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GENDER ISSUES AND DEMOCRACY IN NIGERIA

Introduction

When English speakers travel to countries like Italy, Spain, France, etc., they find out that their languages have a grammatical gender, masculine and feminine. In our relationship with people, we presume that those we come in contact with are either male or female. The word gender evokes a lot of pleasant and bad memories in people. Some individuals substitute the word gender with injustice, discrimination, subjugate, etc. The Nigerian culture influences the people in such a way that when one receives news of a new born baby, the first question asked is to inquire to know if the baby is a boy or a girl. The answer to the question has a significance that is attached to that child and often to the child's entire life. "Gender is a key dimension of personal life, social relations and culture. It is an area in which we face difficult practical issues about justice, identity and survival. Gender is also a topic on which there is a great deal of prejudice, myth and outright falsehood"¹.

At this point, we need to ask a fundamental question. What is the meaning of gender? In 1998, gender was defined as "a social significance of sex. It refers to the constellation of characteristics and behaviours which come to be differentially associated with and expected of men and women in a particular society, our notions of masculinity and femininity"². In 2009, gender was seen as "the structure of social relations that centres on the reproductive arena, and the set of practices that bring reproductive distinctions between bodies into social processes"³. The Oxford Dictionary of Psychology defines gender as "the behavioural, social, and cultural attributes associated with sex"⁴.

¹ R. Connell, *Gender*, Cambridge 2009, p. IX.

² V. Burr, *Gender and Social Psychology*, London 1998, p. 11.

³ R. Connell, *Gender*, op. cit., p. 11.

⁴ A. Colman, *Oxford Dictionary of Psychology*, New York 2009, p. 309.

For this work, we consider gender as the characteristics of people as male and female. Gender identity involves a sense of one's own gender, including knowledge, understanding, and acceptance of being male or female. Men and women differ in many areas but the major difference is the two classes of hormones (estrogens and androgens). While androgens promote the development of male genitals and secondary sex characteristics, estrogens influence the development of female physical sex characteristics and help regulate the menstrual cycle⁵. In 2017, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) explained this concept in the following words. "Gender is a social and cultural construct, which distinguishes differences in the attributes of men and women, girls and boys, and accordingly refers to the roles and responsibilities of men and women. The concept of gender includes the expectations held about the characteristics, aptitudes and likely behaviours of both women and men (femininity and masculinity)"⁶.

The various definitions help us in understanding what we take for granted in our daily activities of life. Once we come across anyone, we discern whether the individual is a man or a woman. The movies that we watch assign roles for a man or woman. Even in the sports, mixed double tennis requires that a man and a woman will form a team. The difference in attributes extend even in the market environment. There are separate shops where women can buy hair, makeup kits, dresses, shoes, etc. The same applies to men. Again, there are social attributes and privileges that are connected in being a man or woman in Nigeria. Power relations are equally defined by the gender of the individual. At this point, one would understand that there are gender differences but are they equal especially in the Nigerian democratic context?

1. Democracy and inequality

It is a dream of any modern society to practice democracy. The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English defined democracy as "a system of government in which every citizen in the country can vote to elect its government officials; a country that has a government which has been elected by the people of the country, a situation or system in which everyone is equal and has the right to vote, make decisions etc."⁷. The definition emphasises the point that it is a system where everyone is equal. Democracy and equality are closely connected to each other in democracy. In the Nigeria context, it seems that democracy exists only in theory.

So what is inequality? It is the phenomenon of unequal or unjust distribution of resources and opportunities among members of a given society⁸. In fact, inequality in Nigeria democratic system exists as old as the creation of Nigeria. Women are not so much included

⁵ J. Santrock, *Child Development*, New York 2011, p. 346.

⁶ The United Nations Children's Fund, *Glossary of Terms and Concepts*, UNICEF Regional Office for South Asia, Nepal 2017, p. 3.

⁷ D. Summers, *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, Harlow 2007, p. 416.

