

## **GENDER AND GOOD GOVERNANCE IN JOHN LOCKE: RELIGIOUS AND POLITICAL PERSPECTIVES**

Ikechukwu Anthony, Kanu  
Department of Philosophy,  
University of Nigeria, Nsukka  
Email: [ikee\\_mario@yahoo.com](mailto:ikee_mario@yahoo.com)

### **Abstract**

*John Locke, the father of British Empiricism and the wheel behind the 1688 revolution in England, is one of the finest minds in the catalogue of modern philosophers. His contribution to the development of political philosophy is immense, and has continued to be the starting point of a retinue of modern political theorizing. In this piece, the researcher focuses on the interaction of the idea of gender inequality and good governance in John Locke. Contrary to the current of his time, Locke saw the need for marital equality and fidelity and draws out their political implications. Locke argues that marital equality is indispensable to social and political equalities among men and women in a given society. And that a tyrannical head of a family can never be a good candidate for democratic political leader. Thus, this piece brings out Locke's concept of good governance, which presents the private and the political life as spheres that cannot be treated in isolation in any sincere pursuit of good governance.*

**Keywords: John Locke, Gender, good governance.**

### **Introduction**

Kanu (2012) observes that the relegation of women to the background of second class citizens or even insignificance has been evident through the various stages of the evolution of human history. The Greeks, in their classics, according to Kanu (2009) had misogynic premises about women. By law and custom, the woman was under the assertive authority of the husband. On marriage she passed from the seclusion and scrupulous custody of her father to similar treatment in her husband's house. In this regard, McKenzie (1965) avers,

Marital fidelity was not imposed on the husband.... There are numerous allusions to the popular belief that woman is by instinct a nymphomaniac, it is assumed that no woman can be trusted to remain faithful unless she is closely watched. (p. 936).

As a consequence they were circumscribed to domestic service roles which included bearing children and daily safekeeping of the house, and was denied the honour of an active role in the society.

Aristotle (Cited by Peschke, 2004), regarded the man as the active, life and form-giving principle in procreation. The man is said to bequeath the seed. The woman is merely passive and only confers matter. As such he concluded that only men ought to be born, and if perchance women are born it is as a result of some failure or defect; he therefore estimated the woman as a *mas occasionatus*, a maimed man. Demosthenes (cited by Hannon, 1967) speaks for the Greek world, "We keep concubines for the daily requirements of the body, wives to bear us legitimate children and to be faithful guardians of our household" (pp. 60-61). This was the acme and prime of her ambition. She must be silent as Sophocles (cited by Boniface, 1995) expressed in his poem, "Woman, for woman silence is grace" (p. 44).

This notwithstanding, with the emergence of Christianity and philosophers who philosophized from the Christian background, the idea of equality in the relation of the male and female sexes began to surface in the philosophical reflections. This does not in any way rule out the position of some theologians who had misogynic expressions. However, in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, contrary to the current of his time, Locke, the father of empiricism and an apostle of the equality of mankind, argued for marital equality and fidelity and draws out its political implications. He avers that marital equality is indispensable to social and political equalities among men and women in a given society, and thus good governance. This piece investigates the dynamics of gender equality and good governance in John Locke.

### **The condition of women during the time of Locke**

The radical nature of Locke's call for women's equality is often lost to us after over a century of protest and changing social attitudes. Yet the subordination of women to men when Locke was writing remains striking. There is no place in his writings where he comes out to describe the experiences of women. However, his argument for the equality of men and women and the views of philosophers who shared the same geographical and historical background gives us an insight into the condition of women at the time. Indicators of this subordination are the following:

1. British women had fewer grounds for divorce than men until 1923
2. Husbands controlled their wives' personal property (with the occasional exception of land) until the Married Women's Property Acts of 1870 and 1882
3. Children were the husband's
4. Rape was impossible within a marriage and
5. Wives lacked crucial features of legal personhood, since the husband was taken as the representative of the family (thereby eliminating the need for women's suffrage). This gives some indication of how disturbing and/or ridiculous the idea of a marriage between equals could appear to Victorians.

At this time, the legal status of women could be compared to the status of slaves. The legal subordination of women was a principle regulating the existing social relations between men and women. The condition of women as described by J. S Mill years after Locke, gives us an insight into the condition of women in Britain at that time. He described the relationship as active domination in which women conform to men's wills. As an apostle of human dignity, he called for the establishment of the principle of perfect equality, admitting no power, privilege or disability to any side (Capaldi, 1964). He compared the subordination of women to slavery based on a striking example of a social relation grounded on force that has survived despite generations of institutes grounded on equal justice (Mill, 2006). In the slave-like relationship, there are consequences; Mill (cited by Michael, 2010) opined that it is difficult to know the capacities and capabilities of both sexes; this is because it distorts the actions and perceptions of both sexes.

