

Reimagining Gender Equation for National Development in Contemporary Nigeria

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Abstract

Gender discourse in Nigeria continues to command attention as there is a sustained scepticism on whether enough efforts are being put towards achieving genuine gender equity and equality. More so events in recent and not so recent times raise bold question marks on the feasibility of gender equity in the socio-economic cum political makeup of Nigeria as a nation. This foregrounds the argument of this article that the patriarchal sentiments that broach prejudice and marginalization of women and other types of men, are perpetrated in both private and public spaces in Nigeria. The study contends that such attitudes result in socio-cultural and political conditioning which hinders the pace of national development. The study adopts the qualitative and critique approach in its analysis; and concludes that empathy is the keyword towards achieving genuine gender equity and equality. It suggests that gender equality can only be achieved through honest and genuine scrutiny of development processes. It submits that more efforts should be put in place to formulate and implement policies that are inclusive for all genders within the Nigerian social space.

Keywords: Gender equity, Gender equality, Patriarchy, National development, Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

A patriarchal environment is toxic to the total existence and development of the woman and those considered as other kinds of men (www.thebrighterside.news), because patriarchy allows unnecessary prejudice and victimization against them in both private and public spaces. Consequences of such prejudice may give rise to extreme situations as in the case of the Umuja village in Kenya, where women banish men in order to feel safe (www.guardian.com). Another instance is the #NigerianWomenOccupyNASS gathering of female groups in Abuja on 2nd March, 2022, to protest the male-dominated legislature voting down all bills on representation for women. The effect of patriarchal sentiments is observed as pervasive in all facets of the Nigerian society, thereby highlighting inequality among and within genders. Though the nascent Nigerian democracy officially aligns with the promises African leaders made to establish gender equality;

being the fifth among the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). However, a systemic oppression and alienation of the female gender still exists in the nation's socio-political spheres. It has been posited that "the perception of gender is subject to the meanings ascribed by family, government, economy, education and religion" (Tume, 18166). The theory of hegemonic masculinity has to do with practices that give prominence to "men's superior image and stance in the social order" (Jewkes et al, s122). It justifies the subordination of women and those male population that differ from the norm. It also sheds light on "how gender power operates at multiple levels; providing an overarching framework for understanding how gender inequalities are produced and reproduced, both in "the long term and the quotidian" (s122). One of the elements employed by hegemonic masculinity is heterosexuality, which makes it not only a problem for women alone but also for men who do not fit into the socially-constructed image of men. This is because in the construction of the 'ideal man' that takes the headship position, there is no space for other kinds of men. Therefore those who do not conform to the dominant image of the ideal man, are typically subordinated and socially marginalized, sometimes worse than women. It is interesting to note that these kinds of men are often referred to as being 'like women'.

This perspective is succinctly expressed in Trysh Travis' study of self-identified porn addicts (men) who fail to meet expectation of hegemonic masculinity and characteristics associated with idealized manhood. In his words, "identifying as an addict means an individual admits weakness and a lack of control, characteristics associated with femininity or subordinate form of masculinity (276). Besides, the marginalization of those that move away from 'the normal' gender stereotype creates another crises ranging from social conflicts, bullying, mugging to outright killing of those who run counter to what is considered the norm in sexual orientation. Resultantly, all gender forms and sexualities that are 'not normal' are subordinated. The Nigerian 2013 Anti-Gay Law and the recent Ghanaian Family Values Bill are cases in point. That these laws fuel public assault and jungle justice on the LGBTQ community in these countries is a contemporary pointer to the fact they constitute a bane to human, material, and societal development, as well as hamper social equality.

Against the foregoing background, this article takes another look into gender processes in the 21st century Nigeria. On the one hand, it scrutinizes the status quo as far as gender equity and equality is concerned, and on the other hand highlights the portrayal of the modern Nigerian woman as an enigma despite her socio-political realities. The article explores the emergence of the Nigerian

woman from the socio-cultural cum political rigmarole between the colonialists' way of life and existing ethos and ideologies of the colonized units that were later merged into today's Nigeria. The primary aim of the article is to channel a discourse on the need to create a fairer and more inclusive society. It creates awareness on how behavioural archetypes of dominance and power create inequalities among genders in the society. It links the current sociopolitical structures in Nigeria to colonial and postcolonial legacies which have been normalized, and establishes the need to extricate the historical legacy of women from the patriarchal analysis of the Nigerian life, with a view to engender a reorientation in shaping gender issues.