⁸ N. De Paula, *Breaking the Silos for Planetary Health: A Roadmap for a Resilient Post-Pandemic World*, Singapore 2021, p. 59.

in political participation due to some factors. For instance, there are cultural and religious norms impeding women from participating in politics. Again, the issue of indigeneship, native, or son of the soil hinders women's representation in politics. Above all, Nigeria men have the notion that women are subordinate to men. Thereby, promoting patriarchal system in a democratic setting. To this effect, men see themselves as leaders and women are considered as followers. The patriarchal system favours men; as such, women are not considered as being influential in the same way as men. The strong patriarchal culture has presented leadership as a male role. Patriarchy seems to continue to impact people's view when it comes to leadership. In the Nigerian democratic setting, the inequality makes women to struggle in the political parties and they continue to be underrepresented in leadership positions. From the position of a counsellor to the highest position, fewer women than men hold top administrative or political positions⁹.

Gender inequality in Nigeria's democratic system is a reality and it is something that is evident without any scientific research. Very few women are appointed as ministers in Nigeria. The situation seems to be the same in other countries in Africa except Ethiopia, South Africa and Rwanda. These countries advocate for a gender-balanced cabinet with 50 percent of its members being women. Unfortunately, in Nigeria, the federal high court is still ordering the government to comply with the 35% affirmative action for women, which allows women occupy 35% of all appointments. It is equally interesting to note that the gender equality bill which seeks to eradicate gender in politics has been rejected by some senators. Their resistance is strictly a cultural and religious issues. Imagine the giant of Africa promoting inequality because of religion and ethnic issues.

2. Feminist theory as principal theory of reference

Different authors and researchers have used a lot of theories to explain the problem of gender inequality. However, this work will use feminist theory to analyse this problem of gender inequality. Feminist theory is the extension of feminism into theoretical or philosophical discourse. It aims to understand the nature of gender inequality. It examines women's social roles, experience, and feminist politics in a variety of fields, such as anthropology and sociology, communication, psychoanalysis, economics, literary, education, and philosophy. Most researchers on feminist theory focus on two main points. Their research focuses on the condition of women in the society. Again, they centre their research on the fact that women generally experience subordination¹⁰.

At this point, we need to know the fundamental principle of this theory. Feminist theory is founded on the three main principles. First, women have something valuable to contribute to every aspect of the world. Second, as an oppressed group, women have been unable to achieve their potential, receive rewards or gain full participation in society. Third,

⁹ M. Madimbo, *Transformative and Engaging Leadership: Lessons from Indigenous African Women*, New York 2016, p. 20.

¹⁰ H. Tabassum, *Theories of social change*, New Delhi 2014, p. 89.

feminist research should do more than critique, but should work toward social transformation. Following the feminist paradigm, this study addresses the content of women's discourse about higher education policy. Again, it addresses the structure, or process, of these discussions in order to increase knowledge to transform higher education policy toward social justice and educational equity¹¹.

The above points emphasise the fact that feminist theory provide useful insight into the political representation of women in Nigerian democracy. Feminist theory examines women's role in democracy as well as lived experiences. This theory is concerned with equality, freedom, and equal opportunities between men and women in all facets of life in Nigeria. This theory starts with the analysis of women's experience in the Nigeria democratic system and its centre of attention is on the woman's position in the society. Feminist theory encompasses a diversity of beliefs and practices. At this point, let us look at the ideologies behind gender inequality in Nigeria democratic system.

3. Possible causes of gender inequality in Nigeria

Equality, fairness and justice are strong ethos of democracy, but Nigeria struggle to associate herself with these values. Achieving gender equality would remain utopian, if there is no urgent reversal from the factors which many females have been subjected to over the years. The aged stereotype of confining the roles of females to the kitchen has limited Nigeria's economic prosperity, political activism, and political participation. In Nigeria, women are reduced to second-class citizens. The society tends to see them as home managers, producers of food, dispensers of sexual pleasure, shouldering the burden of agricultural pains and manual labour¹². We will explain briefly the possible causes of gender inequality.

3.1. Patriarchy

The word patriarchy helps one in understanding the Nigerian society especially with regards to the democratic system. Patriarchy means "the manifestation and institutionalization of male dominance over women and children in the family and the extension of male dominance over women in society in general. It implies that men hold power in all the important institutions of society and that women are deprived of access to such power¹³. For this reason, the common man in the Nigeria society thinks that the best place for women is in the kitchen.

