GENDER INEQUALITY AND TRADITIONAL NORMS: A FEMINIST CRITIQUE OF NIGERIA'S POLITICAL SYSTEM

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Abstract

Gender equality, a problem infringing on human rights as well as affecting national development, has earned the attention of scholars and policymakers for the past three decades. The study aims to critique the impact of traditional norms on gender equality in the Nigerian society from a feminist standpoint. To measure gender equality, one indicator: women's participation in politics was examined. On the one hand, the number of women on the voter register was assessed and on the other hand, the number of women elected into political offices was also analyzed. The methods for the study include a mixed historical method where official documents, articles, news stories and other relevant resources on the subject matter were retrieved from websites and scrutinized. Findings reveal that though Nigerian women constitute over 47% of the voting population, they are conspicuously missing in Nigerian electoral politics as less than 4% of elective posts are held by women.

Keywords: Gender; gender inequality; feminism; traditional norms; patriarchy

Introduction

Questioning norms, beliefs and traditions opens them up to a fresh perspective (Kagher et al, 2021; Makama 2013; Adebayo, 2014). Wisconsin's 2020 teacher of the year Erin McCarthy's goal as a social studies teacher was to spark curiosity about the past so students can challenge their assumptions and replace inaccuracies and distortions they have read about or have been taught. In the ninth chapter of his 2022 book, *Think Again: The Power of Knowing What You Don't Know,* author Adam Grant narrated that profound experience as follows:

> One day, an eighth grader complained that the reading assignment from a history textbook was inaccurate …But Erin had assigned that particular reading intentionally. She collects old history books because she enjoys seeing how the stories we tell change over time, and she decided to give her students part of a textbook from 1940. Some of them just accepted the information it presented at face value. Through years of education, they had come to take it for granted that textbooks told the truth. Others were

shocked by errors and omissions. It was ingrained in their minds that their readings were filled with incontrovertible facts. The lesson led them to start thinking like scientists and questioning what they were learning: whose story was included, whose was excluded, and what were they missing if only one or two perspectives were shared?

After opening her students' eyes to the fact that knowledge can evolve, Erin's next step was to show them that it's always evolving. To set up a unit on expansion in the West, she created her own textbook section describing what it's like to be a middle-school student today. All the protagonists were women and girls, and all the generic pronouns were female. In the first year she introduced the material, a student raised his hand to point out that the boys were missing. "But there's one boy," Erin replied. "Boys were around. They just weren't doing anything important." It was an aha moment for the student: he suddenly realized what it was like for an entire group to be marginalized for hundreds of years.

Layers of insight can be drawn from McCarthy's experiment with her students. First, it underscores how norms -which tend to be biased- can be deeply entrenched and built into social memory that they often go unnoticed, unchallenged and institutionalized. Second, it reveals how knowledge, norms and beliefs are not stagnant but ever evolving. Norms are perpetuated by accepted beliefs. Our beliefs over a matter may be inaccurate but once we gain new insight from superior arguments, there lies an opportunity towards becoming better people and society. Finally, and very importantly, it illustrates how gender injustice hurts.

Moving on thousands of miles away from the American context to the Nigerian society, as touching gender relations, the Nigerian woman has been the victim of inequality entrenched in society's traditional norms. The Nigerian society is patriarchal in nature, an embodiment of traditional norms that are favorable to men and biased against women (Ntoimo & Isiugo-Abanihe, 2013; Dogo 2014). The call for gender equality goes beyond patronizing women. It is intent on transforming society so it can support the collective aspirations of all people, gender affiliation notwithstanding.

Gender inequality hurts not just the marginalized group, but the whole of society. Reason being, every human being is an embodiment of potentials with an important capacity to contribute meaningfully to advance humanity's course. The potentials cuts across the genders. In a situation whereby a gender is discriminated against, that group's contribution to society is suppressed. A society with a

dysfunctional gender relation will inadvertently stunt its growth (Lawanson & Umar 2019; Udoh et al, 2020; Ifemeje & Umejiaku 2014; Akinbami et al, 2015).

No matter how endowed a nation is, harnessing its human resources for development depends on how effective its gender relations are. Therefore, gender relations in this 21st century Nigeria cannot be ignored. Research shows that societies with obtuse gender relations are less likely to develop holistically (Olonade et al, 2021; Nwosu & Ibe, 2014; Ewuim et al, 2015; Okorie et al, 2020; Alewo & Olong 2012; Egbulonu & Eleonu, 2018). One of the forces fighting Nigeria's development is the force of norms, cultures and traditions, especially those that no longer have a place in a modern society.

