

Historical Analysis of Gender and Women Empowerment in Nigeria

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Abstract

This paper discusses gender and women empowerment in Nigeria. Women constitute half of the world's population and have contributed significantly to the well-being of the human race. In Nigeria, for instance, women, have always played five key roles mother producer, home manager, community organizer and social, cultural and "political activist. Despite their large number and crucial functions, the division of roles between the male and female sexes, as prescribed by most cultures, assigns 'the subordinate, position to women. As a consequence, women have for long suffered, various forms of discrimination, inequality, exclusion and violence. In conclusion, the Researcher discusses importance of empowering women in Nigeria and what is to be done in all ramifications.

Key words: Gender, Empowerment, Violence, Women, and Nigeria.

Introduction

In recent times, however, empowering women is increasingly being recognized as a precondition for and as an indicator of the level of success in the attainment of sustainable human development. It is also being accepted that women's rights are human rights'. Much of the current discourse on the status of women and strategies for uplifting their conditions has employed the term *gender* and its derivatives. Thus, there is HOW much talk about the -Heed to upgrade the level of *gender -awareness* in society, for policy makers to become *gender sensitive*, for social scientists to employ *gender constructs*, for the political process to be *genderised* etc. What we intend to do to this chapter is three fold. First, to explicate the concept of gender, second to highlight and explain the current status of women and third, to outline possible strategies for their empowerment.

Gender: what is it?

The term gender derives from the Latin noun, *genus*, which means 'kind or group'. Until recently the term was used mainly as a grammatical concept to classify words into masculine, feminine and neuter. However, gender is now not only in much use but has gained a new and dominant meaning. The concept is currently applied to a wide range of socio-cultural phenomena so as to compare and contrast the differential impact of these phenomena on men and women or boys and girls. In more specific terms, gender is now widely used to designate the 'culturally defined, socially formed identities of men and women that are highly variable across cultures and are continually subject to change'. This implies that the term, gender denotes the different and equal perceptions, views, roles and relevance, rewards, etc. which a society assigns to men and women through its culture, it may thus be stated that gender refers to the socially constructed inequality between women and men.

It is important to emphasize that gender roles are neither natural nor immutable. They are constructed and invented by society. Consequently, they differ among societies and even within a society, gender views differ over time. We may further emphasize that the term gender is not the same thing as sex, because while sex refers to physical differences between males and females, gender concerns the psychological, social and cultural differences between men and women. The differences between the male and female sexes are natural, universal and largely constant. For instance, each of the two sexes performs the same reproductive functions in all cultures. Their biological features are also the same. Thus women develop breasts and men grow beards, etc. On the contrary gender differences are created and sustained by society through its traditions, customs, conventions, mores, and regulations. The gender notions about male and female include traditional stereotypes that characterize 'women as submissive, illogical, passive, talkative, emotional, easily moved to tears, etc. Men on the other hand are assumed to be competent, logical, independent. These stereotypes tend to reflect men and women as belonging to opposite ends of bipolar adjectives in which men have desirable qualities while women have undesirable ones.

Societal norms and stereotypes also function as a traditional ideology that relegates women to housewife roles while promoting men as actors, providers and final authority. What is to be reiterated is that these character portraits of male and female are not determined by nature but have been constructed by society. Their overall impact has been to put women in a subordinate position *vis-a-vis* men. Notably, too the stereotypes differ among societies and change with time. For example, while it is a taboo for women to drive cars in Islamic fundamentalist societies, this practice is not frowned upon in western and westernised societies. Today increasing numbers of Nigerian women are getting into the professions and top positions that previously were thought to be exclusively for men. In this regard, it may be noted that women are now becoming pilots, engineers, professors, company chief executives, etc

Manifestations of gender bias against women

Most contemporary societies are male-dominated. In varying degrees, they harbour beliefs, mores and practices which objectively permit or promote the -economic exploitation of women and their political marginalisation. Women also suffer various forms of injustice, humiliation and violence just because they are women. Usually, the practices which permit these abuses are seen as part of the customs and traditions of the people which are assumed to be beneficial to all. It is therefore necessary that we show some of the ways in which women are disadvantaged by the subsisting gender relations and role allocation.

