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**GENDER DISCOURSE AND NATIONAL
DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA**

By

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Abstract

There have been growing agitations for gender equality in Nigerian society in particular and the African continent in general. Consequently, a plethora of philosophical theories and literature on gender equality and gender inclusiveness became ubiquitous in the philosophical landscape as a society is built on the provisions of laws to foster fairness in human relations. Despite these concerted efforts toward gender equality, society still struggles to fully evolve from its firm patriarchal foundations. This slow pace in eliminating gender inequality and producing a society devoid of gender bias is seen in African states in general. African women are becoming more vocal and proactive in their dissatisfaction with the gender discrimination in society. African females and feminist philosophers have struggled for recognition and societal acceptance and implementation of some of the laws that have been made at national and international levels to ensure the revisitation of policies that reiterate the need for women to enjoy equal opportunities with their male counterparts especially concerning female participation in politics. This paper is in pursuit of gender equality within the crucible of gender equity and equal opportunities in the political, economic, socio-cultural, educational and other sectors that require the services of human resources. The goal is to foster an atmosphere of partnership and complementarity between both genders, where the female gender can complement the male gender in every area that will require the unique expertise and makeup of either gender. The paper uses critical and analytical methods.

Introduction

The advent of feminism and the feminist movements that emerged in the later parts of the 19th and 20th centuries marked a major shift in the predisposition toward gender balance in every facet of the world economy. The brewing agitations for gender equality in a society that was hitherto swept underfoot became a matter that held primacy in human civilization. Consequently, a plethora of literature on gender equality and gender inclusiveness became ubiquitous in the literary landscape and scholarship as a society built on the provisions of feminist ideologies to foster balance and fairness in human relations. Despite these concerted efforts toward gender equality and balance, society still struggles to fully evolve from its firm patriarchal foundations. While the Western world has recorded remarkable strides and progress in gender balance, the African society still leans on a fragile clasp, held by patriarchal norms, and has taken more time in inculcating gender equity. This has led to the emergence of various African feminist literature in the 21st century that attends to gender discrimination to produce a society where there is no gender exclusivity and where women would also be properly represented at the echelons of power. This essay is a discursive work that examines gender imbalance and its implication on national development in a bid to contribute to the already existing body of knowledge that reiterates that bridging the gender gap is a non-negotiable component of achieving sustainable growth and development in Nigeria.

Theorizing Gender

Gender is understood as the classification of the human species into male and female, or man-woman categories and their projected reconciliations. However, gender as a theory transcends much more than a binary identification of humans into these categories.¹ Gender is, “a social construction of the relations between male and female in terms of roles in power-sharing, decision making, division of labour and remuneration

on labour both at home and in the workplace”². Chinwokwu and Arop corroborate this view when they note that “gender is socially constructed and specific to a cultural milieu within a geographical boundary”³. Idike buttresses this view in succinct terms when they add that “gender is more of a cultural category, underpinned by socially constructed (and contested) beliefs and rules about identity and sexuality”⁴.

These cultural variations that guide human relationships are points of constraints and have implications on how individual actors may perceive their identity and well being in society as well as their responses to opportunities. In a male dominant society, the female gender falls at the receiving end of many of these socio-cultural laws and norms. The role of a woman in any society is predicated upon the provisions of culture as these cultural norms dictate what a woman should or should not do. This means that what a woman is expected to do in a particular culture is different from what a woman is expected to do in another distinct culture. This is why Samuel and Segun observes that “gender has been viewed as the socially constructed attributes, opportunities and relationships associated with being male and female and which determines what is expected, allowed and valued in a woman or a man in a given context”⁵.

National Development

National development refers to the sustainable and holistic growth and development of a nation and its citizens. The growth of a nation is predicated upon how much of an impact the nation has had on its citizens. The Federal Government of Nigeria in promoting the third National Development plan of 1980 explains the ramifications of development thus: True development must mean the development of the human person, the unfolding and realization of his creative potential, enabling him to improve his material conditions of living through the use of resources available to him. It is a process by which man’s personality is enhanced, and it is that enhanced personality, creative, organized and disciplined-which is the moving force behind the

socioeconomic transformation of any society.

