerian women and deny them their fundamental human rights despite the United Nations universal declaration of human rights in 1945. This has been adopted by all member nations including Nigeria which included this in her 1999 constitution. When it became obvious that not much was achieved in addressing the inequality between the men and the female, the United Nations again declared 1975 as the International Women's year. The years 1976 to 1985 were declared the United Nation Decade for Women to strengthen and encourage women and their advocates to mobilize and eradicate injustice and discrimination against women, the United Nations adopted its convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) on the 18th of December, 1979. The document spells out the meaning of inequality and how it can be achieved with the cooperation of government, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and individuals (Eya, 2005).

Thereafter, several world conferences, declarations, assessment and reassessment and further conferences followed, all geared towards improving the status of women. The African culture particularly Nigeria culture generally supports patriarchy and gender inequality. This gives rise to the chunk of injustices and maltreatment women suffer in the Nigerian society. The Nigerian women are characterized by low self-esteem because the society has continued to regard her as unimportant and inferior to her male counterpart. The most outstanding expression of gender inequality is the overall preference of the male child to the female child. A situation which exposes many women to various forms of dehumanization imposition of guilt. Many men erroneously blame their wives for the misfortune of not begetting a male child and punish them for a thing which they are directly responsible for. The result is that many women endanger their lives by having too many births in the desperate hope of begetting the “golden” boy. The baby boy preference and consequent tendency tending to care more for the male child than the female child in matters of upbringing and education put women at a serious disadvantage for life even when it well known that liberal feminist theory is correct in its argument that boys and girls are born with equivalent potentials that could be fully realized given the proper and conducive environment.

From the disadvantaged beginning, the Nigerian girl child’s journey into adult life becomes one long battle against harmful traditional and cultural practices that threaten her life and put her down generally. In some parts of Nigeria, harmful traditional practices that dehumanize women still include female genital mutilation to control her sexuality, disproportionate emphasis on marriage as the only acceptable status for a woman. This undue emphasis, particularly in Igbo society puts enormous psychological pressure on women. From an early age, a woman begins to worry about finding a husband, a task she is constantly told that it is a do or die affair because ‘men are scarce’. Consequently, not being married becomes a stigma which most women become desperate to escape from as they get older. Indeed, so constraining is society’s emphasis on marriage for the female gender that an unmarried, a divorcee or spinster is a monstrosity (Ojiakor, 1997).

Child marriage is a reflection of society’s emphasis on the virtue of virginity for women at marriage in which little girls are married off to men who most times are old enough to be their father. The disparity in age ensures that the wife has little or no power of decision making in the marriage. The practice of polygamy is another



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case that demonstrates this inequality. Polygamy subjects women to harrowing trauma and often brings out the worst in their character, in the face of vicious competition that characterizes most polygamous households. All manner of violence comprising battery and assault on women by husbands and other male partners, sexual violence including rape even by husbands. Wife beating is accepted by Nigerian culture as a legitimate instrument of authority by a husband over his wife. Citing Chukwukere (1992), Ojiakor situates this dehumanization of women within the overall power relationships in marriage as thus:

*“Indeed, no matter the level of education or enlightenment, relation between husband and wife is a power-based where the woman expects orders and gives in return total obedience. The man’s prerogative to command his wife includes beating her physically and denying her sexual rights”.*

Dehumanizing widowhood practices in the event of a woman outliving the husband. These include physical and emotional torture which a woman is subjected to ranging from the violent shaving of her hair to making her drink the water used to bathe the corpse of her husband to prove she has no hand in his death (CIRDDOC, 2002).

It is probably in the same basis of inequality that some cultures deny women the right to own, keep or inherent money and property especially fixed property instead you are an object to be inherited alongside the property, the right to participate in decision making and leadership right to attain certain educational heights, the rights to gainful employment, the right to freedom of expression, the right to freedom of religion, the right to freedom to hold opinion, the right to a higher promotion. Denying women these God given rights (Nnamani; 2005). The exact statement usually given is “you are a woman...” or as a woman...” and in order to enforce inequality, societies and families invent cultural directives targeted at women. They demand for example that a bride price be paid on a woman before the marriage. With this effect, the woman is perpetually expected to justify the amount of money paid to purchase her by being sub servant to her buyer and owner. Payment of bride price no matter how small the amount is a cultural sign of the superiority and domination of the man over his wife such that from then on, he cannot see himself treating his wife as an equal and neither can the wife see herself as her husband’s equal. Such a situation may actually be a

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reverse of what happened while they were courting when they may have seen and treated themselves as equals. Related to this is the fact that in most families where the men contribute more financially than the women, the tendency is for the man not to treat the woman as his equal even if the woman is doing a lot of work that is not paid for nor accounted for and because of the fear of communal sanctions, public blame and disgrace, women accept and silently bear the pains, humiliations and degradation arising from such oppressive, unjust and ungodly abuse of their human rights.

The effects of gender inequality has taken such deep roots in a lot of Nigerian societies that in some family circumstances, women are automatically forced by both men and women to bear the blame for many problems and failures in the family even before the facts are known. Thus, despite medical evident, hardly would society blame a male partner for childlessness or sex parenting. Women are usually blamed for the poor performance and behavior of their children, for teaching the children bad habits or not taking time to look after the children; for all marital infidelity even of their husbands because they did not do enough to keep them at home; for financial problems because they are wasteful or does not contribute anything in the family etc. a one sided apportion of blames can only arise in a situation where partners do not see themselves or are not seen by others as equals and so the superior of the two is always and automatically right while the inferior is wrong. Needless to say such societal prejudice has done more harm than good to the well-being of couples and their families. The same patriarchy goes for the traditional handling of cases involving fornication, adultery, rape and abortion. In many cases, the weight of socio-cultural anger, condemnation, blame and punishment is on the woman.

### **Conclusion / Recommendations**

From the whole, I have tried to present the case that man and woman are equal because both are made from the image and likeness of God. Gender equality is not about biological sameness but about equal opportunities for men and women on the basis of personal giftedness rather than the sex into which one is born. Gender is human made and changeable and varies from one culture to another. Nature has made man and woman to be complimentary and interdependent beings of the one human specie such that each is indispensable for the survival of humanity. Women empowerment is a very beautiful first step towards gender equality. There is need therefore to work towards intensified education and enlightenment of the individual woman so that she discovers her power and breaks the cycle of low

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self-esteem which is often characterized by lack of confidence, disillusionment, self-pity and victim complex and also men with concern, in leadership or positions of authority should also help to propagate the cause of women liberation.

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