Economic exploitation and impoverishment

The vital contributions which women make to the economies of all human societies are very often unrecognised, unrewarded and constantly entail arduous exertions. For instance, women are not paid for their housework and family labour and their role in the informal economic sector tends to be ignored in the computation of the gross national product, GNP. It has been noted, with respect to the rural women, that they, 'bear excessive burden in fetching and carrying water and wood for fuel, in hoeing and weeding, harvesting, transporting, storing and food processing.... [They] are the most disadvantaged people in the world. They undertake three-quarters of all agricultural work in addition to their domestic responsibilities'. Even when women secure employment in the formal sector, they have to contend with the challenges of balancing their family responsibilities with their official duties and with other covert and overt acts of discrimination and sexual harassment. They, also face the proverbial glass ceiling above which they hardly ever rise in. their careers. Studies have indicated that women suffer poverty on a more widespread basis men and that their experience of poverty is quite different as a result of expectations about gender roles. Thus, the term 'feminization of poverty' is sometimes used to denote the propositions that more women are likely to experience poverty as poverty levels increase that women stand a greater risk of poverty than men and that there are specific impact' poverty on women.

On the whole it has been estimated that 'women constitute 70 per cent of the world's 1.2 billion poor. The economic¹ plight of women has worsened greatly in countries that adopted the Structural Adjustment Programme, SAP, fostered by the International Monetary Fund, IMF, and the World Bank. According to the report of a Commonwealth study group, it was women in these adjusting countries. Who have had to find extra work to supplement family incomes. Who have, re-arranged family budgets switching to cheaper foods [and], who have been most severely affected by cuts in health and educational facilities and by rising morbidity and deaths among their children. Many factors can be cited as responsible for the poverty of many women. Among these *is the* concentration of women in Sow-paying job as a result of limited, education .and stereotyping of certain jobs as .suitable for women. For instance, Women constitute the majority of nurses, secretary clearers waiters, typists, etc. Which attract relatively low pay when compared with the salaries of medical, doctors and management staff which men dominate. Another major cause of poverty amongst women is lack of access to

critical factors of production. It is known, for instance, that women are discriminated against in granting of loans by banks and other financial institutions often as a result of lack of collaterals and gender bias. Even women who are engaged in farming are disadvantaged because they cannot claim title to land in, most cultures, particularly in Africa.

Discriminatory laws and customs

The Customary practices of many contemporary societies are biased against women and serve to subjugate them to men and to undermine their individual self-esteem. Using Nigeria as an example, it is a fact that the cultures of Nigerian communities approve such practices as preference for the male child, payment of bride price, female circumcision or female genital mutilation, FGM, negative attitude towards childlessness, degrading widowhood. practices and inheritance practices that discriminate against women. The traditions of some communities also approve giving away girls in marriage early and without their consent.

The overall impact of the negative cultural norms has been to engender very low regard for women, entrench a feeling of inferiority in the individual woman and place her at a disadvantage vis-a-vis her male counterpart. As a result of gender-biased cultural norms and practices, women become conditioned into accepting social debasements of the type associated with widowhood rites and self-imposed abuses of the type that denies female children good food. Even in urban centres and in civilised circles, the stereotype gender roles make women overplay their femininity by accepting that they are the weaker sex, over emphasizing the dainty nature of their comportment, viewing the ambition of some members of their sex as ominous and regarding exceptional achievements as untoward competition with men. The widespread preference for the male child means, in part, that families often prefer to send the boy to school and not the girl since she is expected to stay at home to help nurture her siblings and to be married off soon. It is therefore not surprising that women constitute the majority of the illiterate population of most communities. Girls given put early in marriage do not only have their education aborted but are additionally exposed to early pregnancies and *vesico vaginal fistula*, a disease which leaves its victims deformed and unable to control urination. When marriages do not result in children, it is often the wives that are blamed and consequently subjected to inhuman psychological pressures and dangerous medications. Traditional-widowhood practices in most communities are such that compound the tragedy of the unfortunate women and also seriously endanger her health.

It is important to note that religious precepts are sometimes used to subjugate women. The Holy Bible is sometimes quoted as requiring women 'to be submissive' to their husbands. What is usually conveniently, forgotten is that 'the Bible also' enjoins men to love their wives sacrificially just as Christ loved the Church 'and gave.-Himself for her. 'Husbands are also enjoined to treat their wives with understanding and to give honour to them. Islamic injunctions are usually cited as justification for confining women in *purdah* as is done in parts of northern Nigeria and to give away girls in marriage and

thereby deprive them of education. These practices have been questioned and have been shown to be out of consonance with the provisions of the Sharia and the example of Sheik -UsmanDanfodio who established the Sokoto, Caliphate.