THE FIGURATIVE SPACE OF THE WOMAN IN NIGERIA: THEN AND NOW

The three foremost religions practised in Nigeria variously describe the woman as an appendage, complement, or helper to the man. The subtle or dominant entrenchment of the attendant patriarchal principles and doctrines shift the woman down the ladder in the hierarchical organization of the society. This patriarchal undertone influences contemporary attitudes despite the efforts of opinion leaders, women advocates, and activists to foster female inclusion in governance and matters connected to it. It promotes misogyny and mounts pressure on the other kinds of men. Generally, the notion of man being the head of family arrogates power to some men who may not be psychologically or emotionally mature to handle the responsibilities that such power attracts. The notion also discountenances the stark socio- realities of the 21st century where women have had to abandon their traditional roles as children-raisers and home-keepers, to join the workforce and politics, thereby becoming equal providers in the home. It also refuses to pay cognizance to cases where a woman may be the breadwinner of a home. Eventually the imbalance culminates into abuse of power which may lead to fatality for women and even men in some circumstances. This tends to put women in a permanent state of isolated subservience, dependence, and estrangement. Though it could go either way, experiences and facts establish that abuse stemming from cases like the aforementioned affect more women than men.

The 2019/2020 Nigerian Living Standards Survey (NLSS) released by the National Bureau of Statistics reveals that 82.9 million (40.1%) of Nigerians are poor. Sociological analysis of this statistics provided by Tade (35) also establishes that, Nigerian women are the most impacted by poverty and inequality, even in the postcolonial times. These reports substantiate Michalopoulos'

assertion that “poverty has a woman’s face” (130). Similarly, the various cultures of Nigeria are replete with proverbs and sayings that diminish women. In the Southwestern part of Nigeria for instance, there is a saying that “k’obirin t’atorin, k’okunrin t’atorin, ka wo eni to maa lomi leyin ese ju ara won”. This is translated to mean that if women and men should engage in a contest of urinating while walking, one of them must end up with messier feet. Of course, the biological position of the man’s genitals will ensure that his feet do not get messy while urinating and walking. Hence, the ability of a man to neatly ‘urinate while walking’ is purely a biological issue which has no bearing on the man’s superiority or capacity for leadership. However, the proverb is usually used to reference women as being inferior to men. Another Yoruba proverb which says: “ile t’obirin tin se atoto arere, igi arere ni nhu nibe”, is translated to mean “any family that permits a woman to be vocal will experience the abnormal growth of the Arere tree inside the family house”. The proverb literally advocates the gagging of women within the family space. Likewise in the Hausa culture of Northern Nigeria, there are female-disparaging proverbs such as: “babban abun shi ne mace ta riga mi ji nta bawali”, translated to mean “it is an ominous thing for a wife to urinate before her husband”. This indicates that a wife shouldn’t aspire to be more successful than her husband. Also “Ba a yi komai ba, mace ta haifi mace”, is translated as: “the birth of a female child is insignificant”. This proverb literally means that the girl-child is of no value. The Igbo culture also has its share of women-belittling proverbs, some of which are: “umu nwanyi bu oriaku, nwoke bu okpa-aku”, meaning “women are consumers of wealth while men are producers of wealth”. The proverb implies that women do not have it in them to be industrious or successful. Just like the proverb “ajo nwa naaza aha nne ya”, which is translated as “a bad child answers his or her mother’s name”, places the burden of raising a child solely on the woman. The denigration of women as evident in these gendered proverbs, are pointers to the perception of woman in traditional Nigerian spaces.

