



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF VIOLENCE & RELATED STUDIES

Volume 01 • 2005 • Number 1

From A Wounded Background

Tyoor, F.M.T.

Refocusing Gender Crusade In Nigeria

Adebukola F. Osunyikanmi

The Legal Perspective of Violence

Solomon A. & Nsekpang U.

Exploring Socio-Economic Correlates of Wife-Battering

F.A. Badru

An Agenda For Gender Equality in Globalized Economies

Tongo Constantine

Education As An Important Tool In The Elimination of Violence Against Women

D.C. Inko-Tariah.

The Relationship Between HIV/AIDS & Gender Violence

Enobong D. Umoh.

Strategies For Effecting Gender Balance & The Position of Nigerian State

Fayomi Oluyemi

Perception of Sexual Violence Against Women

Amaike & Quadri

Gender & Domestic Violence In Tiv Land

Timiun Godwin A.

Preventing Violence Through Women's Groups

Akinwumi Adenike

Domestic Violence During Pregnancy.

Imaobong A. & Usoroh C.

Equal Participation of Both Men & Women

Ineba Bob-Manuel

Sexual Aggression, Reproductive Health & HIV/AIDS

Julie Orshi & Rosie McNeil

Global View of Domestic Violence Against Women

Akpan A.E. & Inyang E.S.

Violence Against Women: Mobilization To Indifference

Theo Adebowale

Protecting The Girl Child Against Discrimination

J.B. Kinanee

Poverty Feminization As An Instrument Of Violence Against Women

Umar Garba and Zakari Zirra F,



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Strategies For Effecting Gender Balance And The Position of Nigerian State

Fayomi Oluyemi O.

The concept of gender was used during the early 1970's as an analytical category to draw a line of demarcation between biological sex differences. The way the differences are used to inform behaviors and competencies are as either "Masculine or feminine". Gender balancing has to do with equality of the sexes in social, economic and political issue. A gender hierarchy is part of all societies regardless of their level of technical development and Nigeria is no exception. There is the need to balance the roles of male and female in the society and Nigeria needs to maintain a positive and effective position in this regard.

A clear understanding of the role and responsibilities of men and women is crucial in identifying areas for effecting gender balance. The position of Nigeria, a country of great diversity of 250 ethnic groups and over 120 million people remains that the males dictate the pace for the society as a whole.

There has always been a missing gap in gender equality or balance in Nigeria though the gap between opportunities for men and Women is narrowing strategies for effecting gender balance in Nigeria are more compelling today than ever.

INTRODUCTION

There is no social change in history that has been encompassing as the revision of relationships between men and women in both democratic and non-democratic societies. Nigeria was an early twentieth century colony of Britain that became an independent nation in 1960. The history of the peoples that constitute the present states dates back to more than 2,000 years.

A number of kingdoms with contemporary ethnic groups can be identified existed before 1500 A.D, of these; the three dominant regional groups were the Hausa in the North, the Yoruba in the West and the Igbo in the South.

Persistence inequality between males and females in Nigerian Society was reflected in the fact that women were excluded in the attempts at writing the constitution for Nigeria and jostling for leadership in the 1950's. In the diverse Nigerian culture, Patriarchy and androcentrism remain the overall backbone of gender inequality in Nigeria. Androcentrism which literarily means male-centredness reflects some practices whereby the experiences of men are "seen to provide the objective criteria through which women's experiences can be organized and evaluated" ¹. Patriarchy also literarily means rule by "the male head of a social unit (for instance, a family or tribe)

The convention on the elimination of All forms of Discrimination against women (CEDAW) which was adopted by General Assembly resolution 34/180 of 18 December 1979 and entered into force on 3 September 1981, in accordance with article 27(1) states in its preamble that the states that have signed the convention should "Aware that a change in the traditional role of men as well as the role of women in society and in the family is needed to achieve full equality between men and women

The importance of Article 2 of CEDAW cannot be over-emphasized because the gap between men and women in Nigeria in terms of accessibility to decision making remains wide. Women have always remained in the background either in the private sector or public sector decision making for they are "less likely to be in the positions of responsibility than men" ⁴.

