



## **History, Gender, Sexuality and Women's Development in the Global South: The Case of Nigeria**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The global South-Africa in general and Nigeria in particular, is a continent grappling with forces which are anti-development, yet the continent is yearning for development at all levels of human endeavour. Some of these forces are the issue of gender, sexuality, women development, affirmative action, and gender mainstreaming. The way and manner these concepts are interpreted or perceived are rather inimical to the development of the global south and Nigeria in particular. This write up x-rays these phenomena and how this perception in the global south has become an issue of concern globally in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **INTRODUCTION**

In recent years, gender and sexuality studies are beginning to occupy the minds of scholars in Africa or the global south with quite a number of institutions dedicating sections of their journals for these studies. In America and Europe, researches on gender and sexuality have been on-going for quite longer than the global south. This is not unrelated to the different cultural, economic, social and political backgrounds these regions operate from. This explains why in Africa, disparity between the female and male folks is wider compared to the other regions mentioned above and that in Africa and Nigeria, free discussion on sexuality and reproductive rights are not encouraged due to the fact that issues of sexuality are not openly discussed because of the belief that sexual matters are private and thus open discussion is regarded as immoral.

These misconceptions of the phenomenon of gender and sexuality have placed unequal rights on the female folks who are being made to undergo series of humiliations, deprivations, and even death due to their status as women. This act of segregation which has placed the woman in their current underprivileged position is denying the Nigerian state and Africa at large, the much needed contribution of women towards national development.

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This article therefore tries to define the concept of gender and sexuality in relation to the topic under discussion, the issue of gender and women deprivation, sexuality and women inequality, women development, affirmative action, gender mainstreaming, empowerment and gender segregation and Nigeria's underdevelopment. It should also be noted that Nigeria shall be discussed in this write-up as reference to the south concept of global south.

### **GENDER AND SEXUALITY IN NIGERIA: A CONCEPTUALIZATION**

These two terms, gender and sexuality shall be defined and analysed in relation to the Nigerian situation as a country in the global south.

#### **Gender**

The word gender is not synonymous to any particular groups of individuals, sex or ethnic group. As a result, no group can claim sole authority over its use and deprive other people over it. Gender therefore refers to human beings both male and female who are engaged in the process of production for development. In this work, however, the term gender shall be used to refer to the female population in Nigeria who are segregated or deprived from engaging in the process of production for development.

It is pertinent to note that the different notions ascribed to both male and females are the creations of communities by way of their customs, traditions, norms etc. In this dimension, Udegbe in Gushop averred that the gender belief in Africa between males and females include "traditional stereotypes that characterize women as submissive, illogical, passive, talkative, emotional and easily moved to tears. Men on the other hand are assumed to be competent and logically independent. These stereotypes tend to reflect men and women as belonging to opposite bipolar adjectives in which men have desirable qualities while women have undesirable ones... Societal norms and stereotypes also function as a traditional ideology that regulates women to house wife roles while promoting men as actors, providers and final authority"<sup>1</sup>. It should also be noted that these stereotypes differ from one society to the other due to the differences in cultural backgrounds. However, they all have their own fare share of discriminatory laws against women which are retrogressive to the women self-esteem and the society at large.

#### **Sexuality**

The word sexuality is defined by the World Health Organisation in Madunagu (2007) as "a central aspect of being human throughout life and encompasses sex, gender identities and roles, sexual orientation, eroticism,

pleasure, intimacy and reproduction. Sexuality is experienced and expressed in thoughts, fantasies, desires, beliefs, attitudes, values, behaviours, practices, roles and relations. While sexuality can include all of these dimensions, not all of them are often experienced or expressed. Sexuality is influenced by the interaction of biological, psychological, social, economic, political, cultural, ethnical, legal, historical, religious and spiritual factors”<sup>2</sup> .

Mumbi Machera on the other hand views sexuality as the act of eliciting images of belongingness physically and emotionally. She goes ahead to say that sexuality is a multifaceted meaning referring to deep emotional feeling as well as to issues of power and vulnerability in gendered relationships which is socially constructed and is influenced by cultural definitions and prohibitions than by physical possibilities<sup>3</sup>. In both Madunagu and Machera’s definitions of sexuality, culture is seen to be playing a key role in the act of sex, a feature which the global south is internationally recognized as “hesitant” in liberalizing it.