The aim of this article is to present a critique on gender differences in the Nigerian society from a feminist perspective. Focusing on feminist philosophy, this paper critiques traditional gender norms in the society, exploring how patriarchal structures clash with women's rights and how philosophical perspectives can drive progress.

Methodology

The research adopts basic historical methodology, with its focus on the extensive combination of facts from available secondary sources such as documents, magazines, articles, and published books as well as online and internet materials available as well as written materials, academic thesis and dissertations on the issue of gender inequality.

Conceptual Review

Gender

Gender is defined as 'those differences between men and women that are socially constructed. These differences include such stereotypical beliefs as: men are strong – women, weak; men are politicians – women, artists; men assist each other – women, fight each other; men are outgoing – women, inward looking' (Kabira, in Ayioka & Wakoko, 2018: 86). Gender and sex are more similar than dissimilar in that while sex is a biological category, gender is a social construction. Oakley (cited in Okafor 2015: 70) points that society socializes children from an early age to act male or female. Generally, it is natural for girls to want to act and be like their mothers. Boys will want to act like their fathers. The argument of gender socialization has been validated in a 2021 study by Nwakanma & Erondu titled 'Gender Socialisation and Gender Parity in Nigeria'. The study which involved over 420 respondents examined the perceptions of gender relations and the role of

gender socialization. It revealed that though they may openly oppose it, most women subtly accept secondary roles in society.

The patriarchal system, however, adopts the strategy of gender role ideology to dichotomize between private and public life where women are schemed out of occupying the public space. They are restricted to the home associated with its related gender roles as homemaker, mother and wife while men dominate the public space. Also noteworthy is that gender role ideology hierarchizes between the genders where males are given more prominence and value than females. Resuming the distinction between gender and sex, feminists often highlight the difference between the two terms to invalidate the argument of biological determinism that people's destiny is tied to their sex (Mikkola, in Kabira & Wakoko 2018: 86). Based on changing sociocultural and traditional norms, feminists are now calling for the abolishment of patriarchal norms that subjugate women so they can enjoy every right their male counterparts enjoy. Gender is an important identity marker. According to Judith Butler (ibid) the use of gender is not merely descriptive but normative. Gender identity is concretized by norms.

Some scholars including Oyeronke Oyewumi argue that, prior to colonization, gender was not a means of categorizing people, it was only adapted to Yoruba culture culture to 'fit the Western pattern of body reasoning' (ibid, 88). In precolonial Yoruba society, Oyewumi noted that 'power was not gender-determined' but one legacy of colonization was the 'exclusion of women from state structures' (ibid.).

Gender Inequality refers to inequity along gender basis (Fapohunda, 2016). It entails non-inclusivity in access and control to valuable resources including political power. Giving men sociocultural, economic and political dominance changed the power dynamics between the genders. Women were 'inferiorized'. In a patriarchal society, women are at a disadvantaged, subjugated position while men continue to benefit from the system. Inequality including based on gender is an issue the United Nation seeks to solve in the Sustainable Development Goals. Nigeria's society, in contrast to the Ghanaian, is patrilineal. Women are tacitly conceived as their husbands or fathers' commodities. Additionally, a recurring strategy the Nigerian government uses to dissolve the question of *gender inequality* is to neutralize it by calls of *national unity* (Glossklaub 2015: 8).

Norms

The *Black's Law Dictionary* defines norm as a 'non-stated set of guidelines which specify normal behavior in a social context. Social control and order are prevalent

due to the pressure exerted on an individual to conform to the social norm, one which is expected from all members of a community from each other.' This definition is similar to the one provided by the *Standford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* which defines *norm* as 'the informal rules that govern behavior in groups and societies….supported by self-fulling expectations.' Both definitions capture the tacit, social acceptability of norms as well as their potency to regulate social behavior. Society is organized by norms. One of such norms is the organization based on gender into male and female category. Norms spell social behavior from greeting, dressing, eating, as well as gender roles guiding how men and women are expected to behave in private or public. It draws a circumference for society's expectations of individuals and groups. To describe norms as 'traditional' implies their being outdated according to modern trend of human development. Norms are fluid, they are acquired and they do change over time. Norms are cultures, usually tacitly accepted codes of conduct that identifies a people's belief. Norms are local institutions that cannot 'be exported and transplanted in another context' but are subject to change (Glossklaub 3). Norms are patterns of behavior shared by members of a group learnt from generation past through socialization. They can regulate people's aspirations. Considering their regulatory capacity, certain norms upheld in societies like Nigeria may hurt or favour certain members of the society, especially in the case gender inequality. Norms can be the justification for forms of discrimination, and can be seen as unjust, especially where they are seen to limit the size of people's dreams. Several norms, traditions and cultures in different societies can act as limitations for women from realizing their full, innate potential (Egbulonu & Eleonu, 2018; Okorie et al, 2020; Udoh et al, 2020). An example of the impact of norms in regulating human behavior is the participation of women in politics.