Mill (1965) revealed another dimension of this inequality which was the poor wages given to women in the public sector. He argued that their poor wages were due to the prejudice of society which has made almost every woman an appendage of some men, making men to take the lion's share of whatever belongs to both. He insisted that another cause for the low wages given to women was the surplus of women labour for unskilled jobs. The law and custom has also made it so that a woman had scarcely any means of livelihood except that as a wife and mother. Even while she worked as a married woman, her salary was owned and controlled by the husband. He maintained that the law of marriage in Britain deprived a woman of many of the normal powers of autonomous adults, from controlling her earnings, to entering into contracts, to defending her bodily autonomy by resisting unwanted sexual relations. To create

conditions conducive to marriage of equals rather than one of master and slave, Mill argued that marriage law itself will have to be altered. Women will have to be provided equal educational and employment opportunities. Both men and women will have to become capable of sustaining genuinely equal and reciprocal relationships within marriage (Kanu, 2012).

The public discrimination against women, according to Mill (1965) was a manifestation of the desire for dominance. The generality of male sex could not tolerate the idea of living with an equal. Indeed, men's fear of living with an equal in the household was a driving force behind the resistance of granting women opportunities in the public life (Shiprups, 1998). In this regard, Mill made a two-pronged argument about women's exclusion from the public life: the first was based on the idea that it was a tyranny to them and secondly, it was to the detriment of society. It was from this background that Locke began his philosophy of gender.

### **Good governance in Locke's political thought**

In Locke's political philosophy, the state of nature is the first stage in the process of transition into civil society. The state of nature with all its inadequacies creates the need for a political society. This need speaks of the inadequacies of the state of nature, which creates the appetite for anticipating a good system of governance in the civil society. Moving from a state of nature where individuals are not subjected to common legitimate authority with the power to legislate or adjudicate disputes, Locke stressed upon the dynamics of individual consent as the mechanism for forming the civil society. Locke (1999) wrote, "Men being, as has been said, by nature all free, equal and independent, no one can be put out of this state, and subjected to the political power of another, without his own consent" (p. 142).

The first process of transition, leads to the formation of the community, where each person agrees to surrender individual control over their executive power of the law of nature in exchange for an equal share, along with the other contractors, in the joint control of everyone's pooled executive power of the law of nature. As such, the executive power of the law of nature is de-privatized (Iloyd, 1995). The formation of the community only takes us half way into the formation of the political society. It is thus an intermediate state between the state of nature and the civil society. It is not yet a state because there is no formally constituted body which has the authority to legislate and enforce the law. The formation of the community leaves things incomplete and calls for a

second stage in order to establish a civil society. This involves the formulation of a formally constituted authority to exercise the collective executive power of the state of nature. It should be noted that the entrustment of their executive power is not to individual persons, but to a constitutional form. The constitutional form would help people identify those who hold political power with right. By majority decision, the members of the community entrust their collective executive powers of the law of nature into the hands of a constitutional form of government, and thus, the state is created (Iloyd, 1995).

For the constitutional form of government to run a system to be ascribed as good in Locke, certain values are indispensable. For Locke, justice and moral goodness are indispensable variable for a government to be considered good. For this reason, the violation of treaties, political assassinations and unjust war are inimical to good governance (Maritain, 1985). Good governance must show itself in an ability to create a bond that is teleological, ontological, affective, moral, organisational and communicative (Messner cited by Anaulogho, 1997). Good governance should be able to create a society where people are responsible for one another as well as towards the community as a whole. This moral responsibility gives rise to the affective bond of the community. The Lockean great principle of morality is, “to do as one would be done to” (Locke, 1999). The reason why people unite themselves under a civil society for Locke is to preserve their property. By property he meant lives, liberties and estates (Locke, 2003). And thus for a government to be good, it should be able to protect property and punish people who go against the preservation of property. From the foregoing, good governance is realized when the purpose of the civil society is attained.

### **The conjugal compact as the foundation of civil society**

For the realisation of the civil society to be attained, people must come together and be bound by a common factor. It is in this regard that Locke speaks of compact, which he used interchangeably with contract, and to which everyone has a natural obligation which rests on the natural law (Yolton, 1993). Even though, the idea of contract or compact primarily comes to mind when discussing the formation of political society in Locke, he believed that people can still enter into various compacts or contracts even after the civil society has been formed; for instance, the conjugal compact between men and women, which separates marriage from concubinage (Locke, 2003).

In his *Second Treatise of Government*, Locke (2003) speaks of the family as the foundation of the political society. It is in fact the first society which gave beginning to the civil society. In this regard he wrote,

God having made man such a creature, that in his own judgement that it was not good for him to be alone, put him under strong obligations of necessity, convenience, and inclination, to drive him into society.... The first society was between man and wife, which gave beginning to that between parents and children. (p. 133).

Without the conjugal society comprising of husband, wife and children, there wouldn't be a civil society; for the civil society is born from the conjugal society. This is not to say that with the birth of the civil society that the conjugal society dies off. No! The both co-exist. The conjugal society is a society within the civil society. Its 'withinness' within the civil society, and its subjection to the compact of the civil society, does not undermine its importance, because a failure in the conjugal society would amount to a failure in the civil society. This explains why the issue of gender is very significant for Locke in his political philosophy.

