

GENDER INEQUALITY AND HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT: A NIGERIAN PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

The literature suggests that gender inequality in the work-place stems from gendered stratifications in the larger society, and that it is comparable with race- and class-based inequality. Specifically, the gender inequality discourse revolves around the assertion that biological differences between the two sexes have been transformed into male advantages versus female disadvantages. This paper is a library research with the objectives of exploring theories of gender inequality, and examining women's unequal treatment in paid employment through the lens of the human resource management function. On the overall, research evidence indicates that manifestations of gender inequality in employment situations vary over time and space, and that egalitarian relations between the sexes will eventually emerge but slowly. Female workers however must be ready to kick-start the change process by seeking relevant training and re-training, among other measures that will assure their relevance in the workplace. Organisations as well as governments on their part must put supportive measures in place to aid women workers in effectively managing work and family demands. Such measures should be informed by a new appreciation that child bearing and rearing which hitherto curtail women's participation in paid work, are actually civic responsibilities for society at large.

KEYWORDS: Gender inequality, paid work, human resource management, gendered job stratification, statistical discrimination, institutionalised child-care

INTRODUCTION

In every-day conversation and in the literal sense, sex and gender synonymously refer to the state of being male or female. In sociological studies, however, the two concepts are very different: while sex refers to the biological characteristics that distinguish humans into males and females; gender is an achieved status that refers to the social stratification of humans into masculine and feminine categories, as well as the social positions and personality traits that are linked to masculinity and femininity in particular social contexts. Feminine traits include being emotional and dependent, while masculine traits include assertiveness and ambition (Macionis, 2002).

Gender inequality, also referred to as

gender discrimination, differentiation or stratification, pertains to the contention that biological differences between the two sexes have been exaggerated and used to justify unfair treatments of the female sex. This value-laden issue has been examined from different perspectives. Some authors, writing under themes of sexism, patriarchy, and androcentrism examine the inequality and unfairness women encounter in a male-centred world (McDowell and Sharp, 1999). Other authors point out the inequality inherent in the class-less and unpaid status of home making -a job that is associated with women-, which contrasts sharply with paid employment with all its benefits, which seem to have been drawn up with men in mind (Sapiro, 1994). Gender discrimination has also been

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examined from the perspective of international development, specifically, the tendency for development policies to be under-girded by the assumption that male-headed households are the norm; resulting in the exclusion of female-headed households from institutional assistance (Lindsey and Beach, 2000). Within the field of management theorising itself, it has been noted that organisational issues are treated largely from the perspective of men (Saror and Nwasike, 1991).

Our focus in this paper- a library research- is on gender inequality in paid work, a phenomenon that stems from the stratification of work into 'female' and 'male' jobs with superior benefits attending 'male' jobs. Work stratification in turn derives from cultural definitions of masculinity and femininity, which are then applied in segregating jobs, statuses, and rewards for men and women. The gender discourse contends that women tend to be placed in inferior categories in all such stratifications. In this paper, therefore, we examine the origin of gender inequality and women's experiences of this phenomenon in formal work using the framework of human resource management (HRM). Nigerian examples will be cited where these are available. We hope that the paper contributes constructively toward equitable integration of women in Nigerian work-places.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Nature of Gender Inequality

Super-imposition of inequality on biological difference: The study of gender emerged as one of the most important trends in the 20th century. At the heart of the gender discourse is the contention that biological differences have been exaggerated and used to justify unfair treatments of the female sex. In this vein, women are consistently placed at inferior ends of virtually every dichotomous ranking in society. Women then confront problems of statistical discrimination whereby they are treated on the basis of stereotypical ideas about the nature of feminine traits as compared to masculine traits; and consequently, of the capabilities and worth of the female gender, instead of objective evaluations of individual competences (Sharma, 1997; Berry, 1998).

It is not as though there are no differences between the sexes. Indeed, it is well established that the two sexes differ in physical ability such that on average, males are 10% taller, 20% heavier and 30% stronger; and in adolescence, males show greater mathematical

ability while females excel in verbal skills. What is being criticised is the over-emphasis on biological differences that then transforms into male advantages and female disadvantages; more so since research has not pointed to overall differences in intelligence between males and females (Macionis, 2002; Wellcome Trust, 2006).