Socio-cultural norms have made women passive members of society. Women's decision-making power is to a large extent dependent on their socioeconomic standing. It determines their access to household resources and use of healthcare. Among limited studies that explore household resource allocation and general healthcare use is that that Onah (2018). He argued that household-level male-female differences shows inequalities among Nigerian families where allocation of household resources, healthcare use are the prerogative of the husband. Where women are employed in the formal sector, his finding reveals, there is a joint custody of household and financial resources. In a similar study by Ikechu and collaborators (2017), it was found that cultural practices that are inimical to women are largely unreported; and in the few instances where they are reported, they are often trivialized.

Feminism

Most dictionaries define feminism as the advocacy of women's rights on the basis of equality of the sexes. It is a conglomeration of variant women's right advocacy. It seeks to define and establish the equality of the genders politically, socially, economically and other ways. Feminists begrudge society for unjustly focusing attention on men while subjugating women to a second place. The sprinkling of the term *feminism* may insinuate a western flavor to a local struggle. However, Women's struggle is an old phenomenon in the Nigerian political landscape but the term *feminism* is a recent term. It gained currency due to the influence of international donors on local women-based NGOs (Glossklaub, 2015: 8). However, women's rights is an issue that affect females in Nigeria and the world over.

Theoretical framework: Nigeria's Gender Inequality from a Feminist Viewpoint

Three theoretical perspectives have been adopted to address the question of gender inequality raised in the current study: Marxist Feminist theory and Radical feminism. The Marxist feminist theory also called the Materialist theory is developed on the thoughts, ideas and propositions of Karl Marx and Frederick Engels by scholars including Alexander Kollontai, Clara Zetkin and Alison Jaggar. Marxist thought proposes that history is a battle of class struggle between those who have (the bourgeoises) and those who do not (the proletariats). The privileged bourgeoises with access to means of production and capital, employ the services and labour of the proletariats whom they exploit. The ideas in Marxist Feminism were birthed in Frederick Engels' work titled "The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State". It established the nexus between Marxism and Feminism. Feminism looks at gender relations from women's relative disadvantaged position entrenched in socio-cultural norms, traditions, religious and political beliefs. This proposition resonates with the gender relations in Nigeria. Women engage in much domestic labour and family raising and keeping which goes unpaid. Marxist feminists argue that men's access to social, economic and political power has equipped them to push women to an inferior position. As a result, men with their headship in family and society, make decisions, laws and policies that exploit women. The theorists hold that the inferior or patriarchal subjugation of women barred them from decision-making positions, formulation of rules to guide both family and society. They are subservient to laws and traditional norms which violates their human rights.

The radical feminists blame patriarchal system as responsible for the subjugation of women. Bryson, a prominent feminist, view women as the 'oppressed' gender who must emancipate themselves against men, their oppressors. The central

argument of radical feminism is that women have long been forgotten and left behind and need to be recognized and valued. It does not lay emphasis on gender equality, but the fight for women's rights in a male-dominated society. This subjugation and gender-based inequality, radical feminists argue, will not stop until there is a revolutionary change to dismantle the patriarchal system which is firmly supported by state policies, ideologies, socio-cultural and religious norms. Hence, gender activism must not stop at advocating for the formulation of laws and policies that favour women or the abolition of traditions and cultural norms that hurt women.

Impact/Implication of Patrimonial Nigerian Society on Gender Inequality

The Nigerian society has evolved through the years. Dogo (2014) combed the socio-cultural landscape of the different societies in Nigeria to understand gender relations during (pre)/(post)colonial era. Before colonialism, gender relations were more complementary but with the impact of Westernization, that was distorted, leaving women subjugated. However, no uniform statement can be made about gender relations as the different societies in Nigeria had different issues determining how men and women behaved. Though there was no equality, it was pointed that women in the southern part of Nigeria (mostly Igbos and Yorubas) had more complementary roles and were more politically active than their northern counterparts.