According to Okoli, “Onabanjo and M’bayo opine that national development should be man-oriented and not institution oriented”⁶. They add that “for Elugbe, national development refers among other things, to the growth of the nation in terms of unity, education, economic well-being and mass participation in government”⁷. Participation and representation are, accordingly, core elements of democracy. According to R.C Okeke and Ifeagwazi, “national development refers to nationwide development in a nation-state and implies the well-being of a manifest majority of the citizens of such a state in material terms”⁸ For Idike, it connotes decreases in inequality levels as well as the guarantee of the security of lives and property.⁹

Development does not just entail equipping the populace with the financial wherewithal for their basic needs alone but an increase in the production of goods and services with a concomitant increase in income leading to an improved standard of living.¹⁰ National development can also be described as the overall development or a collective socio-economic, political as well as religious advancement of a country or nation¹¹. National development is therefore predicated upon the holistic development of the human resources in a nation expressed in an improved standard of living, and the political, socio-economic, and educational growth that underpins the sustainability of the nation.

Gender and National Development

The general friction that exists when discussing the issue of gender is the reality that women are left out in policymaking, and are discriminated against in matters of economy, opportunities and education in general. Even in the developed nations of the world, women are still craving full support and the opportunity to showcase their expertise in diverse sectors. Data from the Northern zones report very low participation of women in politics and public life. While women in Southern Nigeria gained the

right to vote in 1959, it was not until 1979 – twenty years after – that Northern Nigerian women were allowed to vote¹². Women continue to be under-represented in the National Assembly where they occupy only 6.4% of seats. Figures 1 and 2 present the percentage of seats held by women in the Nigerian Senate and House of Representatives for the 2007 and 2011 general elections.¹³

With the clamour for gender balance proliferating in contemporary society, Nigeria as a nation intensified its commitment toward a political system that is gender-inclusive with the promulgation of the principle of non-discrimination in Section 2 of the 1999 constitution. This has however not yielded its desired result as females are still not given equal opportunities with their male counterparts socially, politically, educationally and economically. As of 2020, the national average of women's political participation in the country has remained at 6.7% in elective and appointive offices, which ranks below the global average of 22.5%, the African regional figure of 23.4%, and the West African sub-regional figure of 15%.¹⁴

Connell in a very expressive manner emphasizes that in civil society, “the majority of men gain...from the overall subordination of women”¹⁵. This reality becomes even more daunting when we consider the fact that women contribute immensely to the productivity of any nation globally, and are yet treated with disdain. It is expedient, therefore, in line with the millennium development goals that women should be included in the socio-economic and political development of the nation as men alone cannot meet up with the development goals of the nation. In fact, according to Mbah, contends that “women are the heart of development in every nation”¹⁶. It is a truism that women are involved in some sectors of production and economic generation in the nation like subsistence agriculture and domestic labour in addition to bearing children and home keeping. They also contribute to the economy by involving in trading, wage employment in cottage industries and factories, etcetera. The National Bureau of Statistics (2004) indicates that

women represent 87% of those employed in the service sector, which involves predominantly informal and unregulated forms of employment.

One of the indices for measuring the growth and civility of a nation is the number of women that are part of the leadership of the nation. Every human society is a composite whole that comprises the male and female gender. Therefore, for progress to be all-encompassing, the economic, socio-cultural and political landscape must bridge the gender gap. A gender-inclusive nation has decided to rise from limiting patriarchal foundations that are discriminatory. The agitations for gender equality and equity are a result of the fact that there is no balance in the treatment of women in the workplace, and there are no provisions for equal opportunities.

The 21st century is marked by globalization and inclusiveness and continues to explode into a haven where the tension that is created by gender imbalance and the disparity that exists could have dire consequences on any nation. For centuries, women have experienced discrimination in careers and the workplace. There is a notable difference in the salary of a woman and a man in the same level of qualification, expertise and experience in a workplace and this one truncates efficiency and quality.¹⁷ This is because such a phenomenon forestalls partnership between both genders and this is detrimental to growth and development.