### **Gender and John Locke**

As regards the end of marriage, Locke speaks of procreation, mutual support of the spouses and upbringing and education of children (Locke, 2003). However, when discussing the nature of marriage, he says it must be between a man and a woman. Thus monogamy for Locke is the ideal form of marriage, ruling out polygamy, either in the form of polygyny or polyandry. Monogamy, in the contention of Locke creates a basis for equality, for there can be no equality between husband and wife when he or she is only one among many. This is why polygamous marriages lack unity, peace and stability. The principle of equality without which there can be no justice, is an ingredient of stability of every human society (Anaulogho, 1997). Thus in Locke, polygamy does not create room for equality and thus justice.

Filmer (cited by Anaulogho, 1997) slighted women in his interpretation of the book of Genesis 1:28. He argued for Adam's sole dominion over everything that God had created including Eve. This mark of authority was for him a sign that the man was superior to the woman. Locke (2003) disagrees with Filmer and argues that the passage in question does not speak of Adam's sole dominion, but of Adam and Eve. In this case, Locke understands the concept 'man' as a generic term. In his contention, the phrase, "God blessed them" meant that the dominion belong to both sexes. Locke further argues that reason and revelation show that

both parents are equally entitled to paternal power. The arrogation of paternal power solely to the man, is as a result of the use of the word paternal power instead of parental power, and not because the man naturally has any prerogative to paternal power. Locke (2003) quotes passages from the scripture to proof that man and woman are equal,

And accordingly we see the positive law of God everywhere joins them together, without distinction, when it commands the obedience of children, honour thy father and mother (Exod. 20:12). Whosoever curseth his father or mother (Lev: 20. 9). Ye shall fear every man his father and mother (Lev 19.3). children obey your parents (Eph 6.1) is the style of the Old and New Testaments. (pp. 22-23).

The argument of Filmer, based on his interpretation of Genesis, meant that man had both domestic and political dominion over the woman. To this, Locke vehemently objects. He extends the equality of men and women even to the church. He admitted a woman's right to speak in the church when she has a special inspiration to do so. Like Plato, Locke recommended equal education for both men and women. In his letter to Mrs Clarke, which was a reply to her request for advice about her daughters, he recommended,

And although greater regard be to be had to beauty in the daughters, yet i will take the liberty to say, that the more they are in the air, without prejudice to their faces, the stronger and healthier they will be; and the nearer they come to the hardships of their brothers in their education, the greater advantage will they receive from it all the remaining part of their lives. (p. 9).

Locke's position on this matter is informed by his experience and observation of modern democracies that have shown that women can be excellent in all professions if they have the necessary education. Countries like Israel, Britain, Pakistan, etc. where women have ruled is a vindication of Locke's position that women are capable of political leadership (Anaulogho, 1997).

Although he did not advocate for women ordination, Locke's interpretation, restrained and cautious as it appeared to be, was radical, even unusual during the time of Locke. His interpretation posed a threat in an environment where leadership in the public, both in the area of religion and politics was seen as the exclusive of the male sex.

## **Gender and good governance**

As already indicated, good governance for Locke, is when the objectives of the civil society is realised. One of the basic reasons for realising a political society is for justice and thus equality among all men and women. Marital equality is indispensable to social and political equalities, and thus good governance. A tyrannical head of a family, for Locke cannot be a good candidate for democratic political leader, and thus cannot actualise good governance. This is based on the understanding that the realms of life between the private and the public cannot be separated or treated in isolation from each other (Okin, 1991). Every action is potentially infused with public meaning. Locke's position on this matter is born out of the realization that political activities reach into and begin with private relations most especially in the family. What goes on between man and woman in their home is created by and in turn creates what goes on in legislature and battlefields. Private actions could create public inequalities of power while public decisions in turn could create domestic inequalities of power while public decisions could create domestic inequalities of power. The decision makers in the political society, from voters to the legislators, develop their first political awareness in private and familial setting (Mansbridge and Okin, 1993). Thus for the realization of good governance, gender equality is indispensable.

## **Conclusion**

Locke's objection to Filmer's position of natural and political subordination of women has partly inspired men and women ever since the fight for gender equality. His contribution or influence on feminism cannot be overemphasized. Theories of women inferiority similar to that of Filmer and to which Locke opposed vehemently, have perpetrated the oppression of women in so many places and for a long time. Proponents of this position which thinks that women are by nature politically subordinate have employed biological, as in the case of Aristotle or theological, as in the case of Filmer and John Knox, justifications for their views. Locke in this regard offers a new perspective, which maintains that these views are the product of nurture and not nature: the upbringing of boys and girls has great impact on their self image, accounting for Locke's advocacy for equal educational opportunities for both men and women. For the purpose of a political society that is balanced, where justice and peace would reign, Locke calls for equal opportunities for both men and women, both in the private and public life. In Locke, good governance is not realizable without gender balance.

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