How do traditional norms and gender relations interface? Most Nigerians are adherents of their traditions which they sometimes hide under it to act in ways that are inimical to women. In 2016, Nigeria's then president, Muhammadu Buhari, in a widely shared interview in Germany about the role his wife plays in his administration, remarked that 'my wife belongs in my kitchen and the other room'. Those words expressed the sentiments of a large majority of Nigerian men -and some women- who have been socialized into a patriarchal system. Norms are powerful. They influence the lives of a people in their society. According to Schalkwyk: 'gender identities and gender relations are critical aspects of culture because they shape the way daily life is lived in the family, but also in the wider community and the workplace' (in Igwe, ibid, 119). African traditions have received much blame for enabling gender discrimination (Randall, ibid, 118). However, it cannot be said how or which culture prescribes gender-based inequality as its way of life.

Nigeria has become a party to several international agreements targeted at reducing or eliminating gender-based inequality. Among these are the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW, 1979),

and the African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights (1986), the Convention on the Rights of the Child adopted in (1989) ratified and domesticated by Nigeria in 1991 and 1992 respectively. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) adopted in 1948, and most importantly the Protocol to the African Charter on the Rights of Women in Africa, 2003 – a unique piece of legislation which takes into consideration the provisions of other international instruments on human rights that touch on women's rights and the need for equality and freedom from discrimination.

The 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria wherein are stated the rights that will support the lawful desires and aspirations of the Nigerian citizens, upholds gender equality. In Section 42 of the Constitution, it spells that Nigerian citizens shall have the right to freedom from discrimination on the basis of gender and other indices. The Constitution is supreme to all other laws, socio-cultural norms and traditions. However, there is a curious contradiction in the Constitution; there is a striking reflection of bias in the language of the nation's supreme law book. In the Constitution, the male pronoun 'he' is found over 230 times, while the female 'she' is absent. The contradiction is evident in what the Constitution provides on the hand, and what is actually obtainable in real life, on the other hand. In reality, a massive gender inequality exists in the Nigerian society. The bias could be a result of the absence of women in decision-making positions.

To reduce discrimination of women in politics, countries were mandated to make provision of a minimum of 3 out of ten of their political positions to women. In response to that, Nigeria formulated the National Policy on Women and related policies. It is in line with this that Nigerian political parties gave women aspirants nomination forms at no financial cost during the election into the fourth republic.

Statistics of Women's Under-representation in Nigerian Politics

Table 1. Gender spread of voters and candidates (2019-2023)

category	2019		2023	
	No.	%	No.	%
Registered voters	84,004,084	100%	93,469,008	100%
Female voters	39,598,645	47.14%	44,414,846	47.52%

Male voters	44,406,439	52.86%	49,054,162	52.48%
Number of candidates	23,442	100%	15,309	100%
Female candidates	3,032	12.9%	1,266	8.3%
Male candidates	20,410	87.06%	14,043	91.7%

Table 2: *Women in elected positions between 2019-2023 according to geopolitical zones*

Zone	2019					
	Pres/Vice Pres	**Gov**	**Dep Gov.**	**Senate**	**House of Reps**	**State Assembly**
NW	0	0	1	0	0	1
NE	0	0	0	1	3	2
NC	0	0	0	0	2	5
SW	0	0	1	2	4	16
SS	0	0	1	2	1	11
SE	0	0	1	2	3	9
Total	**0 of 1**	**0 of 36**	**4 of 36**	**7 of 109**	**13 of 360**	**44 of 991**
Zone	2023					
NW	0	0	1	0	0	2
NE	0	0	0	0	3	3
NC	0	0	1	1	3	12
SW	0	0	1	1	1	16
SS	0	0	2	1	3	10
SE	0	0	1	0	4	5

Total	0 of 1	0 of 36	6 of 36	3 of 109	13 of 360	48 of 991

From both findings and review in this study, traditional norms, culture and religion are largely responsible for gender inequality especially as seen in the area of women's participation in politics. To critique gender inequality in the Nigerian society, one indicator was selected: political participation, wherein women's rights to vote and be voted for was examined. First, the total number of women who registered in the two election cycles were disaggregated. It was revealed that women constitute over 49% of voters. No serious politician or political party will ignore this demography. However, when it comes to elective positions, the outcome in terms of women representation is abysmal. INEC records show that the number of female voters in both 2019 and 2023 elections remained below 48% while male voters remained at above 52% in both election cycles. However, the disaggregation of candidates shows that female candidacy drastically reduced to less than half in 2023 where only 1,266 women (i.e 8.3%) contested as against 3,032 (12.9%) in 2019.

In the presidential election, no woman made it in either the 2019 or 2023 election (no woman has ever got this position). Likewise, the vice-presidential seat. In both 2019 and 2023 governorship race, of the 36 seats available, no woman was elected. However, for the deputy governorship position 4 and 6 women were elected in 2019 and 2023 respectively.

