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Social Imbalance through Gender Inequality in Nigeria: Challenges and Way Forward

Rosemary Nneoma BARNABAS[1]&David KUMIJE[2]
[1&2]Department of Public Administration, Prince Abubakar Audu University, Anyigba NIGERIA

Corresponding Author:
Rosemary Nneoma BARNABAS
barnabas.rn@ksu.edu.ng

Abstract
This paper examines gender inequality as a social phenomenal imbalance that affects national development in Nigeria. The patriarchal system prevalent in many countries of the world of which Nigeria is not an exception has relegated women to the background, thereby making them as though second class citizens. Gender inequality has created wide gender gaps in many countries of the world with very devastating social, economic and health consequences on especially the female gender. Advocates of gender equality submit that women empowerment promotes national development. Against this backdrop, the study attempts an examination of the consequences of gender inequality on national development with motive of identifying challenges associated with gender discrimination and suggesting a way forward. The study adopted the content analysis approach which involved generating data from books, reputable journal articles, magazines, documents, reports and internet materials. Findings of the study revealed that gender inequality has had profound negative consequences on national development as the discrimination against women and their relegation to the background have inhibited their capacity to contribute significantly to national development as they lack appropriate education, resources and political voice. As a way forward, gender equality must be promoted as a powerful instrument to resolve devastating consequences on the female gender through strengthening of policy on gender equality for social justice and national development.
Keywords: challenges, development, gender, inequality and national development.

Introduction

The issue of gender inequality in the society has been a topical issue and currently assumes a front burner across the globe especially in developing countries. Right from time immemorial, women constitute greater proportion of the society, but their role remains a compelling one. There exists gender differentiation in the 21st Century Nigerian Society that prevents women from contributing optimally to national development. As noted by Uchendu (1993), the fact that traditional sex assignments vary from one society to another indicates that sexual division of labour is not rooted in biology but rather in custom and tradition. Perhaps, it was from these perspectives that Haralambos and Heald (2024) presented gender inequality from a sociological background when they noted that: "Women produce children: women are mothers and wives; women do the cooking, mending, serving and washing". They take care of men and are subordinate to male authority; they are largely excluded from high status occupation and from position of power|(p. 367).However, it will be recalled as Anikpo, (1996), put it that, before the white man came, gender division of labour was restricted to farm and household activities. Irrespective of all these odds, colonialism was able to bring about a parallel shift that gave rise to urban centres, new pattern of work as well as new gender division of labour too.

Gender inequality undermines development, so improving gender equality has to be part of any sustainable strategy for development. Inequality in rights, resources and political voice generally disadvantages women, but they also disadvantage the rest of the society and impede development. Even more striking: the costs of gender inequality are particularly large in low-income countries, and within countries, they are larger for the poor.

Foremost among the costs of gender inequality is its toll on human lives and on the quality of those lives. It is not easy to identify and measure these costs, but evidences from countries around the world demonstrate that societies with large, persistent gender inequalities pay the price of more poverty, more malnutrition, more illness and more deprivation to good life.

Reports have established that gender inequality is higher in developing countries of which Nigeria is one (World Economic Forum, 2013; British Council, 2012; & WACOL, 2008). Gender inequality permeates all aspects of Nigerian life. It manifests in the family institution, educational sector, labour market, politics and social service institutions. The Nigerian society is patriarchal in nature. This has perpetuated the domination of women by men, thus bringing about the socialisation of women into a culture of female subordination. This has severe implications for national development which is the crux of this paper. The paper particularly attempts an examination of the consequences of gender inequality on national development with motive of identifying challenges associated with gender discrimination and suggesting a way forward.

Gender and Gender Inequality

Gender, as a social phenomenon, may mean different things to different persons. Basically, gender defines the relationship between women and men and the way this relationship has been socially constructed and institutionalized. Akpabio (2015), sees gender as the socially and culturally defined and constructed roles that women and men play in societies; roles which are shaped by economic, historical and cultural determinants. In similar vein, Nwosu, (2018) citing Ogbuagu, submitted that:

> gender is socially constructed for the purpose of allocating power, duties, responsibilities, statuses and roles in any given social milieu or context. It is universally conceptualized either as an organizing concept which can be innocuously interpreted as neutral (that is without bias) or as a value laden concept which is applied to impose discriminatory practices against one group by another within a given setting.

