

## **ENGINEERING GENDER EQUITY, THROUGH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA**

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### **Abstract**

An extensive study of world literature tends to confirm the universal experience that struggle is not only intellectually, economically and politically uplifting for those who engage in it, but also that nothing is ever achieved without it. Since language and literature are inseparable, it becomes pertinent to use this symbiotic instrument to engineer gender equity for sustainable development. This essay therefore intends to highlight the causes and areas of gender inequality which include teenage marriage and cultural practices that negate the right of the girl-child, among others, leading to female oppression, deprivation and subjugation. It proffers some solutions such as giving equal educational opportunities for both the boy and the girl-child, inculcating independent creative mental, psychological and physical disposition into the girl-child from infancy to enable the females to achieve that sense and pride of belonging which will help to empower them to contribute their quota in promoting sustainable development in Nigeria.

### **Introduction**

Gender refers to the social construction of expectations, learned behaviours, privileges and constraints associated with those identified as males or females. Like race, ethnicity and class, gender is a social category that largely establishes one's life chance and shapes one's participation in society and in the economy. It is obvious that any meaningful national development must be hinged on human beings of both genders. Historically, there has been an age-long battle, between the sexes, characterized by the quest for dominance on the part of the man and the woman's struggle to assert her equality. Very few people give thought to the fact that gender oppression ranks as one of the most insidious problems in Nigeria as a country, and slowing down her pace of growth and development. One does not require to be a prophet of disaster to realize that gender is responsible for most of the crimes and discriminatory acts perpetrated against women who constitute over half of the country's total population.

In contemporary period, despite the level of development in Nigeria, there is little change in the long existing gender division, hence serious and vigorous

attention continue to be given to the position, role and status of women in society and their contributions to the course of human development. Sharing the view of Acholonu (2002), one may safely assert that centuries of struggle and agitation for women's rights, within the fairly regimented patriarchal systems and structures, have given rise to a rich harvest of discourse as expressed in many organized conferences and workshops in the present period. These continue to provide meaningful insights into human conditions in Nigeria.

One of the major issues in development economics which the governments of many nations of the world are currently focusing attention is on how to improve the socio-economic well-being of people, irrespective of sex targeted towards reducing deprivation and alleviation of poverty in all facets of life. Poverty is ravaging the lives of a large proportion of people, especially women, in the developing countries of the world. In Nigeria, a greater percentage of her people live below the poverty line. One major factor that has been responsible for this situation is low access to equal and quality education. The provision of the Universal Basic Education (UBE) in Nigeria is aimed at equipping the individuals with the knowledge, skills and attitudes required to live effectively in the global world of the 21st Century which is ruled by science and advanced technology.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations in 1948 posits that education is a basic right for every citizen in the world, realizing its importance in human and national development. This gave impetus to the World Conference on Education for All (EFA) held in Justin, Thailand in 1999. The Conference focused on basic education of all groups including women and children. It is, however, disappointing to note that an assessment in the year 2000 during the World Education Forum (WEF) in Dakar, Senegal, revealed that the Jomtein goal eluded most countries in Sub-Saharan Africa where Nigeria alone accounted for over 70 million illiterates. Limited access of girls and women to basic education and the denial of other rights and privileges put on them by culture and societal restriction is economically suicidal because it tantamounts to depriving the Nigerian economy of a potentially vibrant labour force (Alele-Williams, 1989). There is therefore the need to examine the causes and forms of gender inequality and proffer solutions that will help to reverse the pernicious male superiority, avert a continued debacle of unprecedented proportional wastage of unappreciated female capabilities, kill the virus of mediocrity that has afflicted the male ego and foster the spirit and consciousness of gender equity through language and literature especially in the area of feminist discourse via textual analysis.

## **Gender Inequality**

No nation can be truly free and fully develop when over half of its people are still 'slaves', their identities defined and their position negotiated by fathers, brothers and husbands. With this position, one is therefore tempted to query any justification for gender inequality in the human world. In response Mill (in Acholonu, 2002:132) observes,

The principle which regulates the existing social relations between the two sexes – the legal subordination of one sex to the other – is wrong in itself, and now (constitutes) one of the chief hindrances to human improvement ... it ought to be replaced by a principle of perfect equality, admitting no power or privilege on the one side, nor disability on the other.

From Mill's view presented, there is no basis for gender inequality.