More often than not, male characteristics and attributes tend to be taken as the norm while women are considered as a variation of that norm. In the Nigerian social space, there are rampant situations where badly-behaved, sluggish or talkative men are referred to as being woman-like. Men who are empathetic towards women are tagged “woman-wrapper”; “mumu”; or “vegetable-eater”. Similarly, effeminate men are deemed abhorrent. The Yoruba derivative of “*obinrin bi okunrin*” arises as a variation of the norm, to describe any woman that is believed to have surpassed what a

socially constructed ‘woman’ would do. In the same vein, “*obinrin a t’eyin to*”; “*obinrin lasanlasan*” are derogatory phrases to deflate the confidence of a daring woman. Even now, when someone’s speech is considered “woman’s talk”, it connotes that such a speech has little or no significance. This differentiation portrays women as inferior beings that must be made to adhere to certain socio-culturally and politically prescribed norms. In most cases, motherhood is considered women’s most significant duty and contribution to the society. Regardless of her educational and economic achievements, a woman’s value is attached to her marital and motherhood status. This further contributes to women’s oppression and subjugation.

From both the cultural and religious viewpoints, man is considered as the head and leader, while the woman is characterized as an afterthought who was reportedly created for the man’s pleasure. Going by this social construct, only the man’s voice should be heard, while the woman is the weaker sex who should only be seen and enjoyed. Yet the woman is apportioned the higher burden in responsibility of upholding her marriage; whether the husband and supposed head is capable or not, because the society believes that ‘it is the woman who builds a home’. Thus, she is the one who must remain a virgin until her wedding night, else she and her family will be ridiculed. In cases of suspected infidelity, it does not matter if the husband is a ‘community penis’ who pokes every hole, it is the woman who is laced with ‘*magun*’, a Yoruba traditional curse or hex meant to bring death to her adulterous partner. The sad irony is that, if the woman is faithful, it then means that nobody will sleep with her to take off the spell, and she will die as a result. The woman is often blamed for either wandering or indecent dressing when raped; and is said to be performing her wifely duties when she is a victim of spousal rape. Most times, she sacrifices her own dreams and aspirations in order to take care of her husband and children. She must prioritise the needs of her family even at her own detriment. The woman is also not exempted from harmful cultural practices such as female genital mutilation, early marriage, forced marriage, and intimate partner violence. These negative practices lower the quality of the woman’s life. Unfortunately for women under patriarchal tethers, any attempt to leave such confinement for personal development is usually foiled by her husband, family, and society. She is seen as defying the natural order and social constructs, and therefore, risks social exclusion and communal excommunication.

According to history, powerful women in Nigerian traditional societies grappled with considerable opposition. Efunsetan Aniwura (c. 1820s – June 30, 1874) who was one of the most powerful and wealthiest Yoruba women of the 19th century is said to have lived ahead time due to her overwhelming accomplishments in that era. Holding the revered title of the Iyalode of Ibadan, Efunsetan dared to run where only men walked. She eventually met her demise due to conspiracies arising from the disgruntlement of the male gatekeepers of that society. Adeeko in his analysis of her character in the play *Efunsetan Aniwura* by Akinwumi Ishola, sheds more light on this menace of objectification and subjugation by declaring that:

Troubling translation of traditions that skew perception against women who would not ordinarily be in the class of bad humans...overall, the play's gendering of interactions in a manner skewed against women suggests that the presentation depicts events as they were in the mid-nineteenth century, when it is probably just overlaying 20th century relations on the little known about times past (53).

New information about her life and times imply that *Efunsetan Aniwura* of Ibadan must have been defamed and humiliated because she became more powerful than what the Ibadan ruling class of that period was comfortable with or than “what a woman was supposed to be” (Ogunleye, 78). The same applies to Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, whose activism to rescue the Egba market women made the paramount ruler – Alake of Egba abdicate his throne in 1949. In the 2024 biopic titled *Funmilayo Ransome Kuti* produced by Bolanle Austen-Peters, it was enacted how she bravely stood up for the voiceless in her community. However, it is believed by the general public that she was silenced by ‘unknown soldiers’ for being too much for a woman. Still on female icons in Nigeria, Michael Janis agrees that Queen Amina of Zazzau in today’s Zaria of Kaduna state was a warrior queen who led and won many wars in the 16th century, but was later vilified for rebelling “against the corruption of her class and the oppression of her gender” (322). Nwanyeruwa is prominent for the role she played in the popular Aba Women’s Riot of 1929 (Korieh 5). Nwanyeruwa is an Igbo woman whose courage and ingenuity made her organize and led over 10,000 women to protest the high-handedness of the warrant chiefs who demanded tax from Igbo women. These iconic women of various Nigerian cultures fought valiantly against patriarchy.