Toeing similar line with the above authors, Uchem (2015) submitted that gender refers to socially constructed roles that men and women are expected to perform in a given society; in the community, church and family. According to her, it involves an understanding of what it means to be a man or a woman in a given culture including society's expectations of how men and women should feel, look or act. For example social norms and cultural values encourage women to be passive and men to wield power and to impose their will upon others especially the women and children.

From the foregoing submissions, gender can therefore be seen to be roles and responsibilities expected of and to be performed by women and men in societies based on the belief system in existence. Most often, the term is used in discourse to mean the roles and responsibilities ascribed by societies to women and men based on their biological characteristics which is influenced by cultural, traditional as well as religious practices. This means that gender roles vary from society to society. That is, a particular role deemed to be ideal and appropriate for women and men in a particular society might be seen as an aberration in another society. These roles and responsibilities ascribed to or expected of women and men by societies change with time as result of advancement or modernity. Differences in the roles and responsibilities assigned to women and men are what have resulted in varying degree of gender disparity existing in various societies of the world today, thus the agitations for gender equality. This position was corroborated by Bridge (1998) cited in Ekpe, et al (2014), where he opined that gender constitutes one of the determinants of how poverty is experienced and of wealth creation. Rights and entitlements of women and men to opportunities, resources and decision making are based on socio-cultural norms rather than on human rights or the respective development capability of men and women.

In Nigeria, culture, tradition and religion have been identified as the basic determinants of gender roles which have resulted in the current state of gender disequilibrium the country faces today. The central culture that pervades the Nigerian society is patriarchal in nature. The patriarchal society sets the parameters for women's structurally unequal position in families and markets by condoning gender-differential terms in inheritance rights and legal adulthood, by tacitly tolerating domestic and sexual violence and sanctioning differential wages for equal or comparable work. Tradition, culture and religion have dictated women and men relationship for centuries and entrenched male domination into the structure of social organization and institution at all levels of leadership. Patriarchy justifies the marginalization of women in education, economy, labour market, politics, business, family, domestic matters and inheritance (Salaam, 2003 cited in Allanana, 2013). To Ejumudo (2013), this male-dominated culture which has accorded women an inferior and secondary position in the society and

promoted male supremacy still remains embedded, obscured and protected within traditional institutions and structures held in abeyance and relative utmost sacredness.

Gender inequality refers to the unequal treatment or perceptions of individuals wholly or partly due to their gender or sex. It arises from differences in socially constructed gender roles. Gender inequality is a process of being unfair or not given the same chances in life to men and women. To Njoku (2015), the term gender inequality refers to the disparities that exist among individuals based solely on their gender rather than objective difference in skill, abilities or characteristics. Tabotndip (2010) conceptualized gender imbalance as rise where there is no equality of access or opportunities for both boys and girls. In Nigeria, gender inequality is influenced by different cultures and beliefs. In most part of the country, women are considered subordinate to their male counterparts especially in Northern part of Nigeria as well as in other sectors including politics, economy and education.

Factors Responsible for Gender Inequality in Nigeria

Several factors have been identified as the causes of gender inequality in Nigeria today. They range from cultural and traditional practices, religion, colonialism, biological make up to statutory discrimination.

***Culture and Tradition*:** According to Ejumudo (2013), the central culture that permeates the Nigerian society is patriarchal in nature. This male-dominated culture perceives and treats men as superior and accords women an inferior and secondary position in the society. The Nigerian culture strictly restricts women to the stereotype role of home keeping, child bearing and child rearing while assigning to men the role of bread winners and decision makers. Culture and tradition subject women and girls to various demeaning, derogatory and barbaric harmful practices. Widowhood rites especially in the southern part of the country subject women to various humiliating and harmful acts ranging from shaving of hair, wearing of black attires, refraining from taking bathe for a period of days, sleeping with the spouse's corpse for several days, confinement, to drinking of water used in bathing the dead spouse to prove innocence (Durojaiye, 2013). Girls are subjected to female genital mutilation in the name of curtailing sexual promiscuity which sometimes results in diseases such as vesico vaginal fistula. Unfortunately, men and boys are not subjected to these demeaning and barbaric practices. Regrettably, this patriarchal culture of male supremacy of the Nigerian society according to Ejumudo (2013), has remained embedded, obscured and protected within traditional institutions and structures held in abeyance and relative utmost sacredness and has continued to pose a major challenge to the task of executing gender- sensitive and gender-parity policies in Nigeria.