Exclusion from public life

Given that most women have been denied good education, that they command very limited economic resources and that the prevailing cultural norms see their place as being in the home, it is not surprising that women are grossly under-represented in public life and decision-making positions in most modern states. Indeed, it has been estimated that women make up less than five percent of the world's heads of state. In the case of Nigeria, the situation is considered to be worse. According to Udegbe, the representation of women in positions of leadership in the three tiers of government in Nigeria in the last three decades has been low, "hovering around 2%". She notes further, that appointment of women into political offices has been 'characterised and motivated by tokenism' and that women in positions of authority 'find themselves working in groups that are in essence predominantly male thereby aggravating their feeling of 'marginality'

Africa's colonial experience contributed significantly to the current political marginalisation of women on the continent. Prior to colonisation, women in many African communities occupied positions of power in specific spheres of social life. There were indeed a number of places where they occupied the preeminent political position. These situations got reversed under colonialism. Two colonial policies have been identified as particularly inimical to the status of the African woman. In the ethos of the European colonialists and colonists, 'only men can be active in the public sphere and earn a living to support their families'. Accordingly, it was mostly African males who were given some education and who got recruited into the colonial civil service and merchant houses, albeit as subordinates. This practice served to reinforce, and generalise patriarchal values in Africa. Besides, it marked the beginning of the under-representation of women in the formal agencies of government, a situation which has been continued in the post-independence period.

As is commonly known, colonialism restructured the traditional African economies and communities to make them ready markets for European manufactures and sources of cheap raw materials for their factories. Among other things, the attainment of these objectives required the promotion of the production of export crops by men who were thereby granted economic power in relation to women who were concentrated in the production of food crops. Control of greater economic resources from cash crop production and merchandising by men greatly facilitated their domination of the political scene immediately after independence.

On the whole, the exclusion of women from leadership positions has robbed mankind of their unique potential for governance. It has led to gender insensitivity in the design and implementation of public policy and helped to perpetuate gender inequality in different aspects of social life.

Forms of violence against women

Women are regularly exposed to various forms of physical, psychological, sexual and emotional violence. This can be traced to the unequal power relations in society between men and women and the pervading patriarchal norms that support the inequality. According to the United Nations Development Fund for Women, UNIFEM, violence against women can be grouped and listed as follows:

- Physical abuse: battering, sexual assault and abuse, molestation at home, educational institutions, workplace, community and society as well as rape, infanticide, female genital mutilation, incestuous relationships, denial of reproductive rights.
- Psychological abuse: sexual harassment, portrayal of women as sex objects by the media, the judicial system and institutions of society as well as their treatment as perpetual minors.
- Restricted access to sources of power (economic, political and social) and to education, landed and moveable property, healthy nutrition, decision making and legal support.
- Commodification of women, trafficking, forced prostitution and commercialisation of women's bodies.

A close examination of the above list shows that violence against women occurs on a daily basis at home and in public places. Some of these acts have persisted and are widespread because they are sanctioned by cultural norms and because women are often unwilling or unable to seek redress.

Women empowerment: definition and justification

As Sandbrook and Halfani have noted, empowerment is a multi-dimensional process involving the transformation of the economic, social, psychological, political and legal circumstances of the powerless. In the specific case of women, empowerment entails not only positive changes in these critical respects but also the dismantling of the cultural norms and traditional practices that devalue, disempower and dispossess women. The process must necessarily also include the expansion of women's access to educational opportunities, facilities for skills acquisition and positions of authority.

It is evident from what we have just said that women empowerment will entail fundamental alterations in power relations between the genders, in the distribution of societal resources and in cultural mores. Those who object to these changes must note that empowering women does not mean that women are to dominate men. It only implies that women will be accorded opportunities. To develop their individual talent and to contribute more meaningfully to societal development. The possible effects include accelerated and balanced social development in addition to improved welfare, education and health for children since it is generally known that the improvement in the socio-economic condition of a woman usually translates into improved welfare for children. Beside empowering women is in itself, a just cause.

It can be argued that women empowerment subverts cultural norms. Our response to this view is to observe that culture is not static. Indeed as Okagbue has posited: culture is dynamic and subject to forces of change such as, in Africa, the introduction of the modern nation state cash economics, modern technology and industrialisation, changing pattern of population consequent upon rural-urban migration, the influence of education and the media find the changing character - of households and the family. All those changes have often undermined the security provided by "pure" traditional cultures. Customary norms are no longer always appropriate and their observance may simply serve to entrap women in subservient positions.