GENDERING AND NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

The status of a country's development is mostly measured in economic terms such as job creation, inflation control, and high employment status. All of these are targeted towards the improvement of the country's 'economic wellbeing', which subsequently translates to an upgrade of the quality of life for the people (*unfpa.org*). A country's development is in direct proportion to the quality of life of its citizens. At the African Leaders Summit 2020 held in Abuja, Nigeria, African leaders resolved that by year 2063, African development would be people-driven. The resolution harped on the empowerment and development of the potentials of Africans, especially, the women and youths, and set a soft target for the year 2030. We are now in the year 2025, and substantial progress in this direction is yet to be seen. In Nigeria specifically, there is a high rate of inflation and unemployment. It seems the nation is currently in a far worse condition than when those resolutions were reached. The situation is the same concerning women matters, as child marriage is still the norm, female genital mutilation is still the norm in some communities, rape and murder of women has escalated, and incestuous and pedophilic acts are still occurring at an alarming rate. The measures put in place to curb these anomalies have not produced significance results.

At the 2019 World Leaders Summit, the delegates unanimously agreed that gender inequality has impacted the Millennium Development Goals negatively. Consequently, female empowerment through education was prioritised at the 2024 edition of the African Leaders Summit held in Nairobi, Kenya. This is an indicator that an equity-based gender approach is crucial to holistic national development. This approach will foreground a better quality of life for all the citizens, and also help them to reach their full potentials. Though women now make up to 41% of paid workers outside of agriculture compared to 35% in 1990, there are still gross inequalities in access to paid employment in some regions ([Goal 5: Gender equality | Joint SDG Fund](#)). The *World Poverty Clock 2023* has also observed that "Nigeria has the awful distinction of being the world capital of poverty, with 71 million people living in extreme poverty" (*punchng.com*). This also shows that gender equality is concerned not only with how to harness the needs, concerns, and responsibilities of women and men, but also with engendering their interactions and relationships. Therefore, women empowerment and gender equality is crucial to enhancing sustainable development.

In the current dispensation in Nigeria, issues bordering on gender equality and equity are still very fraught. While acknowledging the sparse efforts towards the inclusion of women in national political affairs, there still exists a yawning gap of women participation in national policy

formulation and implementation, and this automatically means patriarchal domination to the detriment of women. Despite constituting more than half of the Nigerian electorate, “women are still underrepresented in politics”, and this demonstrates a heavy presence of active patriarchal gender constructs (Bako, 114). Male politicians merely pay lip service to the support of women, but fail to stand up for them where and when it matters. For instance, Patricia Etteh, the first female Speaker of the Nigerian House of Representative, was unceremoniously shoved out of office amidst allegations of financial misappropriation, even though she alleged victimization. When her successor, Dimeji Bankole; a male, faced the same charges, the case was systematically dragged so he could remain in office till he was voted out of his second term bid.

There is also the case of Dino Melaye and Remi Tinubu’s faceoff in the senate. In Dino Melaye’s diatribe against Remi Tinubu he said: “Look, this is not Bourdillon; I will beat you up, impregnate you and nothing will happen!”(*Premiumtimesng.com*). The statement is not only an affront against her personality, but also an attack on her gender. If a highly placed Senator of the Federal Republic of Nigeria could be so attacked, one can then imagine the plight and struggles of the average grassroots woman at the hands of men. Senator Elisha Abbo’s open battery and assault of Osimibibra Warmate in a sex toy shop at Abuja is a case in point (*allafrica.com*). Interestingly, like Melaye asserts, nothing usually happens; none of the so-called ‘supporters of women’ dared to speak against the open harassment of the female Member of Parliament in the first case. Senator Abbo on his part was fined fifty million naira because Warmate initiated a civil claim for damages at the Abuja High court. This happened after the case was initially dismissed by the Magistrate of Zuba Magistrate court, on the grounds that the police failed to prove that the lawmaker assaulted Warmate, despite the viral video of the assault and Abbo’s open apology. Abbo in turn filed an appeal against what he called “simple assault and not torture or inhuman treatment” (*www.thecable.ng*>).

