

GENDER ROLE PERCEPTIONS AND THE CHANGING ROLE OF WOMEN IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The paper examined the traditional role of women in Nigeria in which women are marginalized and subordinated to an inferior position *via-a-vis* the men. It observed that due to some forces of change, there has been an appreciable change in the role of women in Nigeria, in recent time. The paper, however, noted that despite the relative success that has been recorded in the enhancement of the status of women and the attendant significant role performance of women in Nigeria, the gender role gap between the male and female is still a far cry from being filled. It makes recommendations for the way forward. The paper recommended the need for the Nigerian society and her members to accept the changing role of Nigerian women as part of the dynamics of change in a globalized world. It also recommended the need to provide the legal framework and create the enabling environment that would enable the women consolidate on their new found roles, among others.

Introduction

Over the years, the role and importance of women in society have remained issues of serious concern and debate. Historically, in the typical traditional African Society such as Nigeria, women are not only perceived as inferior to men but are marginalized and denied equal opportunities as the men and women are treated as 'lower gender' or 'weaker sex'. According to Obioha (2009) and Chime (1998), the general beliefs is that the role of women start and end with running of the home and nothing more. Ani (2004), also explained that women constitute the group at the bottom of the ladder in many developing countries, especially in Africa, in respect of employment, poverty, education, training and status.

In the said African traditional societies, there are observed role differentiations which are based on gender or sex. While sex roles are biologically determined, universal and unchangeable, gender-

based roles are often rooted in culture. According to George (1996) culture and society are the actual determinants of gender distinctions in society. He explained that the process of socialization in a specific culture inculcates the cultural expectations of male and female behaviours and that these expectations vary from society to society and from time to time in the same society. Similarly, in a study of 224 societies, Murdock (1949) revealed that, while sex-based division was universal, the social, economic and political opportunities enjoyed by women were limited in various degrees by cultural norms and values.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Gender relations can, be analyzed from four theoretical perspectives namely, structural-functionalism, biological determinism, conflict school of thought and feminism. For purpose of this paper, structural-functionalism, biological determinism and cultural determinism are discussed.

Essentially, the structural-functional, theory views society as comprising of inter-related und inter-dependent parts which function in a coordinated manner to ensure the survival of the society. Structural-functional theory holds the view that human society has certain basic needs called functional pre-requisites as represented by the structural units or parts (Igbo, 2003).

According to Talcott Parsons (in Ekong, 2010), gender differences help to integrate society. This is achieved through the complementarity of roles between the females and males as culturally determined by the society.

Biological determinism, as a social theory of gender relations emphasizes the physiological differences in the make-up of males and females and how those differences have shaped social relationship between the sexes (Ekong, 2010). The biological determinist position holds that biology is destiny; that human

nature and society are dictated largely or entirely by the demand of human physiology and that there is an essential unchanging difference between the masculine and the feminine (George, 1996). This theory is predicated on the male domination and assumed superiority of the male sex over the female in most human societies.

Similarly cultural determinism, as a theoretical perspective, asserts that culture (i.e. the norms, values, beliefs and mores) and society are the actual determinants of gender differences in societies. Through the process of socialization, the culturally approved patterns of behaviour, especially for males and females are transmitted to members of the society for purpose of forging appropriate gender identity in the society.

Conceptualization

Gender, as a social phenomenon, may mean different things to different persons. Generally, gender defines the relationship between men and women and the way this relationship has been socially constructed and institutionalized.

According to Akpabio (2005), gender refers to the socially and culturally defined and constructed roles that men and women play in societies; roles which are shaped by economic, historical and cultural determinants. Similarly, Ogbuagu (2005) had explained 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".

From the foregoing clarifications, therefore, it can be said that the role men and women perform in society, especially in the traditional society, is based on the mere assumptions or perceptions of their skills and abilities as culturally constructed and determined by the society.

Gender Role Perception

A social role is often described as the pattern of behaviour associated with a defined social position or a given status (Brown and Selznick, 1997; Mitchell, 1999; Igbo 2003). Similarly, gender roles can be described as those roles that are culturally determined by the society according to the biological categories or of male and female and according to the functional needs of the society as well. Within the context of this paper, gender role perception will refer to those assumed patterns of behaviour that are culturally determined and which society expects from a person or category of persons. For women in particular, gender role perception will refer to those culturally determined patterns of behaviour which the society expects of them as women.