## **Possible Causes of Gender Inequality**

### ***Cultural Tradition and Sexism***

Africans have a lot of attachment to their cultural heritage and traditions. This influences, to a large extent, the development of education in the continent. In many parts of Africa including Nigeria, the place of women and girls in the society is mainly traditional. In some cultures as found in the Northern parts of Nigeria, women are not supposed to be 'seen or heard'. They are better considered for household and domestic chores than sending them to school. This results to early/teenage marriage which consequently affects their status in later life.

### ***Parental Disposition***

The agrarian economy of many African societies results to very large households. In these communities, parents find it difficult to afford sending all their children to school. Investment in the education of the girl-child is considered to be an economic waste. This results to the consideration that parents may not be economically buoyant to afford the opportunity cost of educating the girl-child. In many of these households, it is the girl-child that does most of the chores. In the rural areas where basic infrastructure is lacking, girls and women walk long distances in search of water and firewood for use by the family. In addition, they take care of their siblings. They also support the family financially through petty trading, handcraft, farming, to mention a few. Parents believe that if they allow the girls to go to school, the financial waste and the family domestic burden will be much as the level of poverty is already high.

Apart from the above, some parents still view western education as having a negative influence on the upbringing of the girl-child. They believe that beyond the acquisition of literacy, their exposure is capable of making them rebellious, thus preventing them from getting married and becoming good wives and mothers which are considered as the most important roles for women in any community. With this kind of disposition, parents prefer not sending their daughters to any school in order not to expose them to the danger of not being married. Giving credence to this discuss, Uzoechi (2006) argues,

Where chastity is highly valued, parents may be reluctant to allow girls to travel long distances to school, be taught by male teachers and have close contact with boys. There is a lot of emphasis on marriage and sexuality of girls. In addition there is a perpetuation of social values which gives precedence to the male child.

### **Poverty**

There is hardly any discussion around the world on poverty, its effect, eradication and other related issues, without taking cognizance of the gender dimension. This results from the fact that women constitute a large proportion of the human population. Similarly, a large proportion of the poor is made up of women especially in the developing world. While writing on "Measurement Issues on Poverty", Englama and Bamidele (1997) gave a vivid generalization that poverty affects a disproportionate number of women due to their dual roles in the economy, working both inside and outside the home and child-bearing.

### **Areas of Gender Inequalities**

#### ***Gender Politics in Employment Opportunities***

In contemporary times, despite Nigeria's level of development, there is little change in gender division of labour because gender inequalities still-persist. This division provides a tool for economic and social suppression of women in Nigeria. It also constitutes an infringement on the rights of women to equal opportunities in the labour market. In spite of the argument that the Nigerian woman has ample opportunities to participate in economic, political and social activities of her society without much hindrance, women are still judged by their sex and physical features rather than their achievement, ability or skill with regard to employment in certain professions. Some employers of labour would prefer the male, whether the female is capable or even more qualified for the job or not. Some employers demand, as pre-requisite for employment of female employees, the signing of a bond. Such bonds forbid the female employee from marrying within a specific number of years. Some bonds state that even if such a female is

married, she should not contemplate having children within the specified period. This seemingly subtle gender politics in the labour market is quietly becoming widespread in Nigeria. Examples of professions that practice this type of gender discrimination include the banking sector, oil industries and the management sector. However, the argument of those who practice gender-labour discrimination is that the encumbrances placed on married women by their domestic duties will prevent them from effective performance which, of course, is not true.

### ***Religious Restrictions on Women***

Religion has been a major vehicle of gender ideologies that oppresses, deprives and subjugates women. Feminists are of the view that all major religious texts provide justifications for the oppression of women and the assertions of male superiority. An aspect of giving more dominance to one sex over another identified in Christendom is exemplified in the Holy Bible (King James Version) as contained in 1st Corinthians (14:34) which states:

Let your women keep silence in the Churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak: but they are commanded to be under obedience... And if they will learn anything, let them ask their husbands at home: for it is a shame for a woman to speak in the Church.

The Islamic tenants of the veiling of women (a form of seclusion and controlling of the potency of Muslim women in the society) provide another example of religious restriction on women. According to the Holy Quran (Sura, 24:31),

Say to the believing women to turn their eyes away and to preserve their chastity: to cover their adornments except such as are normally displayed; to draw their veils over their bosoms and not to reveal their finery except to their husbands... And let them not stamp their feet in walking so as not to reveal their hidden trinkets.