In the national assembly election, women were also under-represented. In 2019, of the 109 senate seats, only 7 women were elected. It got worse in 2023 where, for different reasons, none of the women in the 10th assembly, returned. Only 3 women (3.27% of the 109-member senate) were elected. In the house of representatives, out of 360 seats exactly 13 women (3.6%) were elected to represent their constituencies in both 2019 and 2023. In the state assemblies, the number of national assembly seats women clinched between 2019 and 2023 rises and falls. In 2019, 44 females were elected, while 48 were elected in 2023.

Also important in the regional spread of women in elective positions. In 2019, the South West proved to be least bias to women by electing 6 women into the national assembly, making 1.2% of the Assembly. The number dropped to 2 (0.4%) in 2023. This followed closely by the South East which had 5 (1.0%) and 4 (0.85%) women elected in 2019 and 2023 respectively. The South South and North East switched places between 2019 and 2023 where South South elected 3 women in 2019 and 4 in 2023. The North East elected 4 and 3 females in 2019 and 2023 respectively. The

North Central trailed with 2 female representatives in 2023. The North West did not elect any female lawmaker in both 2019 and 2023.

This low representation is consistent at the state legislature where only one female was elected in the geopolitical region in 2019 and only 2 in 2023. The South West maintained its lead of being more gender unbiased by sending 16 women to the state assembly in both election cycles. The South South gave 11 and 10 women access to political representation in 2019 and 2023 respectively. In 2019, the South East gave 9; the North Central 5 and the North East 2. Coming to 2023, the South East, North Central and North East elected 5, 12 and 3 women respectively.

It must be added that, though minimal compared to their southern counterparts, women in the north are making inroads into politics. In 2019, a woman almost defeated the incumbent male Darius Ishaku to emerge governor of Taraba state. In 2023, a woman also a serving senator, against great odds of socio-cultural sentiments of the patriarchal system, defeated a litany of strong men in her constituency to clinch the national ruling APC's ticket as the governorship flagbearer for Adamawa state. She almost defeated the incumbent PDP's candidate to emerge winner. In Adamawa, most people loved Aisha Binani. The only reservation most people had about her candidacy is her gender. This sentiment is similar to what Patricia Ette faced when she was elected Speaker of the House of Representatives. There was so much resistance from her male colleagues, especially those from the northern parts who, citing religion, believed that women should not lead men. Her speakership was truncated.

Findings

The findings of this study validate Dogo's (2014) submission that during colonial and precolonial times, women in the north and south were impacted differently by the patriarchy. Women in the southern parts (i.e. mostly the Igbos and Yorubas) were more politically active than their northern counterparts (mostly the Hausas). Though outside the scope of this study, we cannot ignore the effects of gender inequality on related indicators such as education, employment and more. Some of the impact of gender bias in the society is seen in the economic under-development it breeds. The North East and North West have long held the record of having the highest poverty rate in the country.

It can be seen that the South West is ahead in terms of giving women access to, and control of, political power. The north, however, lags far behind in terms of gender bias against women. On a similar note, years ago, a federal house of representatives contestant in Plateau state attempted to use the gender bias and

stereotyping card against his female opponent to de-market her. In his campaign gimmicks he told the voters that his opponent is a woman, a single one at that, who will most likely follow a man and surrender the constituency's goods to him. By that, he implied that as a woman, an unmarried one at that, she is a prostitute who will go after a man and squander her constituency's resources to please her man. In her response, she turned those stones hurled at her to stepping stones. She pointed to the voters that women do not forget home, but men are too quick to forget home and if she prostitutes, it is the constituency that will benefit from that. Therefore, she will be of more use and service to her people than the male opponent. Her people have found her worthy of representing them four consecutive times.

These isolated victories of some courageous women swimming against the tide of traditional norms holding the patriarchal system are inspirational. These few women are torch bearers to others coming after who can dare dream, aspire and determine to make inroads in politics. It is believed that with more decisive action to empower women and grant them access to all forms of socio-economic and political goods, the region will fare much better than it currently does.

Conclusion

Currently, calls for gender equality, particularly women's participation in politics is much touted in the media, seminars and workshops. Nigeria needs to take decisive steps to change its norms to create a society where no citizen is truly inferior to another on the basis of gender. A just society is the panacea for lasting development. Although, the Nigerian woman does not enjoy the kind of privileges her counterparts in parts of the developed societies enjoy, she is not where she used to be, say, 20 years ago. This points at the fact that the Nigerian society is becoming more women friendly and inclusivity is encouraged -though slowly. Much needs to be done. Rather than insisting that women be restricted to the kitchen and the bedroom, the more women we have in our boardrooms, the more women-friendly and gender-balanced policies the Nigerian society will make.

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