From the religious point of view (Christianity, Islam and African traditional religion), being the most popular religions in the global south, sexuality is viewed as a temptation of some kind, a general gift, a means of procreation, a way of strengthening emotional bonds between people in officially blessed or recognized relationships, which should not be misused. This suggest that most religions limit sexual behaviour strictly to relationship which are recognized or sanctioned by religious institutions: some require celibacy for their clergy, withholding ordination to unmarried clergy and generally require their officials to eschew abusive, manipulative and harassing their members sexually.

The various definitions of sexuality given above which are a true reflection of the Nigerian setting, notwithstanding, and for the purpose of this discussion, sexuality is defined as the act of imbalanced emotional, physical, psychological relationship between males and females leading to sexual activities due to cultural roles in the global south and Nigeria. The idea of imbalanced used in this definition is to emphasize the disadvantaged position women have found themselves in Nigeria as far as sexual issues are concerned, hence tradition has placed a subjective status on them thereby repressing their ability to control their very own sexual bodies, desires, behaviours experiences and to procreate at will or at their own time.

### **Gender and women deprivation**

Although the word gender does not associate any disprivileged position to either male or female, it has however been used in Nigeria to deprive the women folk their rights and privileges. The indices used to segregate against women include among others, religion, marriage, tradition, social and economic.

In terms of religion among Christians, the status of a woman who was created out of man<sup>4</sup>, is to be a helper. This phrase has been used to segregate among women by some religious organisations through restricting the

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ordination of women as clerics. In some religious organisations, women do not even sit together with men neither do they worship in the same building or structure but are rather confined to worshipping at home. These religious restrictions on women goes as far as prohibiting women from stepping out of their compounds in the case of Islam in what is known as Pudah<sup>5</sup> – Jolae while the men are not restricted in anyway. Infact, in both Christianity and Islam, women suffer harsh punishment when caught in the act of sexual immorality while the men are allowed to get away scott free.

The traditional religion in Nigeria does not give women any liberty either. Infact women suffer the worst form of segregation in Africa traditional religion. This is because they, like some of their Muslim counterparts, dare not go to the shrine to worship the deities. Among some communities, like the Kadung people in Pankshin L.G.A of Plateau State, it was believed that if a woman sees certain categories of masquerades, she was going to be barren unless she appeased the gods<sup>6</sup> Maigoro and Danfulani. Yet no holy book said that a woman is inferior to a man.

Marriage is another institution where the traditional role associated to the husband and the woman has made the woman to be discriminated upon in most communities in Nigeria. The woman is primarily to be used for the production of children and up-keep of the house. This explains why barren women hardly survive in their marriages. They are either divorced or will have to go through the trauma of living with a second wife for the rest of the lives. In some families, women are even restricted from picking up jobs of any kind but largely to stay at home and take care of the children thereby depriving them the opportunity to go to school and acquire skills that would help them live a better life. In most Nigerian communities, male children are preferred to females hence the belief is that females are just to help heir mothers with the household chores while the male children are to be educated in schools.

Customs and traditions in many Nigerian societies have tended to be biased against women by subjugating them to men thereby undermining their pride and self esteem. Some of these cultural barriers against the women include forceful marriage, under-aged marriage, female genital mutilation etc. An example of under aged marriage is the case of a serving senator in Nigeria and former governor who married a girl of thirteen years (13). All these negative traditional stereotyping are aimed at instilling a sense of inferiority status on women. Commenting on this, Olusegun and Akin observed that “women become conditioned to accepting social debasements of the type associated with widowhood rights and self-imposed abuses of the type that denies female children good food. Even in urban centres and civilized circles, the stereotype gender roles make women over play the femininity by accepting that they are a weaker sex over emphasizing the dainty nature of their compartment viewing the ambition of some members of their sex as ominous and regarding exceptional achievements as untoward competition”<sup>7</sup>. These roles have reduced the women folk in Nigeria to accept their deprived positions as ordained by God.

