

## Panacea to the Problems of Gender Inequality and the Building of A Gender Friendly Society in Nigeria

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### Abstract

This work is an empirical attempt to trace the abusive cultural rites, values and practices of gender disparity rooted in the Nigerian society. The work discovers that the feminist crusades over the years have got some positive impacts on how the culture of gender inequality could be changed. However, the pace of these changes is very slow. The paper therefore sets to see whether the younger generation is holding the same patriarchal belief common to the traditional Yoruba society and also attempts to re-orientate the upcoming generation if they are still holding to this convention, on the correct views and role relationships between the two sexes. The paper digs deeper into the reasons for the slow pace of achieving gender biased free society and consequently proffers pragmatic solutions to the associated problems. Questionnaires were used in gathering data. The questions were formulated to test whether young men and women were free from the stereotypical behaviours, which characterized gender inequality down the ages. 150 questionnaires were distributed to selected undergraduates and secondary school students across Oyo and Ogun states, Nigeria. The study is limited to cultural beliefs amongst the upcoming generation and how they can be re-orientated from the patriarchal dictates. The findings show that majority of these respondents still have the stereotypical belief of gender inequality and biases, which is a clear indication that gender crusades over the years have not really achieved its overall aim. The paper consequently suggests that gender crusaders should focus their searchlight on the upcoming generation, given the background knowledge that this group constitutes a large percentage of the total population in Nigeria. Also, it suggests that the patriarchal system that dominates African societies must be reviewed and correctly interpreted in a bid to produce a gender sensitive society without any friction from either of the sexes concerned. On the whole, the significance of the work is seen in the fact that a change of mindset of the upcoming generation towards role specifications of male and female will help to provide a gender biased free society as well as enhance the MDG goals of 2015.

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### INTRODUCTION

Many scholars have taken different postures on the relationship between male and female. There is considerable consensus that there are differences between the two sexes (Lakoff (1973), Tannen (1993, 1994, and 1998), Holmes (1998), Bradley (1998), Labov (2001), etc. This claim is also supported by Patzold and Granley (2004:21). In their view, there is much variation among men as a group and women as a group. There is no doubt that there are behavioural differences between the two sexes but this has been exaggerated in history. Thus it could be said that the biases rooted in gender classification today stemmed from convention, ideology, emotion and desire (Ekkert and Macconnel 2004:34). Men down history had always been placed at vantage and privileged positions, given access to wealth and power both in public and private sectors. This is why Poole (1646:21) as far back as this time cited in Bodine (1975:134) claims that “the masculine gender is more worthy than feminine”. Wright, S., Hay, J., & Bent, T. (2005: 532) led credence to this when he retorts: “let us keep a natural order, and set the man before the woman for manner’s sake”.

John Stuart Mill (1869) cited in Romaine (1994:106) is so strong and assertive when he opines:

*What it is to be a boy, to grow in the belief that without any merit or exertion of his own, by the mere fact of being born a male he is by right the superior of all, of an entire half of the human race.*

It is disheartening that some scholars have attributed the differences which cause inequality between man and woman to biology. To this end, some scholars have theorized that the chromosomes that resulted in male are stronger than such as we have in women. Proponents of this claim are also of the opinion that science regards women as a subordinate of man because it was discovered that women’s brains are smaller in size and volume compared to men’s brains when they were measure (Hoffman & Hurst, 1990: 197-208).

The essence of this work is neither to belabor the question of inequality nor to overstress the global misnomer of inequality. Rather, the urgent concern of this essay is to trace the linguistic root of gender inequality as it is entrenched in history, which put

women at a disadvantage and consequently, increased the gap between men and women in the society. Though most of the examples used are from the Nigerian society specifically the Yoruba, instances are also drawn from other parts of the world because it is realized that the problem of inequality is a global phenomenon. To this end, instances that support gender inequality are cited from different expressions within the Yoruba society of Nigeria.