Sidelines, the editorial page of the *Nigerian Tribune* decries this systemic attempt at suppressing the woman by commenting that, “...indeed Warmate must thank her stars and the documentary evidence she produced, as there are hundreds of cases of such abuse of power (and assault) that have become unwinnable!!!” (40) Yet it is still not certain whether or not Abbo would get away with this ‘simple assault’. Needless to say the efforts of activists and human rights organizations that pave way for sanctions of offenders in the various categorization of gendering has been significantly left to the unserious, pretentious whim and caprices of politics, where offenders are

either left to get away with impunity or punished in a ridiculous manner that is not commensurate with the offence committed. Kudos must be given to the non-governmental organizations that have taken up the fight on behalf of the girl-child and woman; and are not daunted by the various challenges of putting up with uncooperative and insensitive systems that would rather gag than help them.

The men referenced in the mentioned cases were voted into power by people who believed they could make the country better by passing laws for a saner and more equitable environment. However, with the public display of their oppressive stances and myopic mindsets, the future looks bleak indeed. Under the administration of former President Muhammadu Buhari, women denigration increased especially after the ‘za oza room’ saga. During an interview with the Channels Television in 2017, President Buhari was asked a question concerning his wife and his response was “I don’t know which party my wife belongs to, but she belongs to my kitchen and my living room, and the other room”. He implied that women were primarily created for cooking and sexual pleasure, hence, they have no place in governmental decision making. Due to his Fulani accent, Buhari’s “the other room” sounded as “za oza room”, thereafter the phrase was comically popularized and used to shut women up in public and power spaces. *Herald.ng* also borrowed the phrase to headline an article which addressed the insensitivity of the Buhari administration to the concerns of women thus:

Aside scrapping the recruitment of women into the Nigerian Army as combatant cadets, he reportedly intended to stop women from aspiring to senior positions in the Army because of the alleged ‘Northern Hegemony’ that is not predisposed to soldiers taking marching orders from women...
(*herald.ng/buhari-has-moved-women-to-za-oza-room*)

Though “human rights treaties impose legal obligations on Nigeria to prohibit discrimination and ensure equal protection of the law”, there are several reports of diverse acts of jungle justice being carried out on effeminate men. (hrw.org/report/2016). Such men are discriminated against, stigmatized, and lynched simply for not fitting into the socially-constructed identity of a ‘real man’. The above inferences are drawn to emphasize that the Nigerian space is hostile to women

and other kinds of men. It cannot be overstated that gender equality is vital to the realization of human rights and sustainable development.

CONCLUSION

“We are now an estimated 257 years away from achieving economic gender equality; and if we are truly committed to the fact that gender equity and equality is the key to global developmental success – and we should, because the data overwhelmingly supports this conclusion - then now is our time to step up and establish a new, more inclusive world order.” – Katica Roy (www.weforum.org)

The above statement made by Katica Roy in 2020 suggests that by making genuine and deliberate commitment towards stimulating inclusion, development can be achieved. In this part of the world, gender segregation is so structural and engrained that it cannot be undone overnight. To be candid, no country in the entire world has achieved gender equality, but some judiciously work at it more than others. Gender equity and equality in Nigeria should advance from being mere white elephant projects to viable and implementable policies. Deploying a human-focused approach to development processes is a sure guarantee of development. Though complex, the nexus between gender dynamics, collective consciousness, and individual orientation should be explored to facilitate a fairer Nigerian society.

The submission of this paper is that empathy is key to create and nurture an environment that allows all genders to thrive. The entrenched social norms of masculinity versus femininity can be reconstructed for positive change. So long as they do not engage in criminal activities, the other kinds of men should be acknowledged as valid members of the society. Intra-gender wars particularly among women should also be addressed with the seriousness it requires, because “the change that women crave begins from the individual unconscious, finding its way to the conscious and then transmogrifying to the realistic society” (Olokodana, 76). Adherence to the aforementioned would consequently influence every strata of the social life and permeate the totality of the existence of the Nigerian people.

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