### **Sexuality and women deprivation**

In Nigeria, like in many countries of the global south, women are deprived of being able to control their sexual life due to a number of factors like forceful or coercive sex, the concept of virginity and the issue of female genital mutilation.

By right, every individual is supposed to engage in sexual activities as a positive pleasure and natural part of life. When sex is carried out with mutual respect and in agreement between the male and female parties involved, it carries with it satisfaction and positive emotional feelings. However, in most families, women are deprived from the consensual aspect of sexuality hence they are supposed to reproduce children and thus, the man forcefully have his way whether she likes it or not. In some instances, women have suffered the worst form of sexual deprivation by being raped and made to live with the gruesome experience especially during wars. This explains why Machera observed that “in Africa, male and female sexualities have been patterned by cultural definitions of masculinity and femininity... Female sexuality is often seen as something to be contained and controlled. In this regard, the man sees the wife as his personal property which should be used at his own time to satisfy his sexual desires and be dumped at will.

The idea of virginity is another area where the female folks have been deprived of their sexuality rights in comparison to their male counterparts. Most religious organisations subject women to very harsh punishment if they are found to have been disvirgined before marriage. However, such religions and traditional customs have not cared to constitute any check against the men simply because men made such laws and nobody dares them. Infact, in some communities, boys are expected to prove their sexual prowess before they belong to certain groups. Yet girls must remain virgins until they are married. Although sexuality before marriage is generally not encouraged, such clarion calls are mainly meant for girls than boys. Thus, the idea of virginity for females only deprives them the opportunity of freely expressing their sexuality while marriage and rape forces them into nonconsensual sex<sup>8</sup>.

Again, the mutilation of the female genital sex organ as experienced in some communities in Nigeria is largely aimed at depriving the females their rights to sexuality pleasure. Incidentally, this practice is not metted on them by their men counterparts like in the case of forceful sex and virginity, but rather, by their fellow females. This is because society demands that it should be done and the women folks are forced to succumb.

### **Gender and women development**

The idea of Women development largely refers to the upward movement of the degree of involvement of women both in national and international affairs. It equally refers to the global shift from the traditional and conservative roles associated to women (especially in Africa) to more social and rational

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responsibilities ascribed to women. These gender development associated to women of recent would further be discussed in relation to education, economic, politics. The women took their disadvantaged position to the UN in order to secure global acceptance. This effort culminated into the first UN international conference held in Mexico City in 1975. Substantively, the Mexico conference endorsed the demand for legal equality for women, which encompassed the rights of divorce, custody of children custody, property, voting, education and other citizenship rights. At the moment, attention would be centered on education.

Education of women in the global south, especially in the northern part of Nigeria, is still not anywhere near their male counterparts. Statistics over the years have shown that women are disadvantaged by so many variables on their path to achieving higher educational status <sup>9</sup>. These variables include the traditional roles ascribed to women which are still been practiced in many communities, social factors like teenage pregnancies and early marriage all contribute to the unequal educational status between men and women. For women to fully develop and catch up with their fellow men folks, all these barriers on their path to education need to be eradicated. This could be done through a special scholarship fund for the education of women by way of subsidizing their cost of education. This would enable even married women with no hope of education to be able to educated thereby increasing the number of educated women.

Politically, women in the global south suffer a very high degree of segregation by both constitutional laws and the traditional system which constraints them from fully participating or contesting political positions on equal basis like their male counterparts. In countries like Nigeria, some communities even consider it a taboo for women to be elected to political positions due to the traditional belief that the woman is inferior to the man and as such, to be elected to such exalted positions would make the man to be subjected to her. Some religions also confine some women to the home. which constraints them from contesting for any political position.

These disadvantaged positions of the women folk in most third world countries has placed women from this part of the world on unequal status even with their fellow women from other countries where most of these barriers to women achieving higher political goals have been reduced to the barest minimum. The unhealthy political atmosphere that exists in the political arena in Nigeria such as thuggery, assassinations, violence of all kinds has also made it almost impossible for women to realize their political dreams which should not be the case. As a result of all these, the level of women political development in relation to the male counterparts has remained unequalled. However, by the time women are given equal opportunities with their male counterparts, their level of political development will also increase.