Going by this Islamic fundamental imperative on sexuality and gender, there seems to be a violation of sexual equality. It should be noted that Muslim women's existing identity is based on male dominance.

According to Mernissi (1983:19):

The desegregation of the sexes violates Islamic ideology on women's position in the social order that women should be under the authority of father, brothers, or husbands. Since women are considered by Allah to be destructive elements, they are to be spatially confined and excluded from matters other than those of the family. Female access to non-domestic space is put under the control of males.

In consideration of Mernissi's view, in both religions, women are not equal to men because each has particular features and characters, nature and constitution. Consequently, social authority and mobility are accorded to men while women are socially subjected and passively immobilized.

### *Cultural Inhibitions*

Cultural traditions and environmental factors prevalent in Africa continue to favour men to the detriment and subjugation of women. Since the position of culture in Africa, including Nigeria, is supreme and unquestionable, it implies that the cultural roles and functions assigned to girls and women remain unquestionable. Consequently, this variation in the roles and functions assigned to both males and females naturally leads to and promotes gender inequality. Noticeable areas of gender inequality under cultural inhibitions include obnoxious norms and traditions prevailing in some communities such as polygamy, son preference, economic dependence, oppressive patriarchal family structure, confinement, property rights, widowhood rights and compulsory clitoridectomy, among others.

### **Gender Equity: The Way Forward**

It is obvious that there is an urgent need for a humanistic management of gender inequality, if there is to be a meaningful and sustainable development in Nigeria. This is to be done through neither de-emphasizing the contributions of women to national development nor in denying them opportunities for self-realization that the nation will develop. Saadawl (in Ntekim-Rex, 2001:432) states:

It is no longer possible to escape the fact that the under-privilege status of women, their relative backwardness, leads to an essential backwardness in society as a whole. There is a need for everybody to pursue and ensure total integration of women into all aspects of national development.

To move Nigeria into the fast lane of development and to gain recognition among the committee of nations, the development of the womenfolk alongside the men should be encouraged. To achieve this goal implies the following:

- (i) The elimination of the obnoxious traditional customs and practices that violate female rights and limit their freedom;
- (ii) Equal educational opportunities must be given to the boy and the girl-child without any discrimination;
- (iii) Inculcation of independent creative mental/psychological and physical disposition into the girl-child right from infancy;
- (iv) Organizing gender sensitivity training and education for men;
- (v) The creation and implementation of women empowerment programmes that will help to alleviate their poverty status and dependence on their husbands;
- (vi) Creation of positive female characters in our literatures especially by male writers.

To correct, encourage and create awareness of this contributory participation towards sustainable development, it is recommended that literary exposition approach be used as a medium of arousing interest and educating those that hold contrary views. The purpose here is to enable the readers of texts gain the needed new knowledge, sensitivity and insight that make for a better awareness which are imperative for change.

The African literary scene has long been dominated by male writers, whose works have, in most cases, presented women in a negative light, resulting to a charge of male chauvinism. The women who are presented in these works do not actively contribute to the social and economic life of their communities because of the diverse inhibitions placed on them. For example, the earlier writers such as Chinua Achebe in *Things Fall Apart*, Cyprain Ekwensi's *Jagua Nana's Daughter* and Elechi Amadi's *The Concubine*, among others, portrayed female characters as pawns in the games played by men. It is against this unholy portraiture of female characters that the feminist writers in the likes of Buchi

Emecheta, Flora Nwapa, Mariam Ba, and Zaynab Akali, among others, are trying to correct. A survey of most works of these female writers showed that their themes focused on their peculiar problems which Acholonu (2002:136) identifies to be,

Polygamy, the highly idealized status of wifhood and motherhood, the terrorizing impact of childlessness, wife battering and abandonment, the stigmatized status of spinsterhood, abuse of the girl child, son preference and the degraded status of single parenthood on the part of women.

In the light of the above, randomly selected texts written by females will be analyzed to confirm the vehemence, opposition and resistance that trail the path of female writers in Africa and Nigeria in particular.