The erstwhile president, Goodluck Jonathan was keen on the empowerment and inclusion of women in his administration. This led him to implement the 35% Affirmative Action for women in ministerial appointments. Despite this adoption, the Buhari's administration is yet to pass it into law, so that it gains legal status as it has come to be a mere paperwork that can be easily ignored by any leader. It is not surprising therefore that the Buhari led administration has completely ignored it. It was in order to establish gender balance in the political atmosphere of Nigeria that Senator Abiodun Olujimi representing Ekiti South in the National Assembly reintroduced the bill on gender equality in Nigeria after it was rejected in October 2015 on

religious and cultural grounds. The bill was to promote equal opportunities for both male and female gender and to eliminate degrading religious and socio-political discriminatory practices against women. This bill was, however, rejected again on weird religious grounds on March 15, 2016¹⁸. This, therefore, indicates that Nigeria is still saddled with the responsibility to revisit some of these religious and socio-cultural beliefs that relegate women to the background. Women, in turn, need to speed up activities that require that they reinstate their desire to be included in every part of nation-building and governance.

Promoting gender equality is therefore one way to include women in the developmental strides of the nation. Okumo and Asfaw assert that “Promoting gender equality and women’s empowerment is an essential component of an effective economic and human (social) development strategy”¹⁹. Chukwuku and Arop define gender equality in very clear terms as “the absence of discrimination of any individual based on sex concerning the allocation of economic resources, political positions or access to social services”²⁰

The United Nations Development program further buttresses the need for gender equity when they note that gender equality accelerates sustainable development in a nation. They put it in clearer terms when they add that a “one per cent increase in gender inequality reduces a country’s development index”²¹. This demonstrates that excluding women in the developmental strategies of any society is detrimental to the growth and development of that society. The aim of the national gender policy of the Federal Republic of Nigeria becomes very instrumental at this point which pledges to:

Build a just society devoid of discrimination, harness the full potentials of all social groups regardless of sex or circumstance, promote the enjoyment of fundamental human rights and protect the health, social, economic and political well being of all citizens to achieve equitable rapid economic growth; evolve evidence-based planning

and governance system where human, social, financial and technological resources are efficiently and effectively deployed for sustainable development.²²

Women Empowerment and Sustainable Development

The fact that women's inclusion in any sector of a nation's activity contributes immensely to geometric growth only means that empowering women in every sector of a country's economy becomes a primary goal. Developments and strides in every nation must be hinged on partnership with men and seamless complementation. Any attempt to improve society with an act of dishonour and discrimination against the female gender only accounts for a rapid decline. Most developed nations of the world have seen the need for this and implemented increased women's participation in politics. Women should be allowed to participate fully with men in the designation, implementation, orchestration and even execution of policies in government geared towards sustainable development. It is in the light of this that the Beijing Declaration Platform for Action (1995)^{23s} emphasizes women's empowerment and their full participation based on equality in all spheres of society which include participation in the decision making process and access to power as being fundamental to the achievement of equality, development and peace. Oyeneho cited and emphasizes that:

Empowerment is a process with a series of steps by which individuals gain access to critical economic and educational resources, such as information, assets, cash and skills. The individuals use these to bring about changes in their environment and to influence other persons and institutions with competing or conflicts of interest²⁴.

Women empowerment transcends just gender equality alone. Its positive benefits and advantages are enormous. It produces a ripple effect in ensuring stable families which translates to peace and security in a nation.²⁵ This is because the family being

the smallest unit of society is the core centre of training for any child and represents the foundation upon which society is built. Being the home keepers and primary custodians of families, empowering women would allow for better families with the right training that can transform society.