#### **The Root of Gender Inequality among the Yoruba**

The problem of gender inequality and oppression starts in most cases immediately a female child is born. There is a usual probing expression of *ako ni tabi babo?* (is it a male or female?) when the news of a baby's arrival is spread among the Yoruba. If the 'unfortunate' baby is a girl, a heap of derision is loaded on the father. For instance, expressions such as *O ti la e mole!* (she has defeated you); *O sojo o* (you are a coward); *oole okunrin ni o* (you are a lazy man) are usually common. Such expressions show the unfriendly and hostile environment in which such a girl is born and in which she unavoidably finds herself. It is even worse in situations whereby a family that gives birth to the baby girl has no male children. All the female children together with their mother are not spared. They will be constantly reminded that they have no portion; nor any share in that house.

Female children are usually referred to as *eye* (birds), *ayale-gbe* (tenant) respectively meaning that *as birds they have no permanent abode in their father's house; they can fly away at any time*. The male child on the other hand is referred to as the *arole* (the permanent person or the owner of the house) and he is made to enjoy a lot of privileges that are denied the female. Right from inception, the male gender is made to feel superior to the female. Thus, house chores and other activities are burdened on the female who is being 'trained' to be 'good', 'obedient' and 'useful' for her future husband as she would sooner or later be married out of the house. The male child in this case looks at himself as the hero of the house, and his sister as somebody there to wait on him and to fulfill his desires. This mentality develops until he establishes a home of his own.

Schools and educational agents are not free from this guilt of gender inequality. When these children start school, the school also differentiates and discriminates against gender. One of such is the attendance register where the names of boys are written with blue biro, and the names usually come first before the names of girls. Educational agents do a lot to increase the gap between boys and girls, and thus encouraging the stereotype of boys. This is revealed in classroom activities whereby teachers feel and confirm boys as having more potentials than girls and thereby concentrating on the boys in the

classroom especially in technical subjects and Mathematics. This in essence confirms the popular sayings that "hammers are for boys and needles are for girls". Since girls in this case are not usually given the chance to tap into their potentials, such may recluse. The girls' names are marked in red. Also, many of these children are introduced into fairy tales, nursery rhymes, literature and textbooks that will present the girls as feminine, weak, attractive and dependent beings who sometimes get into trouble and always in need of idealized, handsome, strong and brave man. Examples of such are *Cinderella*, *Sleeping beauty*. Furthermore, the portrayal of roles in the children's textbooks further confirms this. Many textbooks will portray girls as teachers, nurses, cooks, and others like these while boys are portrayed as wearing stethoscope, carrying instruments in laboratories, and doing all sorts of hard jobs like climbing while the girls hold ladder for him to climb (supportive role) or at best play with other girls. Thus, right from the womb, through the family to the society and school, there is a clear line of roles demarcation between the boy-child and the girl-child that tends to affect their perception about themselves.

The boy-child believes that his role in life is to strive to achieve mastery through education in order to be able to provide active role for his wife and family. On the other hand, the girl-child sees herself as somebody who is perpetually dependent and if she must be educated, it must not be one of the 'tough' subjects like the sciences so that she could be effective as a housewife and performs the role 'nature' and the society have given her. Also, this extends to the family unit whereby one of the oaths which a woman is made to take in marriage now is 'to worship' the man, she is trained to 'surrender' to the husband in all things, and to remain silent as a mark of obedience. Even when a husband is glaringly at fault in a quarrel, the wife is supposed to still beg by kneeling down. Consider, for example, the expression, *Ori o ni pada diru, okunrin lokunrin o ma je* (The head is forever the head, no matter the situation).

There is also the widely accepted myth that while the male was created with nine (9) major bones, the female got seven (7) which also shows in a way that the woman is inferior to the male. Also, in a situation whereby a male child is referred to as *omo oko, o fako yo, okunrin meta*, meaning the typical of his father, he demonstrate his manliness; *ako* here means something that is strong and sharp. *Okunrin meta* means somebody who possesses the combinatory powers of three (3) men. Such expressions are never used to refer to the females. But on the contrary what is common to the female gender are *owo lobinrin mo* (woman's sole concern is money), *obinrin bimo fun ni o pe ko ma pani* (a woman can still kill her husband irrespective of the children she has for him),

*esu lobinrin* (women are evils), *aye obinrin* (the world of women!), *Obinrin o ni gogongo* (women cannot keep any secret).