***Religion*:** According to Omadjohwoefe (2011), one of the accounts of the origin of gender role differentiation which has resulted in marginalisation of women is tied to myth and religion. Referring to Genesis 2:7-21, 3:16, Omadjohwoefe submitted that Eve, the first women was created from Adam the first man. Eve having disobeyed God by eating from the forbidden tree which she also convinced Adam to eat from evoked the wrath of God. A curse was placed by God on Eve condemning her to severe pains during child birth and that her desire will be to her husband who shall rule over her. The above according to Omadjohwoefe represents a mythological origin and justification for the inferior status and position of a woman in society (Omadjohwoefe, 2011). In line with this submission, Millette (2017) posited that religion is used as a way of legitimising male dominance. As she puts it, "patriarchy has God on its side". To illustrate her point further, Millette noted that the Christian religion portrays Eve as an afterthought produced from the spare rib of Adam to assist him. The status of Eve was made inferior and subjected to the authority of Adam. This, according to her was because the origin of human suffering is held to have its source in Eve (woman action). In a similar vein, Armstrong (1993), and Holms and Bowker (1994) cited in Omadjohwoefe (2011) opined that none of the major religions of the world has been particularly good to women. They have usually relegated women to a marginal position thereby reinforcing and sustaining gender inequality in society.Both the Bible and Quran seem to give subtle recognition to the superiority of men over women in society. The two religions demand unquestionable obedience and subordination of women to the authority of men.

***Biological Make-Up*:** This factor has always been provided as evidence to support discrimination against women. In describing women's anatomy, Olusanya and Owoyemi (2014) citing Freud (1933) argued that the female reproductive system is an inexorable vice that keeps women emotionally unstable, submissive, passive and devoid of creative intellectual potential alluding to pregnancy and childbirth as instances that makes women sometimes unfit for occupations that are rigorous. Allanana (2013) posited that women's role as mothers and wives which is culturally influenced and predetermined expect them to be gentle, providing care for their husbands and children. There is therefore no denying the fact that the biological composition of women hinders them from taking part in certain rigorous and strenuous activities or occupations, but they are never in anyway

unstable and devoid of intellectual ingenuity or resourcefulness as portrayed by Freud. Examples abound of women who have performed creditably well when given the opportunity. Queen Amina of the Zaria emirate, Funmilayo Kuti of Egbaland, Dora Akunyili of the NAFDAC fame are but a few to mention in Nigeria.

***Statutory Discrimination*:** The tripartite legal systems laced with discriminative provisions in operation in the country have also been identified by studies as one of the factors responsible for the marginalisation of women and a contributor to gender disparity. The country according to these studies operates a statutory law (common law), customary law and Sharia law. This is as a result of the various ethnic groups that make up the country. Customary law is practised mainly in the South while Sharia law is applicable majorly in the North. Evidence abound that most Customary laws in Nigeria is gender discriminatory and very illiberal towards women's rights. Similarly, Sharia law, which is accorded the position of customary law in the North also, discriminates severely against women in many respects. Practices in Nigerian customary law which discriminates against women includes; wife inheritance, harmful and despicable widowhood rites, female genital mutilation, polygamy, denial of custodial and maintenance rights, child marriage, wife chastisement and wife/girl child disinheritance. Sharia law which operates exclusively in the northern parts of Nigeria is also fraught with a lot of discrimination against women. The law devalues a woman's testimony or evidence, and places it at par with the testimony of a minor. It also discriminates against women in favour of men in punishment meted out by its courts in adultery cases.