Nigerian women have always played a minority role in decision making, leadership affairs and political processes. Gender balance is of great importance to women's well being and development. Gender balance has to do with the matter of social justice and good economics. Though there are social and cultural factors weighing on gender balance, public policy can influence women's status.

The present democratic Nigerian government has a leading role to play in widening the opportunities available to women and extend the services that are equally important to them. The problem of gender imbalance is greatly reflected in the social and cultural patterns of conduct of people. The main challenge of

women and girls arising from cultural practices are multifaceted. For example, in the Northern part of Nigeria, early marriage for girls is still prevalent and educational development as well as social and economic empowerment of girls is affected.

It should be noted also that the general division of roles makes women "home keepers" and men "breadwinners" in Nigeria. Most women are often denied the opportunity to pursue a career in whichever field they choose. They are limited to a career that, in some way complements "home keeping" or that will allow them to spend less time outside the home.

CONCEPTUALIZATION

The emergence of academic study of gender can be dated to the 1960s and its development was triggered by the second wave feminism. It has developed a critique of gender inequalities, in both personal relationships and in social, political and economic positioning.

The second wave feminism began to draw attention to the ways in which academic disciplines acted to exclude the experiences, interests and identities of women. For instance, before 1970s, the social sciences in general and political science in particular, largely ignored gender. The "people" it studied were mainly men and the topics it focused on were aspects that were significant to men, such as paid work and politics. In the context of second wave feminist critiques, a number of disciplines across the social sciences, the arts and humanities began to pay increasing attention to gender.

The concept of gender came into the style of speech or writing used by people in a particular context during the early 1970s. "It was used as an analytical category to draw a line of demarcation between biological sex differences and the way these are used to inform behaviors and competences, which are then assigned as either "masculine" or "feminine"". Gender, refers to social meanings of male and female, and distinctions made in different societies about attitude and roles. Socialization influences the way male and female perceive their environment and how they relate to each other. Adindu (2002 P:83), states that Gender in the context of the family, community, nation, and organization is how certain roles, responsibilities, rights and identities are ascribed to male and female members based on established beliefs, values and norms.

In simple terms to say something is "gendered" is a description of whether its character is either masculine or feminine. For instance Pink and Blue are gendered colours, the former regarded as "feminine" and the latter as "masculine".

The early use of the term "androcentric" was made by Charlotte Perkins Gillman in her subtitled book, "Our Androcentric Culture" 1911⁷. Historically most societies, exhibit androcentric tendencies whereby their culture, organizations and institutions reflect the dominance and power of men. A simple illustration is provided by androcentric use of language for instance, in Britain until at least the

1980s, "mankind" and "men" were widely used in a generic way, instead of the more "gender neutral" "human kind" or people.

Some writers have addressed the issues of the ways in which the "male epistemological stance" (Mackinnon, 1982) is evident in academic theories and research⁸. The consequences of the male "Stand point" are that findings from men only research studies have been generalized to women and that areas of enquiry focus on issues of importance to men's interests and experiences, while the issues of importance to men have been over looked.

The exchange of opinion over difference focuses on the heart of feminist conceptions of equality, and how it might be achieved. Equality or balance is not a straight forward aim in a world torn apart with inequalities between genders and across ethnicities. When the second wave of feminism talked about equality, it was imagined as a world where women had an equal access to the power and autonomy of men. Equality was also breaking down traditional gendered binaries that suggested women were incapable of certain tasks or holding positions of responsibility because of their sex⁸.

Consequently, the term "difference" within feminist theory took on a number of different meanings. The concept of gender difference pays more attention to the differences between women and the meaning that is attached to them. Cott in (Mitchel and Oakley 1986: 59)⁹, observes that "the value accorded to sexual difference" in feminist theory has increased at the same time that the universality of the claim of sisterhood has been debunked. Ethnic, racial and sexual diversity among women is stressed more than ever before in feminist theory, but so is the emphasis on how women (as a whole) differ from men (as a whole).