Empowering women would also be integral to exposing them to their fundamental human rights. This would help in eliminating destructive and subjugating cultural practices like gender-based violence, female genital mutilation, and other obnoxious and dehumanizing practices like sexual abuse suffered by women and even young girls in society. Chinwokwu and Arop note that:

The Millennium Project Task Force on Education and Gender Equality (2005) provided five components for women's empowerment. These include Women's sense of self-worth; the right to have and determine choices; the right to have access to opportunities and resources; the right to have the power to control their own lives both within and outside the home and the ability to influence the direction of social change to create more just social and economic order.²⁶

The USAID policy, therefore, earmarks different strategies for the empowerment of women in society. One of them is increased opportunities for women in social and political activities. The political situation of a nation represents the growth of that nation. According to King, "The goals of development are largely defined political process"²⁷. Therefore, empowering women entails increasing the capacity of women to participate in politics and governance. They should be given unreserved rights to vote and be voted for key political offices. Women are truly empowered when they sustain the power to act freely, exercise their rights, and fulfil their potential as full and equal members of society"²⁸.

Removal of gender disparities is another way women can be properly empowered. Women should be allowed equal access

to resources and wealth control as their male counterparts. Some of the socio-cultural practices in Nigeria are detrimental to women's empowerment. A good example is the Igbo system where women are not allowed to inherit landed properties after the death of their husband, especially when a male child is absent. The act of relegating women to the background and paying them less at their workplace, even when they are equally qualified or more qualified than their male counterparts is an act that must be completely jettisoned to allow for sustainable growth and national development.

Gender-based violence is another scourge that has grossly limited women. According to the Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against women²⁹, (CEDAW, 1992) Article 1, "gender-based violence inhibits women's capacity to enjoy their rights and freedom based on equality with men and it also impairs their ability to enjoy their basic fundamental human rights as enshrined in the international law and conventions". CEDAW (1992) Article 1 went on to define gender-based violence as "any act of violence that results in or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life". Women have been victims of all forms of violence ranging from physical abuse from partners and every other act that suggests that women are of lesser value than men. When gender-based violence is eradicated, women would be better able to express themselves and be able to pursue their personal goals.³⁰

Another strategy for women empowerment that would translate to national growth and development is increased education for women. Nigeria from colonial times till date is a society that holds to the patriarchal system of providing education for only the male gender with female education coming as secondary. The Global Gender Index Analysis report presented by World Economic Forum (WEF) in 2013 named "economic participation and opportunity; educational attainment; health and survival and political empowerment" as areas where the gender gap is very

prevalent in the world³¹. The gender gap in attaining education in Nigeria and even globally is shocking and is a great cause for concern. This was the fear of Buchi Emecheta's book titled, *Second Class Citizen*. In it, Buchi mentioned the experience of a girl named Adah, the protagonist heroine of the novel, who from her early life has been passionate about Western education, But her brother- Boy- was picked from the family for that education Adah was so enthusiastic about. She was deliberately left out because of the belief that a Woman's education will definitely end up in a man's kitchen. This experience of her life led her to an unsuccessful marriage with Francis which left her life in ruins.³² -Riley notes that "in almost all the developed countries of the world, females are more likely to be illiterate and have spent few years in school than their male counterparts"³³. Women have been successfully short-changed in places of work based on their lower educational qualifications when compared with their male counterparts. A great sign of progress from gender inequality in every society is the equal opportunities for education for everyone irrespective of gender.

Nigeria's Role in Bridging the Gender Gap towards Nation Building

Despite the glaring shortcomings of the Federal Government in enforcing gender balance and passing some proposals for gender equality into law, Nigeria has at some point pledged its loyalty and commitment to fostering gender equity and bridging the gender gap. The Nigerian government has signed major gender treaties globally that foster gender balance. They include the International Civil and Political Rights Covenant - the International Economic, Social and Cultural Rights Covenant, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the Children's Rights Convention, and the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (Convention against Torture)³⁴.

In the year 2000 Nigeria adopted and passed into law the National Policy on Women, guided by the global instrument of the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and its optional protocols. Since then, several gender-responsive policies have been adopted including among others: The Female Genital Mutilation (Prohibition) Policy of 2002 (which is currently under review to make it more proactive); the National Gender Policy (2006) (also currently under review); the Gender Policy for the Nigeria Police Force (2010) and the Gender-based Violence (Prohibition) Law (now adopted in many states in Nigeria)³⁵.