Several discriminative provisions abound in the Nigerian statutory law. They include section 6 of Nigerian Criminal Code which legalises marital rape; section 353 and 360 of the Criminal Code create disparity in the punishment applicable in cases of unlawful and indecent assaults, the sections provide a lesser punishment of 2year jail term where the victim is a female as against 3years where the victim is a male; section 55 of the Penal Code provides for wife chastisement; and Regulation 121-127 of the Police Act discriminate against women in issue of marriage.

Explicating National Development

Development which has the core values of sustenance, self-esteem and freedom from servitude "is a multidimensional process involving major changes in social structures, population attitudes and national institutions, as well as the acceleration of economic growth, the reduction of inequality, and the eradication of poverty" (Todaro and Smith, 2004). Its essence is to increase the availability and widen the distribution of basic life; raise the level of living through increase in income, provision of more jobs, better education and greater attention to cultural and human values; and expand the range of economic and social choice available to individuals and nations (Todaro and Smith, 2004). National development is therefore the overall development of a country which entails the social-economic, political as well as religious advancement of a nation which can be achieved through development planning (Lawal & Oluwatoyin, 2011).

The illuminations on national development in this section of this paper are Nigerian-anchored. Development implies positive social change and improvements in the living standards of people (Okafor, 2007). According to Okeke and Ifeagwazi (2018), 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. It therefore denotes decreases in inequality levels and means the guarantee of security of lives and property in the nation-state. Summarily, national development therefore can be described as the overall development or a collective socio-economic, political as well as religious advancement of a country or nation. This is best achieved through development planning, which can be described as the country's collection of strategies mapped out by the government.

Gender Inequality and National Development in Nigeria

Gender inequality has significant effect on national development. As submitted by Gabriel (2016), gender inequality undermines national development as inequality in rights, resources and political voice as it affect women inhibit their capabilities and capacity to contribute optimally to national development.

Economy: By the virtue of the population of Nigeria, the potential female labour force is 50% but the actual value is 31%. The proportion of women in the formal sector is very minimal. This is noticeable in the industrial sector as well as the public service. Statistics indicate that in the Federal Civil Service, which the highest employer in the country, women are mostly found in the junior cadre (Ajir, 2012). Women are mainly involved in petty trading, selling wares in the market and street hawking in urban areas. According to statistics 78 % of women are mostly engaged in the informal sector, which are farming and petty trading. Despite this, their

contribution is not commensurate monetarily. The women's unpaid labour is twice that of men, and its economic value is estimated to be up to 30% of the nation's Gross National Product (Gabriel, 2020).

Women self-advancement has been curtailed by the burden of reproduction, particularly in Nigeria with a very high birth rate as well as the cultural roles associated to women - the role of childbearing, child raising and homemaking. Nigerian women, like their counterparts, around the world, face a lot of discrimination that limits their opportunities to develop their full potential on the basis of equality with men. They are far from enjoying equal rights in the labour market, due mainly to their domestic burden, low level of educational attainment, poverty, biases against women's employment in certain branches of the economy or types of work and discriminatory salary practices (Salaam, 2013).

Women are mostly involved in farming and food processing. They do not have access to land but can only use the land at the benevolence of their husbands and brothers. Women also have limited access to agricultural inputs. Women tend to be disadvantaged, because when compared with men, they do not have access to obtaining credit facilities and so are rarely engaged in the production and marketing of lucrative cash crops, such as cocoa, which tends to be a male preserve. The legal protection granted by the constitution and the Labour Act has little or no effect in the informal sector – agriculture and domestic services where the vast majority of women are employed.

There are few women in paid employment in both public and private sector organisations in Nigeria (World Bank, 2019). According to UN Women (2019), global employability rate of men is 94%, while that of women is 63%. These women have so much to contend with in the male dominated world of work. The unwritten law of the glass ceiling that does not allow them to reach the peak in their career; and the few who get to the top have their male counterparts who do not understand why a woman should be the 'boss' to contend with. The physical and psychological stress they experience in this regard may hinder them from contributing their very best. In Nigeria, 65.3% of senior positions are occupied by men, while only34.7% are occupied by women (National Bureau of Statistics, 2019). Mcguire (2002) finds out that gendered workplace rankings mirror gendered cultural rankings where women are less esteemed and seen to be of less status than their male counterparts. Davies-Netzley (1998) establishes that the patriarchal factor is the reason for the scarcity of women in top positions.