In terms of economic development, most women in the third world countries far underdeveloped due to their disadvantaged position of being women. Women are perceived as weaker persons who cannot control vast

business empires. That is why they are often referred to as “business men’s wives, farmers wives, merchants wives” rather than been merchants, farmers and business women themselves. Although quite a number of women engage in business even at international level, the ratio compared to men is very negligible. This goes to say that women in Nigeria require special fund to enable them fully participate in economic activities towards developing themselves.

### **Affirmative action**

The term affirmative action simply refers to any measure used to address the inequalities arising from among groups as a result of historical injustices and disadvantage. It takes into account different steps/measures taken by various governments to redress such inequalities through preventing domination and protecting vulnerable sectors. It is therefore a conscious effort towards redressing past historical wrongs and injustices and has been used to address issues of racial and ethnic injustice in societies where the forms of oppression have been recognized to have infringed on the rights and dignities of those excluded. For the purpose of this article, affirmative action shall be used to refer to the unequal situation that exists between men and women in politics in Nigeria and the call for 30% female representation in elective positions and /or appointed positions.

The principle of affirmative action originated from the fact that democracy should not be gender biased but rather, should include the representation of women as well as men in decision making process on the one hand while striving for equality. The lack of women participation in the political scene, it is observed, makes them unable to share power in the exercise of political authority or make contributions when critical issues that concerns the wellbeing of the nation comes into focus. This also limits their access to the nation’s resources thereby restricting their economic source to the barest minimum. Some of the most pronounced disadvantaged position of the women manifested for instance, when the presidential technical committee on the review of the 1999 constitution, set up in 2001, had only three women out of 29 members. When the then president Obasanjo mandated the political parties to nominate six members each prior to constituting the committee, no single woman got nominated. The president had to compel the parties to nominate at least a woman each before the three women finally emerged as members of the committee.

Nevertheless, the current position of the women could be improved through constitutional reforms required of existing positions that do not adequately protect the fundamental rights of women. A social and gender commission based on gender could be established as an alternative to the federal character commission while the implementation of the national policy on women should be financed.

### **Gender mainstreaming**

The concept of gender mainstreaming means the process of assessing the implication for women and men of any planned action including legislation, policies or programmes in all areas and at all levels **11**. It is a strategy for making women's and men's concerns and experiences an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes in all political, economic and societal spheres so that women and men equally and inequality not accepted The ultimate objective is to achieve equality. The UN came up with its principles guiding gender mainstreaming to include:

- i. Issues across all areas of activity should be defined in such a manner that gender differences can be diagnosed. In other words, an assumption of gender neutrality should be maintained.
- ii. Responsibility for transforming gender mainstreaming into practice is system wise and rest on the highest levels. This signifies that accountability for outcomes needs to be monitored constantly.
- iii. Gender mainstreaming also requires that every effort be made to broaden women's participation at all levels of decision-making.
- iv. Gender mainstreaming must be institutionalized through concrete steps, mechanism, process and all parts of the UN system.
- v. Gender mainstreaming does not replace the need for targeted specific women policies and programmes or positive legislation, nor does it substitute for gender units or focal points.
- v. Clear political will and the allocation of adequate additional human and financial resources for gender mainstreaming from all available funding sources are important for the successful translation of the concept into practice **12**.

Thus, gender mainstreaming could be achieved through the following ways: All bodies that deal with programme and budgetary matters , including the committee for programme and coordination, should ensure that all programmes visibly mainstream a gender perspective; The improvement of tools for gender mainstreaming, such as gender analysis, the use of data disaggregated by sex and age and sector specific gender surveys, as well as gender sensitive studies; The establishment of instruments and mechanisms for monitoring and evaluation, such as gender impact analysis methodologies; Facilitates linkages between national machineries for the advancement of women and all NGO's and in particular, women's NGO's and the institutions. It should be observed that these lofty policies outlined by the UN are all geared towards ensuring that the opposite sexes fuse together and translate their knowledge, ideals, skills and experiences into development among member nations of the UN. If the Nigerian government could muster the political will to implement some the suggestions advanced, the issue of gender mainstreaming would be greatly reduced.