The domestic or household division of labour refers to the distribution between family members of the responsibilities and tasks necessary for maintenance of a domestic home. Historically, the concept of the 'gendered' division of labour is used to recognize that there are marked differences between women and men in responsibilities for the performance of tasks necessary for daily living in a family.

Men have primary responsibility for the necessary financial provision of their family household while women have primary responsibility for the management and performance of house work and caring work, such as cleaning, laundry, shopping, cooking and caring for children.

The concept of domestic division of labour came to prominence in academic debates in the 1970s. By using Marxist theories, feminists argued that what women's role within the home although unpaid is "work" or "labour"; which is in form of productive activities like men's waged labour.

The idea of equality has become a subject of debate in gender studies. 'Equality can be defined as a state or condition of being the same in terms of social status or legal / political right'¹¹. Historically, men have had a higher social status than women in legal and political rights in western societies. In the late 19th Century

and early 20th Century for example, in Britain “equal rights” feminism campaigned the extension of rights and privileges in relation to education, proper employment, the vote previously enjoyed by men to women. There lies the on going debate about the meaning of equality behind the scenes of the historical struggle for gender balance. What is the nature of the differences between men and women and how does it relate to the attainment of equality between them? What is the standard to which the achievement of equality is to be judged? Does equality mean that women should take masculine norms, values and lifestyles? Central to feminism and gender studies is the issue of whether equality requires that all women be treated the same as all men, irrespective of their differences or whether equality requires that differences between women and men be recognized and provided for.

Also central to the work of socialist feminists and Marxism is the theorizing about ideology in which “one male theoretical perspective has proven attractive to a wide range of feminists because of its analysis of the capitalist social formation as predicated upon class conflict appeared amenable to the inclusion of a consideration of a gender inequality”

There is a growing consensus that patriarchy should be abandoned as an explanation concept or theory and it should only be used as an adjective to describe relationships or institutions where men dominate women .

The validity of definitions of violence is both cultural and legal terms “Violence may be narrowly defined as in the legal sense of it being the unlawful use of physical force by an individual against others”¹⁶.

Men's violence against women has especially been the concern of feminist researchers violence has been conceptualized as a broad range of men's harmful behavior toward women including rape, domestic violence and sexual harassment. Violence has been identified as a key mechanism in the subordination of women by men. Researchers who studied the difficulties faced by women who have experienced men's violence shows for example in cases of domestic violence, the woman is sometimes blamed for arousing anger in her aggressor, or in cases of repeated violence, for not leaving him. A woman who dresses provocatively may cause a man to rape her.

STRATEGIES FOR EFFECTING GENDER BALANCE⁷

Gender balance refers to equality in roles between male and female. Through ensuring women's equal access to and equal opportunities in, political and public life including the right to vote and to stand for election as well as education, health and employment.

The convention on elimination of all forms of discrimination against women (CEDAW) adopted in 1979 by the United Nations General Assembly and often described as the International Bill of Rights for women, described discrimination against women as “any distinction, exclusion or restriction on basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or

exercise by women irrespective of their marital status, on a basis of equality of men and women, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social and cultural, civic and or any other field”.

CEDAW entered into force in 1981. Nigeria ratified the convention in 1985 and signed its Optional Protocol but yet to domesticate nor implement most of the articles. In Nigeria, Gender balance seeks to transform power relations in the society so that women can fully exercise their right to political participation and make a difference in their homes, communities and in the society as a whole.

In order to fully strengthen and actualize the essence of gender balance, the following strategies should be adopted in Nigeria:

The Institutions such as National Orientation Agency (NOA) and the National Policy on Women and the National Policy on Education should conduct awareness raising activities among various government leaders and civil society by emphasizing that gender balance does not simply mean quotas. Quota is the only form of affirmative action strategy that has been found effective in increasing women political participation. These institutions should create an awareness of what 50/50 is and what is not, and share various strategic approaches and best practices to attain gender balance.

Parents should begin to handle children (boys and girls) from a very early stage without discrimination such that both male and female are exposed to equal opportunities They should play a significant role in helping their boys and girls to achieve a kind of balance in reasoning and social relations in order to remove gender inequality amongst them.