Gender is socially constructed: Gender inequality has also been criticised on the premise that gender is socially constructed, rather than being determined by biology. This opinion stems from observations that while the biological factors which make one sex visibly different from the other are the same universally, gender qualities of masculinity and femininity vary among societies and do not exclusively apply to one or the other sex (Nanda, 1991; Wellcome Trust, 2006).

Margaret Mead's (1963) study on reversal of masculine and feminine roles (as defined in Western societies) among three tribes in New Guinea- the Arapesh, Mundugumor and Tchumbuli, is a seminal contribution to this hypothesis that gender definitions are cultural conventions (Nanda, 1991). Reversal of gender roles has also been observed in Kibbutzim settlements in Israel, and among the Hijras of India (Lindsey et al., 2000; Macionis, 2002). It has been reported that in ancient Greece, while the Spartans extolled sexual equality and their laws regarded child bearing by women as equivalent to military service by men, Athenians however practised infanticide against females (Fehr, 2003). In the section that follows, theories that explain origin of gender stratification and mechanisms that perpetuate the practice are explored.

Theories of gender stratification

Two sets of theories on gender stratification can be identified in the sociological literature. One set explains the genesis of this phenomenon, while the other explains the mechanisms through which individuals acquire the beliefs and behavioural patterns that perpetuate it (Sapiro, 1994). These theories imply, either that gender inequality is functional and should continue, or that it is dysfunctional and should be discontinued. This section explores the tenets of the major gender stratification theories.

Origin of gendered stratification of society:

Several theories have been conceptualised to explain the genesis of gender stratification in society. To start with, *static theories* which are anchored in theology or biology see the structure

of gender relations as inevitable and unchangeable. Within the Judeo-Christian theology for example, the stories of creation and expulsion from the Garden of Eden are generally understood as a God-sanctioned moral basis for women's submission to men. A critique of static theories has however been put forward in *progress theories* which posit that modernisation and on-going learning ought to change social life for the better, and that autocratic and patriarchal power relations between the sexes are as unjust as those between monarch and subject (Sapiro, 1994; Fehr, 2003).

Economic theories, also referred to as materialist or conflict theories posit that economic needs and structures are the main determinants of other aspects of social life. Early proponents of this view are Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. Marx had argued that the history of the world is the history of class struggle wherein those who control means of production also control the products and labour of those who make them. In Marx's opinion then, the condition of women like other social inequalities has its origin in the class system (Sapiro, 1994).

The economic perspective is supported by evidence that suggests that industrial progress always results in changes in the divisions of labour between women and men, wherein jobs which initially were classified as male jobs would be left to women, while men would move to newly re-designed better paying and skill-intensive jobs in the same occupations. This scenario has been witnessed in the feminisation of clerical work, teaching, tailoring (garment making), among others (Fehr, 2003; Vance, 2003).

Functionalist evolutionary theories are comparable to economic theories in justifying existing divisions of labour between the sexes as being essential for the development of efficient social structures (Sapiro, 1994). A counter-argument to functionalist theories however posits that the division of labour between the sexes is not an inevitable result of women's child-bearing roles; and that cultural norms with respect to child bearing and home-keeping may be arranged to conform with women's productive work, instead of being the other way round (Nanda, 1991).

The feminist sociological theory argues that privileges given to certain groups in society tend to become institutionalised in such a way that they become accepted as legitimate by the privileged who would not readily surrender them. Further, the resultant inequality can only be challenged when the oppressed group gains

necessary resources to do so (Lindsey et al., 2000). This perspective implies then, that women must first acquire certain resources, for instance, higher levels of education, if they must enjoy same benefits as men. Social closure theory posits that a status group creates and preserves its identity and advantages by reserving certain opportunities for its members using exclusionary and discriminatory practices. The theory further posits that because women pose a threat to men's privileges, men tend to emphasise women's presumed incapability for doing male-associated jobs, and that this concern on the part of men is the cause of gendered stereotypes concerning the work capabilities of each gender (Tallichet, 1995).