The patriarchal society not only sets the parameters for women's structurally unequal position in Nigerian democracy but equally, defines their roles in families by condoning gender-differential terms in inheritance rights and legal adulthood. Thus men are being trained for leadership activities while women are confined to domestic activities. This affect

¹¹ B. Ropers-Huilman, *Gendered futures in higher education: Critical perspectives for change*, New York 2002.

¹² A. Oyekanmi, A. Moliki, *An examination of gender inequality and poverty reduction in Ogun State Nigeria*, "Journal of Sustainable Development in Africa" 2021, nr 23(1), p. 32.

¹³ G. Lerner, *The creation of Patriarchy*, New York 1986, p. 239.

them later in life, thereby making them lose self-confidence and develop low self-esteem in their career in adult life, politics inclusive¹⁴. The above points emphasise the fact that patriarchal system in Nigeria uphold that males dominate important roles in political leadership. Therefore, there is a big gap between genders in the democratic system which causes women not to play a big part and involve in democracy.

“Patriarchy functions as a social system that penetrates all aspects of daily life, from individual and group level interaction, to the organizational structures of institutions. The male domination of patriarchal society is manifested where position of power, authority, and decision/making are reserved almost exclusively for men and awards men a greater portion of prestige, wealth, power, and influence than women”¹⁵.

3.2. Religion

Nigeria is a religious country but we do not know if her religiosity is shallow or profound. What we know as citizens of the country is that religion influences the people’s culture, political life, and mode of living. The various types of religion in Nigeria (for example, Christianity, Islam, African Traditional Religion (ATR) to an extent proscribes the gender roles of men and women in the society, upbringing and lifestyle. The role of God in most religions is considered as a man while women are considered insignificant in some religions. “In the histories of religions, the voice of women is rarely heard, due to the patriarchal dispositions of societies in which these religions emerged, and which eventually stifled some of the changes in the status of women triggered by these new religions. The world’s religions all agree on the respect for women and their crucial role in the family life, especially with emphasis on women as mothers and wives”¹⁶.

In Nigeria, the population of women seems to be the same with men unfortunately, the important positions are being dominated by men in religion. Yet, the different types of religion emphasise that men are equal and neglects the fundamental rights of women. Only a few of the main religions accept that women can be official interpreters of their sacred texts and an official intermediary between God and the faithful. Up until very recently, women were denied an education in the holy texts of Islam, Judaism, etc. Where only men are the authoritative interpreters of religious texts, women cannot contribute to any development of progressive, gender-equal, interpretations. Most religions also claim that only men possess the ability necessary to communicate with and be God’s representative on the earth¹⁷. We can summarise this point in a sentence; men in the pulpit, women in the pew.

¹⁴ M. Allanana, *Patriarchy and gender inequality in Nigeria the way forward*, “European Scientific Journal” 2013, nr 9(17), p. 116.

¹⁵ B. Benda, *Rehabilitation issues problems and prospects in boot camp*, New York 2005, p. 136.

¹⁶ K. Klingorová, T. Havlíček, *Religion and gender inequality: The status of women in the societies of world religions*, “Moravian Geographical Reports” 2015, nr 2(23), p. 2.

¹⁷ A. Stuart, *Fredom of Religion and Gender Equality: Inclusive or Exclusive?* “Human Rights Law Review” 2010, nr 10(3), p. 440.

3.3. Culture

Culture is “the sum total of the ideas, beliefs, customs, values, knowledge, and material artefacts that are handed down from one generation to the next in a society”¹⁸. Culture wields a big power in the Nigerian society. It influences and affects people’s minds, opinions, perception and mode of operating. There are some traditional cultural practices which are helpful to the citizens but there are many of them which promote gender inequality. This has an effect directly or indirectly in the democratic system.