Empowering women: what is to be done?

The compelling need to enhance the status of women has gained wide recognition in recent times. It has come in part as a result of the long-standing struggles of women activists in all parts of the world. Principles, policies and actions towards ending gender inequality have been advanced and undertaken within international organisations and by governments and non-governmental organisations. On its part, the United Nations Organisation, UNO has fostered several declarations and conventions aimed at ending all forms of discrimination, including specifically discrimination against women. Among such international documents that prohibit discrimination based on sex and other considerations are the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, ICCPR and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, ICESCR. Perhaps the most comprehensive, and significant of these instruments with respect to the defence of the human rights of women is the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women CEDAW. The Convention was adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1979 and entered into force as an international treaty in September, 1981. CEDAW has been described as an international bill of rights for women and a framework for women's participation in the development process (which) spells out internationally accepted principles and standards for achieving equality between women and men.

In addition to conventions, the UN has programmed and specialized agencies which are dedicated to uplifting the status of women. The organization declared 1975 the international women's year and the years 1975 to 1985, the women's decade, as part of efforts to accelerate the advancement of women. UN declarations have provided the standard for regional documents such as the African charter on human and people's rights and national constitutions such as the 1979 constitution of Nigeria. In spite of the adoption of these legal instruments, women are not yet to enjoy equal rights with men. This is partly because these declarations sought equal treatment for people in unequal situations. As Osinulu has stated: 'true equity can only emerge from efforts directed towards addressing and correcting these situational imbalances'.

Between 4-15, September 1995, the fourth world conference on women was held in Beijing, China. The theme was: 'equality, development and peace'.

The conference adopted what has become known as the Beijing platform for action which consists of strategies towards the empowerment of women. Article 44 of the document thus enjoins: 'governments, the international community and civil society, including non-governmental organizations and the private sector' to take strategic action in the following critical areas of concern;

- The persistent and increasing burden of poverty on women
- inequalities and inadequacies in and unequal access to education and training
- inequalities and inadequacies in and unequal access to health care related services;
- Violence against women;
- The effects of armed or other kinds of conflict on women , including those living under foreign occupation;
- Inequalities in economic structures and policies, in all forms of productive activities and in access to resources;
- Inequality between men and women in the sharing of power and decision-making at all levels;
- Insufficient mechanism at all levels to promote the advancement of women;
- Lack of Respect for and inadequate promotion and protection of the human rights of women;
- Stereotyping of women and inequality in women's access to and participation in all communication systems, especially in the media;
- Gender inequalities in the management of natural resources and in the safeguarding of the environment;
- Persistent discrimination against and violation of the rights of the girl child.

The Beijing platform for action is commendably comprehensive and rightly recognises that the process of women empowerment requires the cooperation and participation of governments, international organisations and society at large. What we wish to underline is the need for societal *deserialisation* as part of the effort. This process entails 'critically examining learned behaviour, received values, familiar language, habitual perceptions, existing knowledge and power relations within a given community. The overall aim of such a review is to annul those practices and values that disempower women. Child-rearing practices and the socialisation and education of the young should be directed towards making them aware of the potential of the girl child and should seek to encourage her to realise her abilities. For the interests and special concerns of women to be addressed meaningfully, it is of utmost importance that they be significantly represented in decision-making bodies in every social organisation. There is also need for women to organise, propagandise, sensitise and network for the cause of women empowerment. In the interim, affirmative actions such as reserving a specified percentage of parliamentary seats for women may be considered. However, this must be seen as a short-term measure. In the long-run, meaningful empowerment requires that women be organised and that they be politically educated and encouraged to take active part in the

political process, as party members and leaders, and as voters, and candidates for elective offices.

Conclusion

In the main, three tasks were undertaken in this chapter. First, we explicated the concept of gender, which was defined as the socially-constructed inequality between men and women. Second, we illustrated the various forms of oppression, exploitation and violence which women experience. These disabilities were seen as the result of the perception and role which society has assigned to the female person. Third, we outlined the various strategies which have been advanced for actualizing women empowerment, defined as the process of upgrading the social, economic and political status of women. It was emphasized that society as a whole, stands to benefit from women empowerment and that the process requires the involvement of the intimations community, governments, non-governmental organizations, and women group and the society.

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