Sex war theories build on the work of Sigmund Freud to explain the long-standing striving between the two sexes which has translated to the subordination of women in social life. Freud had argued that the chief trauma of a girl's life is the discovery that she lacks the male phallus, which to her is the symbol of male power. Other psychoanalysts however insist that 'womb envy'- men's resentment of the fact that women's role in procreation is more conspicuous than theirs-, is the root of the sex war (Sapiro, 1994).

Mechanisms that perpetuate gender stratification: Several theories seek to explain the mechanisms that perpetuate till the present period, the beliefs and behavioural patterns that symbolise the gendered stratification of the human society. Genetic theory of sex employs the genetic structures- the brain and hormonal system in explaining why males become 'masculine' and females become 'feminine'. *Psychoanalytic theory*, attributed to Sigmund Freud, sees the development of gender and sexuality as a conflictive process involving psychological adaptation to the demands placed on the psyche by both biology and the environment. According to Freud, much of the work of becoming male or female is accomplished by controlling our subconscious drives, expressing them only in culturally acceptable ways (Sapiro, 1994).

Social learning theory posits that people learn about gender through their experiences (rewards and punishment) and through socialisation (Sapiro, 1994). *Discrimination theory* asserts that individuals can be forced into gendered behaviour against their will, through exposure to acts in which people are singled out for special treatment, not on the basis of merit but on the basis of prejudice about the group to which those people belong. In this regard, the mass

media are regarded as a major culprit in the enduring portrayal of women in domestic and sexually erotic roles, which contrast with the consistent portrayal of men in professional roles (Lindsey et al., 2000; Fehr, 2003).

Victim blaming paradigm is the term we have given to the proposition that female workers themselves are partly to blame for the unequal treatment they receive in the workplace. According to this argument, women have been expecting men to transfer leadership to them in much the same way that a developing country might be waiting for developed economies to benevolently transfer technology to her. Proponents of this view insist that women must assume responsibility in pursuing their preferred work experience and affirming their worth in the work-place (Dantiye and Garba, 1991; Luthans, 1992). While in the preceding sections we examined the genesis and practice of gender inequality in the larger society, in the sections that follow manifestations of this phenomenon in formal work are analysed using the framework of the HRM function.

Gender and the human resource management function

Human resource management (HRM) is the contemporary designation for personnel management. This function is that part of the management process that deals with managing people at work, and it comprises five elements: recruiting and selecting people into jobs; administration of reward systems; employee training and development; employee retention through administration of work-place safety, health and welfare policies; and industrial relations (Cole, 1993; Bratton and Gold, 1999). The issue of gender-related discrimination is a thread that runs through all these elements of the HRM function (Berry, 1998), as is shown in this section.

Recruitment and selection: Recruitment and selection refer to activities performed by organisations in contacting potential appointees, and establishing whether it would be appropriate to appoint any of them (Bratton et al., 1999). One key aspect of unfair discrimination in recruitment is the practice whereby people are selected into jobs based on stereotypical designation of work into male and female jobs. Moreover, the jobs that tend to be designated for women entail the same kinds of tasks that women perform as wives and mothers at home, thereby replicating the status

hierarchy that exists between the two sexes in the larger society. The result is a long-standing pattern wherein women are concentrated in a predictable range of low-status, low-paying and low-skilled jobs involving cleaning, cooking, serving, nursing, sewing, teaching, child-care, clerical and sales work (Lindsey et al., 2000).

In the same vein, organisations are quite unwilling to recruit women into jobs that require travelling and frequent transfers. The usual explanation is that females lack the stamina required in such jobs; and that consideration for their families would force them to quit earlier than males in same jobs. Indeed, women have been known to intentionally omit feminine appellations from their curricula vitae in a bid to improve their chances at securing jobs (Sapiro, 1994). Visibly pregnant women are hardly successful at interviews (Jemerigbe, 1992; Johns, 1996).

In the Nigerian context, the 1991 census placed the country's potential labour force comprising persons in the age group 15 to 64 years at 46,091,452. The proportion of females was 23,675,975 or 51.4%. But of the actual employed labour force of 24,117,842, males constituted 62.6%, suggesting selective discrimination against women. Further, distribution of employed persons by occupation showed that males dominated every occupation except sales where 65.1% women against 34.9% men were employed (Yesufu, 2000). Women are similarly over-represented in the lower cadres of the Nigerian civil service, with about 55% of positions within salary grade levels 1 to 6 being occupied by women (Amali, 1991). In a recent newspaper advert for recruitment into a government agency, job seekers were advised that "a female applicant on first appointment shall be unmarried for an initial period of two years..., after which she could apply in writing to get married" (The Punch, 2006: 21). Men were not similarly restrained.