Women are made to believe that their natural role and duty is to procreate and to serve men, live at their mercies and so, they 'dare not' dabble into anything they regard as the sole prerogative of men like politics. It is believed that a woman who does not accept the natural order is a 'deviant' and must suffer. That is why it is said that *obinrin ti o ba teriba foko, ko le ri fa oko* (a woman who is not submissive to the husband will definitely suffer). This perspective on women is not restricted to a particular region or country. In the Soviet Union, the situation is worse to the extent that in order to keep women off from aspiring to the male's world, the feet of their women from age six (6) were bound in order to present them as ideals for the males. One of the Chinese's names for women is 'slave'. This is to show that it is a global problem. We shall consider few quotations of great men towards women:

Thomas Aquinas (1223-1274) believes that

Women are defective and accidental, they are a male gone awry, and the result of some weakness in the (father's) generative power or of some external factor, like the south wind, which is damp (Scott: 1979:89).

Martin Luther (1483-1546) as quoted in Scott (1979) also opines that:

If a woman grows weary and at least dies from childbearing it matters not. Let her only die from bearing, she is there to do it (Scott, 1979:91).

Napoleon Bonaparte (1769- 1821) as quoted in Scott (1979) says:

Nature intended women to be our slaves... they are our property, we are not theirs, they belong to us just as a tree that bears fruit belongs to a gardener, what a mad idea, just to demand equality for women! Women are nothing but machines for producing children (Scott, 1979:95).

Moreover, Spiro T. Agnew says:

I leave with you the words of an old Welsh proverb – 'Three things are untamable Fools, women and the salt sea' (Scott: 1979:100).

Bengali also expresses that a woman's heaven is under her husband's feet (Scott, 1979:110). Thus in summary, the male world sees women as:

Breeders, big talkers, gossips, passive, devious, un-direct, better with children, emotional, irrational, not serious, silly

always, pre-occupied with details, machines, slaves, property, accidental, etc., (Legahorn and Parker: 1981:40).

Furthermore, there are some expressed beliefs in religion that also affirm men's negative cultural rights against women. For instance, the story of Adam and Eve in the Old Testament is usually used to show the devilishness of women. It is believed in the Bible that a woman should keep silent in the church. That is, they have no (or limited) right to rise up to any man in the church not even to question the supposedly authority of the man. In fact, they are referred to as the 'weaker vessels', which have no power of any sort. Thus, in cases where a woman wants to lift her head for anything, such expressions are brought to her remembrance. It would be religiously shown her that she is over-stepping her boundaries and this may likely incur the 'wrath' of God.

Also, utterances like "my brothers and sisters" which is very common in Christian religion can be depressing to a woman because a woman will wonder why not "sisters and brothers?" This is made serious when it is known to her that she should submit and worship the man. Where a woman is surrounded with all these confusions, she will feel inferior and will not likely want to rob heads with the supposedly superior sex. Women are not given much cognizance in the Bible. When children are counted; women's names are not included. From all considered, it is seen that the church is not an exception of the pervasive culture in the society. More women than men are educated, ordained and made to engage in all the effective works of the church, while the second rated citizen sit back to watch. However, we can say that Jesus himself was an exception concerning this male domineering syndrome because women featured and took active participation in his ministry. He gave them free opportunity. He engaged them in deep conversation, listened to them, and gave help to them.

The Muslim religion is not an exception to this stereotype. In fact women are not given much prominence because of the *purdah*, an object of the man, and she must be good, gentle, loving, etc. Such are the traumatic experience of women, which aggravate their inactivity in public activities like politics. Quran complicates this issue when it states that:

Men are in charge of the women because Allah hath made the one of them to excel the other.... So good women are obedient, guarding in secret that which Allah hath guarded.

As for these, from whom ye fear rebellion, admonish them and banish them to beds apart and scourge them (The Holy Quran, Chap. 4:34).

Inequality abounds everywhere and this is identified in different sectors and varying degrees of operations. For instance, there are some occupations that have been termed as masculine while some are viewed as being the comfort zone or the reserve of women. Wikipedia (2008) lists some occupation to include mail carriers, bartenders, bus drivers, fire-fighters, gatekeepers and real estate agents, mining, agriculture, forestry, construction and others, while females function in most cases as teachers, secretaries, librarians amongst others.