### **Gender and women empowerment**

Despite the fact that there are many international agreements and treaties concerning the affirmation of human rights, women are still likely to be poor and illiterate compared to men. This is because they usually have less access to medical care, property ownership, credit and training and empowerment. They are also less likely to be active in politics and are more likely to be victims of domestic violence. The inability of women to control their own fertility is one of the major factors responsible for their lack of empowerment and their unequal status with men. When a woman can plan her family, it means she can plan for the rest of her life and when her reproductive rights such as the rights to determine the number, timing and spacing of her children and to make decisions concerning reproduction free of discrimination, coercion and violence, then she has the freedom to participate more fully and equally in the society thereby empowering herself in the process.

Gender equality implies a situation where women and men enjoy the same opportunities, outcomes, rights and obligations in all spheres of life. Quality between men and women exist where both sexes are able to share equally in the distribution of power and influence; through work for financial independence through work of through setting up business; enjoy equal access to education and the opportunity to develop personal ambitions. Gender equality could thus be achieved through empowering of women with particular reference to identifying and addressing power imbalances by giving women more autonomy to manage their own lives hence women empowerment is critical to sustainable development and the realization of human rights for all. Other ways which could enhance women empowerment include:

**Education:** About two thirds of the illiterates in the world are women and their higher levels of education are associated with both lower infant mortality and lower fertility, as well as with higher levels of education and economic opportunity for their children.

**Political:** The current social and legal institutions still do not guarantee women equality in basic legal and human rights, in access to or control of land or other resources, in employment and earning, and social and political participation. In most cases, what is obtainable is that laws on domestic violence are often not enforced on behalf of women.

**Economic:** It is terse clear that more women than men live in abject poverty. This kind of economic disparity exists largely because most of the unpaid work within families and communities rest on the shoulders of women thereby expanding the frontiers of the economic disparity **14**.

#### **IMPLICATION FOR NIGERIA'S DEVELOPMENT**

The disprivileged gender roles associated to women in terms of unequal educational, economic, political, social and religious rights have reduced the female gender in Nigeria to be passive. This has deprived them the

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opportunity to contribute to national development in Nigeria and indeed, the global south. This feeling stems from the fact that competent women who could be appointed or elected to exalted positions in Nigeria are denied such opportunities for the simple fact that they are women. By so doing, the country is losing the contribution of this group of people towards the attainment of her national development objectives.

The issue of sexuality deprivation too carried on Nigerian women has its grave consequences on Nigeria's path to national development. This is because in Nigeria, women constitute about 50% of the population. Yet, this category of people are living in a world of uncertainty, the fear of the unknown, fear of being brutalized sexually at any moment. The likelihood is that they may not concentrate and put in their best in their places of work. Depending on their type of job, teachers, students, administrators etc, a slight error could cost the country dearly, either loss of lives or finances or even misleading students in the case of teachers.

### **Towards a better gender and equal opportunities**

In recent times the compelling need for rights of women to be recognized has been emphasized. Top among these struggles is CEDAW (Convention on Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women) formed in 1981<sup>9</sup>. The Beijing Conference of 1995 is another platform which tried to bridge the gap of inequality between men and women. Such convention concretizes women who had resigned their deprived positions to fate.

Apart from the conventions, seminars and workshops, the government of Nigeria could consider legislation on the specific number of elective positions to be zoned to women right from the federal, state, local government areas and down to the word levels as a deliberate way of bridging the gap of disparity.

Government could also come up with economic policies for women aimed at empowering them. This is because researches have shown that in developing countries like Nigeria, the unequal status accorded to women has contributed in impoverishing them more than their male counterparts. Such policies could be in form of small scale loans without collaterals in order to enable them have access to such loan facilities.

Furthermore, a legislation against under aged marriage should be sponsored by the government. This is with the sole aim of protecting teenage girls who are forcefully married off by veracious parents to people who will violate their sexuality rights, emotions and respect.

The issue of genital mutilation should be prohibited by the law without recourse to any custom and tradition. It is a barbaric act which subject females to unnecessary pain and deprivation of their sexuality satisfaction. In this 21<sup>st</sup> century, no civilized society should condone this terrible act.

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