According to Awoyemi and Adeoti (2016), persistent inequality between men and women places significant constraints on a society's productivity and ultimately slows its rate of economic growth and national development. The economy pays for this inequality in reduced labour productivity today and diminished national output tomorrow. Both scholars further posit after assessing entrepreneurial holdings in south-western Nigeria, that the level of inputs (household resources and other productivity augmenting resources) being used on women businesses are lower, so the marginal productivity of additional inputs is higher. They believe that economic productivity and development can only be increased by improving women's access to productive resources (such as land and capital). Indeed, these gains according to them would translate to productivity and income at the household and entrepreneurial levels which would influence economic growth rates in Nigeria.

Politics: The Nigerian constitution guarantees the rights of women to participate in active politics; however, the last decade has witnessed a relative increase in women's participation. This is only when we measure the increase in participation with certain standards such as the number of women who vote in elections, the number of public offices held by women, a number of women-related policies implemented by government etc. Over the years, there has been a remarkable increase in women's participation in politics in Nigeria considering these standards, yet there is inherently a pronounced level of under-representation of women in politics when compared with their male counterparts (Nkechi, 2016).

Women's aspiration to participate in governance is premised on the following ground; that women in Nigeria represent half of the population and hence should be allowed a fair share in decision-making and the governance of the country. Secondly that all human beings are equal and women possess the same rights as men to participate in governance and public life. The right to democratic governance is an entitlement conferred upon all citizens by law. However, when it comes to actual practice, there is extensive discrimination. Few and almost insignificant number of women were elected to various political offices in the 2003, 2007, 20011, 2015and 2019 general elections held in the country. Men dominate most public offices to date. Female gubernatorial candidates have emerged but none has ever won and same goes for the Presidency. Legislative representation has witnessed the presence of women yet they remain under-represented when compared with their male counterparts. Following two decades of military rule, statistics reveal that women only secured 3% representation in contested positions in 2003, 4% in 2007, while in 2007 they made with only 6%. Few and almost insignificant number of women were elected to various posts in past five general elections held in the country between 2003 and 2019. The result of the survey shows that no woman was elected as governor of any state in the federation. We only

had few women as members of Houses of Assembly across the country and as members of the upper house (Senate) and a lower house (House of Representative) of the National Assembly (Gabriel, 2020).

In a related development the first and only female Speaker of any House of Assembly in Nigeria, Mrs Margaret Ichen was frustrated out of office in Benue State. Women have not received much support from the men because those who have found themselves in one position of authority or the other are frustrated out of office or forced to step down (Nkoyo, 2012; UNESCO, 2009).

There is a National Gender Policy that commits to ensuring Affirmative Action for women, however, women's representation remains below the 35% target. Suffice to mention that, the manifestos and constitutions of political parties in Nigeria rarely mention Affirmative Action for women, and when they do, their commitments are lower than the benchmark set by regional and International Conventions. Women Participation in Nigerian politics is an issue of great importance. Women have been put in the background politically for years; this has engendered a consciousness of women under-representation in public life.

In politics, women seem to be so discriminated against that the few of them who ever get elected or appointed to political positions have so much to contend with as it is believed to be the world of men. The number of women who even dare contesting elections in Nigeria is so minimal as politics here is actually money politics. Many women are unable to afford the huge sum of money that this requires along with the fact that the society sees women as not been cut out for such and the men treat women as second class citizens who must be seen only and not heard. According to a UN survey, women occupy a little above 10% of political offices in Nigeria (UN Women, 2019).

Education: Education is said to be a vehicle that breaks the shackles of poverty thereby leading to transformation, development and progress (Ikoni, 2009). With the 2015 MDGs' first deadline for attainment of gender parity in primary and secondary schools' enrolment already missed, the ability of women and girls to empower themselves economically and socially by going to school, or by engaging in productive and civic activities is still being constrained by their responsibility for everyday tasks in the household division of labour (CEC Report, 2017). In Nigeria, educational facilities are generally believed to be inadequate, and access, limited for many, especially girls and women (Uku, 1992). According to the United Nations Human Development Report (2015), Nigeria was classified as a low development country in respect of equality in educational accessibility. Female Adult Literacy Rate (ages 15 and above) for the country was 59.4% as against male, 74.4%; the Combined Gross Enrolment for Primary, Secondary and Tertiary schools for a female was 57% and male, 71%.