Evaluation and Conclusion

Nigeria as a nation is still very much at an infancy stage as it pertains to bridging the gender gap and allowing for equal opportunities. This millipede pace in eliminating gender inequality and producing a society devoid of gender bias is seen in African states in general. This accounts for the proliferation of different kinds of literature in the Literary landscape that speaks against gender inequality and establishes feminism as a core ideology that should infiltrate the African society and permeate into every sector of governance and society. From bold female writers like Flora Nwapa who became the first-ever female writer in Nigeria, publishing her novel *Efuru* in 1966 as a response to the highly misogynistic society of Nigeria with its accompanying ills expressed in culture and tradition, to Buchi Emecheta's *Joys of Motherhood*, African women began to voice out their dissatisfaction with the gender discrimination in society. Flora Nwapa and Buchi Emecheta are foremost pioneers of the feminist movement in Nigeria expressed in African literature and inspired the new generation of feminist writers in our contemporary society led by Chimamanda Adichie. And with the emergence of other feminist authors like Lola Shoneyin, Ayobami Adebayo, and a host of others, the Nigerian philosophical structure and the whole African philosophical and literary enterprise have played a major role in contributing to the clamour for gender equity.

The onus, however, lies on the government to start the processes of implementing some of the laws that are geared towards gender equity. The 35% Affirmative Action should be revisited and passed into law. Other policies that are only at the level of mere theoretical ruminations should be translated into pragmatic values and practices and programmes that reiterate the need for women to enjoy equal opportunities with their male counterparts should be emphasized. The signing of different global policies by regulatory bodies that emphasize gender equality is only the first step toward bridging the gender gap. Intentional actions that are truly gender-friendly should be implemented and taken seriously.

One major area that should be visited is the area of female participation in politics. While Western nations have increased women's participation in politics, there is a dire need for more women to be integrated into key political positions if we are to experience growth and development in Nigeria. Women have taken different leadership positions in Nigeria, Africa and the world in general and have proven to be very instrumental and efficient in positions of leadership. Therefore, there is no basis whatsoever for withholding leadership positions from them. Furthermore, women should be paid fairly like their male counterparts and economic stability should never be the exclusive preserve of the male gender only.

Flowing from this, instead of women canvassing for gender equality in politics, the theory of equal opportunity should be adopted.

This theory should emphasise the meritocratic system of selection and opportunity, where a person is allowed to contest an election if he or she is the best candidate. Consequently, being the best candidate requires certain qualifications. But given the fact that women are sometimes victims of marginalization, they may not emerge as the best candidates as their educational background, and financial, emotional, parental and societal support may not be sufficient enough compare to that of their male counterparts. This is where equity and a level playing

ground should be put into consideration.

Equity in the sense which is being applied in this paper is the process of being fair to women and men. Consequently, “since women and men have different experiences and backgrounds, they should not only be given equal access to resources and opportunities, but also the means of benefitting from this equality.”³⁷

As much as the goal of bridging the gender gap is integral to the sustainable growth and development of the nation, it is pertinent to discourage radical and destructive feminist movements that seek to arouse gender wars and portray feminism as a war against the male gender. The systemic foundations of patriarchy have taken deep roots in Nigerian society and African society in general. Therefore, actualizing a society free from gender biases is a gradual process that would not happen overnight. Therefore, degenerating into gender wars and inspiring hatred for the male gender is only a counterproductive endeavour that would plunge society deeper into realms of underdevelopment.

The pursuit of gender equality must be within the crucible of gender equity and equal opportunities in the political, economic, socio-cultural educational and every sector that requires the services of human resources. The goal is to foster an atmosphere of partnership and complementation between both genders, where the female gender can complement the male gender in every area that will require the unique expertise and makeup of either gender. This way, the clamour for gender equality would be seen in the light of progress and not an attempt to raise any gender above another or discredit any gender. When the gender gap is bridged and there are equal opportunities for everyone, society would grow geometrically in leaps and bounds. This is because every act of integrating women into the goals and plans of sustainable development is greeted with concomitant growth in every facet of the nation.

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