In *The Joys of Motherhood*, Emecheta (1980) posits that the status of women in the African Community is determined by the number and sex of her children. A childless woman or a woman who has no male child is an embarrassment to her husband and to the family from where she comes. In addition, she is constantly and openly reminded of her 'uselessness' regardless of the pain and mental torture she goes through everyday of her life. Child-bearing is therefore the greatest test for a married woman. Her entire life and happiness depend on this. This is the case of Nnu-Ego in *the Joys of Motherhood*. Unable to bear children in her union with Amatokwu, she is cast out of her husband's affection, moved to a nearby hut reserved for older wives and put to work in the farm for *if you can't produce sons, at least you can help to harvest yams*. Emecheta's message from this novel is that childlessness or sex of children should not ruin a marriage. She therefore bemoans the ruthlessness of the traditional system in which a woman exists only to give pleasure to the man, bears his children, washes his clothes and eventually receives his punches. Catherine (1988:64) laments that "this state of affairs eventually corrodes the woman's ego, depriving her of every human dignity and reduces her to a state of utter hopelessness."

In her treatment of characters, Emecheta (1980) presents her characters in such a way that there is a strong delineation between male and female characters. The women excel in their roles. They are forceful and articulate, industrious and intelligent thinking beings whom the reader is brought to recognize and appreciate as individuals.

Nwapa's (1978) preoccupation in *Efuru* is to expose the woman's situation within traditional and contemporary societies, especially her role as wife and mother. She focuses on the importance attached to having children and thereby

stresses the unenviable lot of barren women within the community. She examines the issue of childlessness in marriage with its attendant problems and the necessity for economic independence through determination and hard work, a sine qua non for self fulfillment and freedom of action for women.

In terms of characterization, Nwapa's women tower over men in mental and material achievements. In *Efuru*, *Idu* and others, women constitute the central characters. The message which the author is passing across is that motherhood is not the only path to happiness and contentment. A woman can lead a life of fulfillment through selfless service to others. She also stresses the fact that the society must change its attitude towards the woman, marriage and motherhood. In all, Nwapa's *Efuru* underscores a fundamental necessity for the mental and material liberation of women from male domination.

In Ba's (1980) *So Long a Letter*, one finds the idea of women's liberation in the character of Aissatou who abandoned her husband. She totally rejected a relationship where she would share her husband. She therefore left her husband, improved her education and got a lucrative Foreign Service job. This is an ideal feminist ideology which the women are fighting for. However, it is contrast to Ramatoulaye who refused to abandon her home but was abandoned by her husband.

*The Stillborn* by Akali (1984) is a response to the falseness of the myth of womanhood and the religious decapacitation of women, especially under Islamic religion. Thus the author reflects the various modes of oppression of women and seeks to correct some of them. In spite of the obvious obstacles of socio-religious nature, the heroine, Li seeks freedom through the acquisition of formal education. Education is the beacon of light offered

differences have contributed immensely to the treatment women receive in a patriarchal society such as Nigeria, without accepting the fact that inequality of sexes is neither biological given nor a divine mandate, but a cultural construct. Religion, cultural inhibitions and environmental factors have been identified to provoke the subjugation of women in African society. In addition, it proffers solutions to minimize or ensure the eradication of the factors that cause inequality.

Through some randomly selected textual analysis, it becomes clear that where there is no understanding, there is darkness. This is so, even when light is all around. Although there is, in Nigeria, the plentitude of creative works in her literature, shedding light in the county's circumstances of immobility or even morbidity, darkness still prevails because the understanding of language and literature which would have moved the country forward is yet to be sought. There is a blatant refusal to learn from language and literature. However, if one rethinks, corrects and purges one of her pride, cultural dogmatism and errors, one shall be

moved forward by all the languages and literatures at one's disposal. In all, the emphasis presented by the author to the women folk.

In the text, one finds the heroine moving out of seclusion and marital subjugation into enlightenment and personal achievement. These achievements are possible, in spite of the binary opposition to the religious and cultural institutions. In all, one finds in *The Stillborn* that the heroine, Li, became the 'man' in the house. This is an indication that given the chance, women can make contributions to sustainable national development in Nigeria.

### Conclusion

Discussion on gender equity has become acceptable topical issue globally, despite the oppositions it has to contend with. This paper recognizes the biological differences existing between the male and female. However, this is to create amicable relationship and an awareness of understanding between men and women in order to build a better society where societal justice and mutual respect are entrenched for participatory sustainable development in Nigeria.

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