There should be establishment of a Gender Equity Commission and Citizenship and Residency Rights for Women who marry into or live in areas other than in which they were born, to be able to secure leadership positions.

There should be enactment of a law guaranteeing the right of women to land, property and inheritance on equal terms with men.

The Nigerian government needs to monitor and modify all discriminatory patterns in its agencies as well as ensure that the curricula of schools, law enforcement and other agents of socialization are in conformity with the principles of CEDAW which it signed and ratified without reservations.

There should be at least 30 percent representation of women in political matters in line with the principles of CEDAW. More awareness should be created among women at the grassroots level on the meaning and importance of CEDAW for women.

One of the ways in achieving gender balance is through education. Nigerian women should appreciate and embrace education as a means of empowerment and self-actualization. Empowerment of girls and women through education must promote gender balance.

Men should support women's struggle for gender balance as this will further

enhance the actualization of the principles of CEDAW. They must promote a spirit of unity, understanding and solidarity among themselves in Nigeria.

Women should create, enhance networks and collaborative relationships among women Organizations. This will result in social involvement, capable of inducing social change in unifying critical mass that they need to constantly remind them of unity and collective destiny.

Concerted effort should be made to change prevailing activities towards the disabled, the girl-child, and the rural women so as to integrate and bring them to the mainstream of development with men.

Women should be mobilized to support a peace process that encourages gender balance. They should shake off traditional beliefs that are impediment to development especially the customs and cultural practices that undermine the status of women in society, while recognizing those beliefs and practices that contribute to development. Rural and Urban Organizations such as workers, peasants, women, youth, students etc, should be encouraged to initiate and implement strategies to strengthen their productive power and meet their basic needs.

THE POSITION OF NIGERIA

In Nigeria, women and men, from childhood are socialized to embrace gender roles as defined by patriarchy. It is necessary to recognize the patriarchal nature of Nigeria in order to understand the position of Nigerian state in gender balancing.

In pre-colonial Nigerian society, it has been observed that the emphasis in power sharing between male and female was on the basis of complementary not opposition. Nwanunobi (2001) argues that the difference was not along the super-ordinate /sub-ordinate lines, but the men manage to dictate the pace for the society as a whole.

In the colonial era, the authority promulgated ordinance as early as 1876 to protect women's right, but it was subverted with the ideology of domestication of women. The colonial authority authorized the incorporation of positive attributes of women's movement and aspects of traditional laws and customs that were "not repugnant to natural justice, equity, morality and good conscience" into the body politic of the nation's practices, but the interpretation of what has morally acceptable and within good conscience was the preserve of men.

The policy ensured that women did not function in public places like men, male students were mostly trained in schools and women seen as subordinate citizens who had up and the implication are the upward mobility of women in the civil service and political participation.

The position of Nigeria as relates to gender balance could be found in Chapter II of

the 1999 constitution. It makes provisions for the fundamental objectives and directive principles of state policy. Section 17 (1) of the chapter states that "the state social is founded on ideals of freedom, equality and justice"²⁰. It states further in section 17 (2) that "every citizen shall have equality of rights, obligation and opportunities before the law".

Nigerian constitution provided for freedom from discrimination, traditional practices in many states of the federation specifying customary gender roles.

Although Nigeria has ratified the convention on all forms of Discrimination against women in 1985 and signed the optional protocol in 1999, the 30% affirmative action prescribed in the Beijing platform for action and articulated under Article 7 of the CEDAW (at least 30% female representation in government) is still a far cry from the minimum standard required in Nigeria. The reasons are connected to gender stereotypes and division of roles thereby keeping women from decision making positions.

Despite the contributions of some prominent women in shaping what is today known as Nigeria, it seems that the gains from this period have not been developed in modern day Nigeria.

In pre-colonial society, some prominent women broke through stereotypical boundaries to make contributions to their societies and examples of these women are; Queen Amina of Zazzau, Moremi of Ife, Queen Kambassa of Bonny Kingdom, Madam Efusetan, Iyalode of Ibadan, Madam Tinubi of Lagos women Nana Asmau, leader during the Sokoto Jihad etc.