The harmful traditional practices includes the following; early marriage, female genital mutilation, preference of male child, child labour, virginity test, female forced marriage, breast pressing, polygamy, forced pregnancy, etc. The unfortunate thing about these practices is that some of them cause physical pain while others cause psychological pain to the women. These are more other discriminatory practices have lasted for a long time in different states across Nigeria. The people who are practicing them have accepted these beliefs as norms. Again, these practices discriminate against women, enforce their inferior status and submissive role of women and others threaten their lives. Traditional practices are also aggravated by the existence of poverty, illiteracy and ignorance. While it is undeniable that they transmit the values of the group and the community, others are also used as a way of preventing women from being involved in the political life of Nigeria¹⁹.

4. Effects of gender discrimination in Nigeria

Gender issues have been associated with a lot of psychological problems. In this work, we will present a few of them.

4.1. Anxiety

A lot of women in Nigeria are suffering from anxiety because of the environment in which they find themselves. At this point, it is important to state that anxiety refers to all of the feelings and bodily sensations that go with worry. Anxiety makes the body of the Nigerian women to respond in anticipation of those future threats which they are likely to encounter in the political parties. Bearing in mind that men will always find a way of discriminating the women, some anxiety symptoms such as heart racing or feeling short of breath, can happen to some ladies in anticipation a specific political event draws near²⁰. Anxiety is a mental health disorder and many Nigerian ladies are battling from it because they worry so much about the role of their gender in politics.

¹⁸ A. Colman, *Oxford Dictionary of Psychology*, op. cit., p. 184.

¹⁹ N. Wadesango, S. Rembe, O. Chabaya, *Violation of Women’s Rights by Harmful Traditional Practices*, “*Anthropologist*” 2011, nr 13(2), p. 128.

²⁰ H. Hazlett-Stevens, *Women who worry too much: how to stop worry and anxiety from ruining relationships, work and fun*, Oakland 2005, p. 16.

It is pertinent to state that anxiety interferes or affects the activities of the individual who is suffering from this disorder. Some ladies are even avoiding anything that is associated with politics because of what they will face there. Those ugly experiences can active panic attacks. In fact, anxiety has four components - thoughts, feelings, sensation, and behaviour. The common thing about them is that they do not exist in isolation, with each one independently growing on its own. Anxiety is made up of a series of thoughts, feelings, sensations, and behaviours. Each component is an immediate and automatic reaction to the previous one²¹. This points to the fact why many women in Nigeria become keenly aware of their gender at a young age and struggle with being bullied in political parties.

4.2. Depression

The issue of gender inequality emphasises the issue of men been favoured over women especially in Nigeria democratic system which happens to be the major issue of discussion in this article. In fact, it is associated with some psychological problems like depression. As elections draws near, women are like to lose interest in political parties. They become sad and develop feelings of hopelessness because they know that they would not be elected in most of the contestable elective positions. However, depression is inherently characterized by a depressed mood or sad affect. The absence of feelings, or a feeling of emptiness, also can be a functional consequence of depression. A loss of interest in social activities may be depression-related psychosocial change that is most obvious to women in Nigeria²².

Depression should not be part of a lifestyle of a woman in Nigeria. Therefore, it should not be taken lightly. The unfortunate thing is that many of them do not seek help from psychologists. Depression overwhelms people's lives. The great variety of explanations for depression in women is indicative of the compelling nature of the problem. Millions of women are troubled, even complicated, by depression each year. There seems to be no single, simple explanations for women's greater tendency toward depression. Biological and social and psychological factors all seem to play a role²³.

4.3. Low Self-Esteem

Gender inequality is associated with low self- esteem. Actually, low self- esteem is one the characters manifested by abused children. In DSM- 5, low self- esteem can be found under the persistent depressive disorder²⁴. Let's not forget that self- esteem plays a vital role in the life of a woman in the society. However, let us give a definition of low self-esteem. "Low self- esteem is a series of ambivalent feelings towards the self. Ambivalent means both

²¹ Ibidem, p. 34.

²² C. Miller, *Nursing for Wellness in Older Adults*, New York 2009, p. 298.

²³ S. Nolen-Hoeksema, *Sex Differences in Depression*, California 1990, p. 20.