Explaining gendered stratification of jobs:

Gendered stratification of jobs has been partly attributed to the fact that when women first began to enter paid employment, they had few marketable skills other than home-making skills (Sapiro, 1994; Johns 1996); a situation which in turn has been traced to deliberate exclusion of women from education from the 15th century up to the early part of the 20th century (Fehr, 2003). Additional blame has been laid on limitations of personnel assessment techniques, which compel assessors to resort to gender-related cues in assessment situations (Berry, 1998).

The observed lop-sided representation of women in the Nigerian work context has similarly been attributed to lack of access to education, as well as earlier perceptions of gender roles which promoted nursing and teaching as appropriate professions for the few women who could afford to go to school. These limitations virtually excluded women from the higher echelons of the public service and foreign companies until the 1970s onward (Forrest, 1994).

Reward systems: Rewards refer to financial benefits employees receive as part of an employment relationship (Bratton et al., 1999). Studies have shown that employers are more likely to reward men with families with higher pay than women with families, probably because women's earnings are perceived as supplementing those of their husbands- the stereotypical primary bread winner (Sapiro, 1994; Entifi, 2009). Even where both male and female job occupants possess similar education and experience, women earn less than men across all occupations. Further, the few males in female-dominated occupations enjoy more advantages than the women in these jobs- a phenomenon referred to as 'the glass escalator effect' (Lindsey et al., 2000).

Explaining gendered pay discrimination: This issue of gender-based pay discrimination is serious enough that it has been the subject of a number of conceptual models. For example, the human capital model attributes wage inequality to individual choices in matters of occupation: women are paid less because they choose occupations that afford them more time for family responsibilities; but since these are the very jobs with an abundance of workers, the result is low pay (Nanda, 1991; Johns, 1996; Lindsey et al., 2000). Many developed countries had to introduce 'equal pay for work of equal value legislations' to address gendered inequality in work remuneration (Sharma, 1997; Berry, 1998). However, available data in respect of the Nigerian work context suggest that discriminatory pay based on gender is not the norm (Osundahunsi, 1991).

Training and development: Training refers to learning activities through which the skills required in an occupation are acquired; while development pertains to learning activities which are directed at future needs and career growth rather than immediate task performance (Cole, 1993). Employers are required to demonstrate fairness in giving all workers equal access to training, without

deference to ethnicity, gender, age or medical condition. Further, training is a veritable instrument for fitting 'special need employees' for jobs. In this regard, three groups of 'special need employees' have been identified: disabled workers; displaced workers whose job skills require adaptation through re-training; and female workers who possess managerial potential (Berry, 1998).

Women as 'special need employees': Women are implicated in the last two of the three categories of 'special need employees' who stand to gain a lot from continuing training and development, in that they tend to be worse hit than men by technical changes such as advances in computer technology (International Labour Organisation- ILO, 1998b; 1998c); and also because of their simultaneous over-representation in low-skilled jobs and under-representation in management (Berry, 1998). The concept of '*glass ceiling*' describes women's inability to progress to management positions because of invisible barriers erected by male-dominated management; while *tokenism* describes the limited presence of women in a particular job position or work environment (Sharma, 1997; Lindsey et al., 2000).

In the Nigerian context, women constitute less than 5% of managers (Osundahunsi, 1991). An analysis of 192 companies profiled in 'The Nigerian Stock Exchange (NSE) Fact Book' (2003), revealed that only 7 or about 5% had a female chief executive officer (The NSE Fact Book, 2003). Besides their low proportion, Nigerian female managers are concentrated in small-scale enterprises; no blue-chip company is headed by a female CEO (Forrest, 1994). In the public sector, however, up to 9% of women workers are on Grade levels 15 to 17 (Amali, 1991), suggesting that women are more likely to be in management positions in the public rather than the private sector (Akerle, 1978). Regrettably, women's token presence in management means their virtual non-involvement in policy formulation, including policies that should have enhanced their participation (Jemerigbe, 1992), a kind of catch-22 situation.