This disparity in job specification causes a lot of income imbalance and inequality. This is so because the occupation that is geared towards a lowers status is bound to offer a lower income which gives the reason for the wide gap in the socio-economic growth and status of men and women. The situation is even worse in the case of women who decide to raise families in conjunction with public work. Such women pass through a lot of agonies because they may not be able to cope with the rigour and the demands of their works after they return from their maternities. Thus women are left at a disadvantaged position in comparison to their male counterparts who have no hindrance.

It is discovered that such traumatic experience that many women in the corporate world are faced with had caused some of them to pickup part time jobs, low-income but time giving jobs and temporary appointments. Sometimes, they have to sacrifice their careers in the corporate world to give this care that the families need. This is why Manfied (2008:167) says:

More than 30years after the feminist movement took hold in North America, women continue to battle for pay equally in the work place. But the solution is getting worse.

It is must, however, be stated that research has shown that women’s earnings are going on the increase. Also, research has shown that in some societies like the Gulf State of Bahrain, women’s earnings are higher than what is obtainable for men (Vediour 2008: par. 7)

**METHODOLOGY, DATA PRESENTATION AND FINDINGS**

150 questionnaires were distributed to two groups of people. The first group consists of undergraduates while the second group is made of 50 teenagers in two secondary schools. Completed questionnaires were collected to determine the extent at which these young men and women were free from the cultural convention of gender imbalance and inequality. The questionnaires asked simple questions on job specifications at home. The subjects were asked to tick as appropriate the gender that is meant to do the such works as cooking, washing the dishes, laundering, cleaning and clearing the compound, arranging the home, driving/fixing the car, purchase/fixing of the electrical household appliances like electronics and purchase of the kitchen equipment. The results show a significant difference between the jobs specified as belonging naturally to the male with that of the female.

Table 1 Showing the result of stereotypical attitude of respondents

Items on the Questionnaire	MALE	%	FEMALE	%	BOTH	%
1. Cooking	16	10%	102	68%	32	21.3
2. Taking care of the children	13	8.6%	110	71%	27	18
3. Clearing the compound	37	25%	81	54%	32	21.3
4. Arranging the home	38	25%	88	58%	34	22.7
5. Washing dishes/clothes	23	15%	103	68%	24	16
6. Driving/fixing the car	109	73%	10	6.6%	21	14
7. Fixing electrical appliances	123	82%	18	12%	09	6
8. Purchases of household appliances e.g. electronics	94	63%	35	23%	21	14
9. Purchases of kitchen Equipment	15	17%	105	70%	20	13.3

From table 1 above, it is seen that 16 respondents claimed that men should do the cooking at home while 102 claimed it is the woman’s duty and 32 people among the respondents said that it should be a

joint responsibility. Also, 13 respondents supported the fact that men should take care of the children while 27 felt it should be the duty of both and 110 submitted that such is the sole duty of the female. On

the cleaning and clearing of the compound, 37 of the total respondents believed it is the duty of the men, 81 respondents claimed that it should be the duty of the women, while 32 of the respondents believed that such should be a joint responsibility of both. Also, in reaction to the question that bothers on the arrangement of the home, 38 members of the respondents felt this should be left for the men, 34 asserted that it is the duty of both while the majority (88) retorted that women should be saddled with this assignment at home. For washing of the clothes/dishes, only 23 respondents indicated that men should be solely responsible for this, while 24 respondents felt that both sexes should take responsibility, while 103 respondents said that the women should see this as part of the roles their sex has bequeathed to them.

Only 10 out of the total number of respondents believed that a woman should drive/fix the car while 21 respondents maintained it is a joint responsibility. The rest (109) considered this as the exclusive preserve of the male. The same low response is recorded for the question on fixing electronic appliances at home and the purchase of household appliances by the female. A change from this is recorded in the purchase of kitchen equipment whereby 15 out of the total respondents agreed that it could be the duty of the male. And 20 respondents expressed that both can be involved in this while 103 respondents claimed that the women are the sole specialists in this area.

These findings are represented better in the histogram below which shows a high frequency for the respondents who believed the male should be preoccupied with items 6-8 (driving/fixing the car, purchase/fixing electrical appliances). Also, there is a higher frequency for the respondents who believed that it is the duty of the female gender to engage in items 1-5, and 9 (cooking, cleaning, washing, laundering, purchase of kitchen equipment). The implication of this result is that many of the respondents, who are teenagers, young men and women, are still guilty of these stereotypical behavioural practices.