²⁴ American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorder*, (5th ed.), Washington 2013, p. 168.

positive and negative. Low self-esteem is actually a form of self-hate, self-disgust, self-resentment, self-neglect, and is very self-defeating²⁵. Low self-esteem makes women to see their painful situation in democracy in a more negative way.

Looking at the problem of low self-esteem, we find out that part of the problem is that Nigerian women feel they are not loved by their culture, tradition and men living within the environment and as such, it justifies the reason for their being discriminated and marginalised against. Again, inequality contributes to the gravity to which women perceive or carry themselves. Take for instance, Nigerian women who have suffered from gender inequality tend to have extremely low self-esteem. They may feel self-worthless, valued only as sexual objects because of their experience. Some women describe themselves as feeling invisible because they have gone unnoticed in the society²⁶.

5. Political participation of women in Nigeria

The inclusion of women in politics in Nigeria is a fundamental prerequisite for gender equality and for genuine democracy. When the number of women holding political positions increases at the Senate and Federal House of Representatives and other ministries, the numerous challenges facing women would be presented and discussed at the appropriate offices. A basic requirement for gender inequality and true democracy is women's political participation. This is true because it encourages the direct participation of women in public decision-making and is a way of ensuring greater transparency for women. A greater participation of women in politics in Nigeria will help to advance the course of gender equality and affect both the type of policy issues that would be considered and the types of solutions that will be proposed²⁷. At this point, let us look at what the women can achieve if they are given equal opportunity with men in politics.

5.1. Promote women's education

Women's education in Nigeria is a fundamental and inalienable human right. It is obvious that girl's education reduces inequality and gives both male and female equal opportunity in the society. There are many obstacles that prevent women from attending school in Nigeria. For example, child marriage, poverty, early pregnancy, gender based violence, etc. discrimination in the labour market could be part of the reason why some parents do not invest or train their girl child. Girl's education should encompass all the aspects of education like going to school, ensuring her safety in the school environment, given the same opportunity with her male counterparts.

If women are to participate in politics in Nigeria, one needs to remember that the level of their education would determine their participation in politics and function as elected

²⁵ C. Gerber, *Christ-centered self-esteem: Seeing ourselves through God's eyes*, Missouri 2001, p. 31.

²⁶ B. Ugwuanyi, *Psychological Interpretation of Child Abuse A Research in Igboland of Nigeria*, Abuja 2021, p. 137.

²⁷ D. Giri, *Gender perspectives in Indian context critical responses*, Chhattisgarh 2021, p. 189.

representatives. Education will enable women to lead autonomous lives and also have freedom to act. It is an undeniable fact that women's education are necessary to bring about the needed social change in the status of women in Nigeria. The right quality of education for the girl child up to a university level would bring about a change in the male dominated politics in Nigeria. When more women begin to gain seats in government, it will enable them to make significant changes to the society at large, while also encouraging the men to place value on their girl child²⁸.

5.2. Promoting and protecting women's rights at national level

This article sustains the idea that there is an urgent need to change the ugly situation of women in the society. The change can be effective when women are elected to represent their constituencies at the national level. It is unfortunate to state here that in Nigeria, many laws have been promulgated to improve the role of women in the society but the implementation becomes a big problem. However, when women take the seat at the Senate, they will help in voting and passing sensitive laws that affects the lives of women in Nigeria. For example, laws on sexual harassment, rape, domestic violence, divorce, girl child trafficking, etc.

The few women in government have shown that women are strongly linked to positive development in education, infrastructure and health standards at the local level. Where rates of gender development and empowerment are higher, human rates of development and standards of living are also higher. Again, Women are strongly committed to peace building, as they often disproportionately suffer the consequences of armed conflict. Reconstruction and reconciliation efforts take root more quickly and are more sustainable when women are involved. By helping women become participating members of a democracy, one can look to mitigate conflicts or stop conflicts before they begin²⁹.

5.3. Promotion of good governance

Good governance is an approach to government committed to creating a system founded on justice and peace that protects individual's human rights and civil liberties. It is measured by several factors like participation, rule of law, transparency, responsiveness, consensus oriented, equity, inclusiveness, effectiveness, efficiency, and accountability³⁰. Equitable participation of women in politics and government in Nigeria is essential to building and sustaining the democratic system. When women are involved in democracy, they help in putting the characteristics of good governance into practice. Their participation breaks the tradition of gender inequality and promotes representation of the vulnerable in the society.