On the issue of gender roles and stereotypes, gender balance has not been achieved because the achievement of women has been curtailed by certain cultural, traditional and religious practices. Although urbanization has helped to reduce the traditional practices that discriminate against women in recruitment and employment, but in reality, Nigerian women are not enjoying balance rights in the labour market to heavy burden of domestic work, lower levels of educational attainment, biases against women's employment in certain sectors of the economy or stereotypes at the workplace and discriminatory welfare packages".

In Nigeria, various socio-cultural, economic, political, legal and religious practices have hindered the development of gender balance. In most communities in Nigeria, a divorced woman is despised regardless of the circumstances. In the eastern part of Nigeria especially, the divorced woman is stigmatized and becomes socially vulnerable. While the marriage age in eastern and western part of Nigeria is between 18 and 21 years, it is between ages 12 and 15 in the northern part of Nigeria. In the north, girls as young as nine years, depending on the onset of puberty, are allowed to marry, but boys as young as nine years are not permitted to marry.

In the area of property rights in Nigeria, a triple system of marriage laws in Nigeria

namely, "customary, Islamic and statutory, has resulted in a numerous legal provisions and precedents regarding property rights and inheritance". A report of experts on women anti-discrimination committee shows that 90% of registered land and properties are in men's names. Women are often unable to enforce property rights in a court of law due to ignorance of such rights, lack of financial security and fear of antagonizing in-laws. Traditionally, the south-east and south-south zones of Nigeria do not allow women to own land and other properties out of the six geographical zones in the country.

In the area of tax, although there are no disparities in taxation of both male and female workers, women are required to provide proof of their custodianship of children and dependants.

Nigerian government in 2000 established National policy on women. The National policy provides for affirmative action to increase 30% the total number of women's representation in the legislative and executive branches of government and in political party hierarchies. "The overall goal of the national policy includes mainstreaming gender perspective in all policies and programmes based on a systematic gender analysis at all levels of government"²⁴

Also to increase women's participation in policies in Nigeria, the federal ministry of women affairs and youth development (FMWAYD) established national action on women in politics, which is working to develop strategies for the effective mobilization and participation of women to register, vote and be candidates in the electoral process. The government has also established national consultative and coordinating committee for monitoring the implementation of the Beijing platform for action and African plan of action.

In Nigeria, some progress has been made in the promotion of and political appointment of women both at local and federal levels. Women also head a number of national institutions and agencies. Most Nigeria's 36 states and federal now have women as high court judges and emergence of a female presidential candidate in 2003 is another significant development but Nigeria has not been able to achieve gender balance in all these areas in terms of equality in numbers and roles.

On the issue of gender roles and stereotypes, gender balance has not been achieved because the advancement of women has been curtailed by certain cultural, traditional and religious practices. The division of roles makes women the "home keepers" and men the "breadwinners". Nigerian women are often limited to a career then in some way complements "home keeping". The complication of this is that some women prefer or will be forced to opt out entirely from the workforce and stay at home rather than bear the triple role burden which is usually applied to women. Although urbanization has also helped to reduce the traditional practices that discriminate against women by providing jobs to women but in reality there is no balance in the number of female and male employed.

It should be noted that significant changes in the status and quality of women's empowerment had occurred. These changes include a review of labour laws/acts with due consideration to gender advocacy for implementation of affirmative action; the national poverty eradication program, which provided training for both men and women and research and documentation by the national centre of women development.

CONCLUSION

Nigeria's development is the responsibility of the people (men and women) and government. Good leadership serves both men and women. In most communities in Nigeria, men are seen as dominant and women as inferior. The importance of gender balance cannot be underestimated. In order to have a more peaceful and satisfied society men think about social relations more often than in terms of autonomy but women think in terms of connection. The participation of women in commensurate numbers with their male counterparts in politics will change the character of politics and governance in Nigeria. The society will gain politically, economically and culturally if the gender imbalance is evened out.

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