From the table 1 and histogram 1-3 above, it is amazing that despite all that the feminist crusaders have done over the years, the upcoming generation is yet to be freed from the cultural convention of gender inequality. This is revealing given that the ages of the respondents range from 14-25 years. They were teenagers and young men and women in secondary schools and universities. There is the basic assumption that they would have imbibed the culture of gender equality but this assumption is wrong because many of the respondents are still of the opinion that some basic house chores should be the exclusive preserve of the female. Indeed, it is more

surprising when the female teenagers and young women themselves still have the same mindset that cooking, laundering, cleaning etc are their basic responsibility while some other works at home like the electrical appliances, driving etc should be left for the men.

#### **RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION**

To combat the cultural and historical problems of gender inequality, and build a gender friendly society in Nigeria, a lot has to be done on the education of the girl-child. Girl's child education is sine qua non to the promotion of gender equality, and both are vital to development. Policies and actions that do not address gender disparities miss critical development opportunities.

In order to achieve in Nigeria, the vision 2015 of the World Bank as contained in the Millennium Development Goals (MDG), which claims that gender gap shall be totally closed by 2015, there must a focus on girls' education. This is pertinent so as to reevaluate the importance of both sexes, remove the negative mindset of the girl-child, and provide the opportunity for the girl-child to show her maximum potential in any chosen field of education. Such efforts should be considered imperative in enhancing the socioeconomic situation of the female and reducing the fertility rate of women, as well as reduce infant and child mortality rates.

To achieve the above, both government and non-governmental organizations should embark on the reorientation of the society in terms of the equality of rights and freedom for both sexes. Emphasis should be placed on equality. Gender stereotype must be deconstructed in order to reconstruct a society that is genuinely sensitive to equality of both sexes. Very recently in Nigeria, the National University Commission (NUC) introduced some general and compulsory courses to be taken by her undergraduates. The reason may not be farfetched: the unabated struggle and conflicts in some parts of the nation most especially, the Niger Delta Area. Considering the cruciality of the abusive cultural rite in the Nigerian society which has the years graduated into inequality, the Nigerian government should as a matter of urgency introduce some courses on inequality, power sharing and gender related issues not only in the Universities and other Higher Schools of learning but also at the primary and secondary levels. The school agencies, in the development of their curricula can do a lot in this regard. Right from the nursery and primary schools, subjects like social studies should have topics that centre on the general knowledge of equal rights of both sexes. Nursery and primary schools' curricula should be given a second look so as to include examples from both sexes, instead of having a particular sex being favoured. Examples that share roles along masculine and

feminine lines like we have below should be changed into examples that favour equal rights of both sexes. For instance:

- (i) Betty / Loretta / John/ rides on the bicycle
- (ii) Paul / Joy / Ruth/ is climbing a tree
- (iii) Paul / Betty / John/ is fetching water
- (iv) Jack / John / Loretta/ is cooking the food

Such examples as we have in (i-iv) above do not place much emphasis on the persons doing the riding or person doing the climbing.

There should be increase in the spaces that are reserved for the girl-child in sciences, and technical fields and more girls should be encouraged and motivated to go into these areas.

Furthermore, there should be enlightenment programmes that will be based on the importance of the girl-child and the equality of both sexes. This can be done with the assistance of the different mass media corporations, like the television and radio houses, billboards etc. More importantly, within the school premises, catchwords can be posted within and outside the classrooms that will catch the attention of these young ones. Such catchwords should emphasise the importance of both sexes with their equality. The essence of this is to change the inbuilt psychic and stereotypes of these future generations. The attempt here is not based on role reversal, but it is a way of de-emphasizing and demystifying the roles nature has specified as belonging to the feminine or masculine gender. It must be understood that whatever image is created in the impressionistic hearts of these young ones especially from the early stage will go a long way to sharpen their views on life and the opposite sex in their later years. So, it is the candid submission of this paper that if these teenagers and young men and women start to receive training from their very early years with the help of parents, society, media, school agencies and others, considerable stress shall be saved in the future. This will equally allow the gap between male and female in all facets of life to be closed and consequently, the MDG vision can then be realised.

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