²⁸ Ibidem.

²⁹ A. Olufade, *Nigerian women, politics and the national identity question*, "African Educational Research Journal" 2013, nr 1(3), p. 168.

³⁰ J. Hela, *Leadership and corporate management*, Nagar 2021, p. 53.

When there is equity in the gender representation, they will help to promote good and human policies that would impact the lives of the less privileged in Nigeria. Women in their nature have the capacity of building a just family and in this context a just family devoid of discrimination and marginalization. Their power, talents and resources will help them to achieve these goals. There's no doubt that women in power will help to empower more women initiate the good policies which men may see as insignificant.

Conclusion

The issue of gender inequality is as old as man. It is gender that defines the roles, rights, responsibilities and obligations of women and men. The role of women and men has always been interpreted in terms of social expectations about behaviours that are considered appropriate for both genders. Gender difference is also a hierarchy in which practices and behaviours associated with men have historically been valued higher than those linked to women, resulting in women's disadvantaged status in all spheres of society³¹. Nigeria is a patriarchal society and stifles the growth and well-being of women.

However, the exclusion of women from the political arena and most of the activities that are connected to democracy is an affront to the spirit and values of democracy. In fact, our society is worse off without educated and active women, because they are responsible for shaping the next generation. The onus is on young people to take the centre stage in overturning barriers to women's empowerment. Women have nothing to lose by participating in the social, economic, and policy arenas; conversely the incentives to gain are limitless³². The government has a major task in working towards achieving gender equality in Nigerian democratic governance.

³¹ A. Ortenblad, R. Marling, S. Vasiljevic, *Gender equality in a global perspective*, New York 2017, p. 4.

³² A. Olufade, *Nigerian women...*, op. cit.

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Gender issues and democracy in Nigeria

Gender inequality remains a critical challenge in the Nigerian society especially in the democratic system. The percentage of women in governance is less when compared to men representing their constituencies. There are a lot of factors or ideologies behind gender inequality in Nigeria. Take for instance, tradition, culture, mentality and religion. Different authors and researchers have used a lot of theories to explain the problem of gender inequality. However, this work uses feminist theory to analyse this problem of gender inequality. It aims to understand the nature of gender inequality. Moreover, gender issues have been associated with a lot of psychological problems like anxiety, depression and low self-esteem. The inclusion of women in politics in Nigeria is a fundamental prerequisite for gender equality and a genuine democracy. Women's inclusion in governance will help in promoting women's education, empowering women, protecting women's interest and promoting good governance.

Keywords: gender inequality, feminist theory, discrimination.

Kwestie płci a demokracja w Nigerii

Nierówność płci pozostaje krytycznym wyzwaniem w społeczeństwie nigeryjskim, także w systemie demokratycznym. Odsetek kobiet sprawujących władzę jest mniejszy w porównaniu z mężczyznami reprezentującymi ich okręgi wyborcze. Istnieje wiele czynników lub ideologii stojących za nierównością płci w Nigerii. Weźmy na przykład tradycję, kulturę, mentalność i religię. Różni autorzy i badacze zagadnienia korzystali z wielu teorii, aby wyjaśnić problem nierówności płci. Ten artykuł wykorzystuje teorię feministyczną do analizy problemu nierówności płci. Jego celem jest lepsze zrozumienie natury nierówności płci. Co więcej, kwestie płci są związane z wieloma problemami psychologicznymi, takimi jak lęk, depresja i niska samoocena. Włączenie kobiet do polityki w Nigerii jest podstawowym warunkiem wstępnym poszanowania równości płci i prawdziwej demokracji. Inkluzja kobiet do sprawowania rządów pomoże w promowaniu edukacji kobiet, wzmocnieniu pozycji kobiet, ochronie interesów kobiet i promowaniu dobrego zarządzania.

Słowa kluczowe: nierówność płci, teoria feministyczna, dyskryminacja.

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