Consequently, Ojo (2018) affirms that women are fewer than men in certain socio-economic activities. According to him, the percentages of female workers in some selected professions were as follow architects, 2.4%, quantity surveyors, 3.5%, lawyers/jurists, 25.4%, lecturers, 11.8%, obstetricians and gynaecologists, 8.4%, paediatricians, 33.3%, media practitioners, 18.3%. Mamdani (2016) posited that the incidence of poverty is more rampant among the female gender in Africa because of discrimination in educational opportunities. On the Gender-related Development Index (GDI), Nigeria ranks a disparaging 123rd position with the Estimated Earned Income for female as low as the US $614 and the male, US $1,495 (UNDP, 2015). Lack of education has been a strong visible barrier to female participation in the formal sector.

The social pressures on females such as early marriages, and other extraneous factors, as well as consideration of female education as secondary to that of boys and certain inhibitive religious practices in some parts of Nigeria, are the major causes of the high illiteracy rate amongst women.

As the impact of teenage pregnancy and early marriage makes abundantly clear, girls are at a double disadvantage in educational access, especially in the north, where these practices are most widespread (NDHS, 2013). Education gives women the opportunity to be less dependent on men and to have more control over their sexual and reproductive health, often resulting in fewer births and a greater spacing between births, which is both healthier for mother and child. Where women lack education and information about family planning and have a low social status, there is a much higher prevalence of unintended pregnancies; the biggest risk factor associated with this being unsafe abortions.

Conclusion and the Way Forward

Gender quality no doubt, improves the development of any society. Unfortunately, as seen from the preceding discussions are not so in Nigeria, Nigerian women who are the future leaders need to be educated for them to be self-reliant. If the education sector is properly managed, gender discrimination will be eradicated and give women equal chances and the quality output from our institutions will be productive in the society for a positive turn-around of the national economy.

This paper revealed that gender inequality in Nigeria has caused serious social dangers to national development in terms of inabilities of higher increase in poverty level of women, women poor participation in politics, higher rate of illiterate women among others. In order to proffer solutions to these problems, gender equality must be promoted as a powerful instrument to resolve these biased effects. Most importantly, there should be a demonstration of the political will through strengthening of policy on gender equality for social justice and national development.

The way forward (a) The efforts of the women should be revitalized by encouraging them to participate in political activities rather than just answering such name like "first lady". (b) Legislative provisions and protections should be strictly adhered to by the entire society. (c) Gender related issues should be introduced or instituted into the school curriculum for students to study right from the basic level of education in Nigeria. (d) Government should adequately fund and support training and development programmes designed to redress the gender imbalance. (e) Qualitative education is seen as a sure tool for self-realization and actualization; women should strive to acquire the highest level of it and should not allow the earlier stereotyped mentality about certain course being the exclusive preserve of the men to discourage them. (f) Women should be properly sensitized though attending conferences, worships, seminars and refresher courses so as encourage them to further develop themselves academically. (g) There should be the formation of women alliance to sustain a broad-base struggle by women to eliminate all the inequalities or barriers that women are subjected to. (h) Cultural orientation towards the value of women is needed to avert and change gender stereotype in girls, in particular. (i) There should be national campaign to discourage not only gender violence but all forms of acts against women in Nigerian society.

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Authors' Bio

Rosemary Nneoma BARNABAS, *PhD*. is a Lecturer in the Department of Public Administration, Prince Abubakar Audu University, Anyigba NIGERIA. Email: rosemarybarnabas22@gmail.com, barnabas.rn@ksu.edu.ng Phone+2348064466843, +2348053203425

David KUMIJE, *Ph.D.*, is a Lecturer in the Department of Public Administration, Prince Abubakar Audu University, Anyigba NIGERIA. Email: kumije.d@ksu.edu.ng. Phone +2348033802050, +2349022518367