Leadership Styles of Token Women Executives:

Additionally, token female executives tend to feel pressured to work harder than their male colleagues in order to prove their worth; and to adopt one of four male-defined stereotypical leadership styles: the mother; the sex object; the mascot; or stern iron maiden (Lindsey et al.,

2000). In the Nigerian context, token female executives adopt either one of two leadership styles: battle-axe (martinet) approach, or feminine (conciliatory) style. The battle-axe approach is associated with pioneer female managers who, finding themselves in an all-male environment adopt an aggressive style. The conciliatory style magnifies feminine attributes in managing work, and typifies such female managers as overtly frivolous (Saror et al., 1991). On the overall, there appears to be a pervading notion that women are unsuitable for top management positions because of their largely dependent and intuitive disposition (Dantiye et al., 1991; Saror et al., 1991). Some authors however view these characterisations as paradoxical in that many of the traits are strengths, and indeed, they are cognitive styles which merely point to different but not inferior ways of perceiving and handling issues (Furnham and Heaven, 1999; Macionis, 2002).

Developing women for management roles: In order to increase women's presence in managerial positions, therefore, concessionary treatments that specifically raise the number of women to be developed for such posts have been suggested, akin to affirmative action or positive (reverse) discrimination. In particular, mentoring has been suggested for improving women's participation in management. Regrettably, women find it difficult to find a senior executive to mentor them because of a peculiar circular problem: most senior executives tend to be males; mentoring requires some closeness between the 'trainee' and the mentor; a closeness which onlookers often misconstrue in amorous terms. Ironically, the few women in executive positions themselves fail to mentor upcoming ones, believing that everyone must 'pay her own dues' (Sharma, 1997; Berry, 1998; Lindsey et al., 2000); another catch-22 situation.

Safety, Health and welfare policies: Organisations are required to maintain a work environment that meets corporate objectives and is simultaneously healthy and safe for employees. Where an aspect of work impacts negatively on employees' physical or mental well-being occupational (work) stress is said to exist (Bratton et al., 1999). This sub-section examines three forms of gender-related work stress.

Sexualisation of the workplace: For female employees, one key form of work stress is the sexualisation of the work-place, whereby workers

put up behaviours that impute sexual meanings to apparently a-sexual work activities. These behaviours, which include sexual harassment, sexual bribery and gender-based jokes, degrade women and hinder the establishment of egalitarian work relations between the two sexes as colleagues in the workplace (Tallichet, 1995).

Predominance of women in sweat-shop jobs: Some export-oriented, labour-intensive industries like clothing and toy industries are known for employing a preponderance of young female workers aged between 13 and 25 years, under what has been described as sweat-shop conditions (Lindsey et al., 2000). This employment strategy is informed by stereotypical perceptions that women can be paid less than men, while at the same time, their nimbler fingers make them better than men at these jobs (Sapiro, 1994; Barber, Gowthaman and Rose, 2004).

Aspects of the poor working conditions in these industries include the very nature of the jobs in that they are menial, ill-paid jobs with poor career prospects; exposure to toxic substances and poor ventilation; poor living accommodation; and lean chances of obtaining maternity leave (ILO, 1998a; Barber et al., 2004). It is said that by the time these young women are nearing 35 years, they are already physically worn out and are routinely replaced with fresh batches of teenagers (Shah, 2001).

Absence of policies that address women's peculiar needs More crucial than the aforementioned welfare issues is the observation that organisational life has been largely structured around men and their welfare needs. There is therefore a dearth of welfare policies that specifically address women's needs, particularly those needs that derive from their reproductive roles. In this sense, women have to accept whatever policies employers offer in terms of the length, pay and promotion implications of maternity leave; absence permits to nurse sick children; and so on. Indeed, issues that border on women's reproductive health are regarded as additional costs which are best avoided so as to maintain lean cost structures. Oftentimes, women are pressured into choosing between a career and a family (Saror et al., 1991; Sharma, 1997).

Industrial relation: Industrial relation refers to the process of managing employment relationship, wherein an organised body of workers in form of a trade union interacts with management over issues affecting employees'

working lives. Three broad industrial relation strategies are in use: union recognition, union exclusion and union opposition. The three vary in the degree of participation and legitimacy accorded unions in the governance of the employment relationship. Union recognition is at the positive extreme wherein an organisation accepts unions' roles in regulating the employment relationship. Union opposition is at the other extreme and it means that an organisation maintains the status of a non-union company (Bratton et al., 1999).

It has been shown that women's experiences of unfair treatments are aggravated under non-union work environments. Firms operating in clothing and toy making industries in export processing zones, as earlier mentioned, are much studied for their non-union policies and poor working conditions, although positive changes are being reported. These firms employ disproportionately high number of women in hope that women's innate docility would keep them from unionising (ILO, 1998a; Shah, 2002).

FACILITATING GENDER EQUALITY IN ORGANISATIONS

Previous studies on gender discrimination in formal work have recommended measures that will ensure more equitable participation of women workers. These measures are still relevant today, and they comprise actions to be taken by women workers themselves, as well as actions to be taken by employers and governments. To start with, women workers have been urged to view positive discrimination, or policies that are akin to 'federal character' policy as additional support, and not the main solution for improving their participation in paid work (Dantiye et al., 1991).

In this vein, women workers have been advised to take responsibility for the entrenchment of egalitarian relations between the two sexes in the work-place, by seeking higher education, continual training and development; and going beyond the formal dictates of work to playing organisational politics (Saror et al., 1991; Jemerigbe, 1992). As opined by Luthans (1992: 105), "women who want to get to the top have to take the same route as men: aim for line positions, not staff jobs like personnel and public relations. They also need to take risks and show that they can succeed". Female workers also need to staunchly resist sexual jokes and harassment at work (Tallichet, 1995); and utilise family planning to enhance their participation in formal work (Jemerigbe, 1992).

However, given that paid work takes place in communities of workers (organisations), in their quest for equality at work women would need the support of this unique economic institution. In this regard, one far-reaching recommendation is the re-structuring of work, especially in the Nigerian context, to make part-time work and flexible working hours available for women to enable them combine parenthood with career, while avoiding the poor conditions of service that often accompany these types of work design (Jemerigbe, 1992).

More importantly, organisations have been enjoined to adopt flexible and extendable maternity-leave arrangements, with full pay for the first three months and possibly with graduated pay for another three months, made contingent upon the frequency with which a female employee requests for maternity leave (Jemerigbe, 1992). Provision of child care facilities in much the same way work-places provide staff canteen, clinics and gyms, has also been recommended. Such supportive measures are to be anchored on a new perspective of child rearing as a civic responsibility, not just for women but for the entire society (Nanda, 1991).

As regard the way government can help, Nigerian policy makers can learn from developed countries like the US which since the 1960s have applied policy instruments in checking work-place gender inequality (Berry, 1998), and in supporting working mothers through public provision of child care, paid and extendable maternity leave (Schwarz, 2010), among others. Furthermore, developing countries must weigh the benefits of foreign direct investment, against the morality of hosting sweat-shop factories employing mostly women, under the guise of promoting foreign direct investment.

CONCLUSION

This paper has highlighted how gender inequality in paid employment stems from the stratification of the larger society along gender lines, with the accompanying cultural definitions of femininity and masculinity; as well as stereotypes of the work capabilities of, and appropriate rewards for men vis-à-vis women workers. Female workers then confront the arduous task of disproving these stereotypes of the female gender as a group, and securing objective assessment of their individual work capabilities. For these challenges to be overcome, however, women who desire organisational careers must acquire

relevant education and continuing development. They must manage their family roles so as to be assets and not liabilities in their work-places. Women in paid jobs however need the support of organisations and government institutions, in forms of work re-structuring and welfare policies that accommodate their reproductive roles. Such support must be informed by a new perspective that sees child rearing as societal responsibility, in which women just happen to play more visible roles.

It is noteworthy that much of the literature on the gender discourse is authored by women, thus attesting to the supposition that women are the ones to kick-start the entrenchment of gender equality in paid work in particular, and social life in general. Future research could re-visit the distribution of women by job positions in Nigerian organisations, for purposes of comparison with extant research findings.

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