DIMENSIONS OF GENDER DISCRIMINATIONS

As stated earlier, women in the traditional African society have remained victims of gender discrimination. The women are marginalized, undervalued and unrecognized. They are subordinated to the male folk and considered inferior. This explains why the African societies are often referred to as the men's world. Emihe (1996) has observed that in Nigeria, as in most parts of Africa, we live in a male-dominated society where the male folks continuously and persistently relegate the female to the background because society has made it so. While the male child is encouraged to go to school, for example, the female child is given out in marriage at an early age.

The inferior and subordinate position which society assigns to women in developing countries and Africa in particular can be explained from the often observed situation in which men in farming communities are recognized as "farmers", while the women are referred to as "farmers' wives". In this regard, the woman's role is not only underrated but perceived as merely supportive to the man's role.

Furthermore, gender discriminations against women often find expressions not only in the attitude but also in the practices of most of the African societies. These include the stereotypes

and restrictions that are made against the women such as the following:

- Ascription of social status to the physiological and physical differences between men and women with the former, of course considered to be "superior" to the later.
- The common practices of patriarchy, by which the man is traditionally regarded to be the head of the family.

In some parts of Nigeria, particularly in Igbo land, for example, the traditional widowhood practice may demand that the widow stays in-doors, in mournful mood, for months, without any makeup sometimes subjected to some awful ordeals, in addition. Again, in some Nigerian traditional societies, women are forbidden from climbing trees and engaging in hunting activities. In these typical traditional societies, it amounts to a taboo, and a mark of waywardness for a young lady to wear trousers and smoke in the public. Similarly, while young girls may be favoured for such perceived "soft" and generalist courses as nursing, secretarial studies and teaching, such professions as medicine, engineering, law, military and para-military services are recognized by the society as the exclusive preserve of men.

SOME DETERMINANT S OF GENDER ROLE DISCRIMINATIONS AND DIFFERENTIATIONS

Gender role discriminations and differentiations can be explained from different perspectives, viz - religion, tradition and culture as well as public opinion.

Both the Bible and Quaran 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. While the Quaran specifically directs that men, are appointed guardians over women, the Holy Bible (Genesis, Chapter 3, verse 16) states:

"I shall greatly increase the pain of your pregnancy, in both pains you will bring forth children and your craving will be your husband and he will dominate you".

The traditions and culture of a society especially in developing countries such as Nigeria are known to have dominant influences on gender role differentiations and discriminations. Egbucha (2006) had explained that in Igboland, female children in the family were not given the privilege of education, since they were then regarded as "birds of passage". Otite and Ogionwo (2006) have similarly explained that there are variations

in the economic duties such as trading, farming or cultivation of certain types of crops and in religious and ritual positions in relation to the sexes.

The law and customs in most parts of Nigeria, in several instances, have tended to perpetuate gender discriminations in society by denying women such fundamental rights as inheritance of property. Equal employment opportunities, equal access to credit facilities, rights to procure bail and even decent treatment as widows.

Public opinion is another factor that has not only deepened role differentiation between men and women in society but have militated against the active advancement of women in Africa. According to Emihe (1996), the notion' of where the woman should go to, how she should behave, what type of work she should do, have immensely affected and hampered the adventure instinct in the African woman.

CHANGING ROLE OF WOMEN

In relatively recent time, there have been some significant changes in the traditional role of women, globally and in Nigeria in particular. The social barriers of tradition and culture are gradually giving way to new ideas, new values and practices. Today, women are making giant strides and breaking new grounds in almost every field of human endeavour, including those occupations and professions that were once considered the exclusive preserve of men. As a result, some countries in the world, including Nigeria can, today, boast of women doctors, pharmacists, engineers, politicians, lawyers, bankers, vice chancellors, military officers, pilots, wrestlers and even commercial car drivers, among others. According to Ekong (2010), women are said to contribute a substantial part of the armed forces in China, Cuba, Israel and Russia, while 12% of labourers at building sites and 25% of Asian and Latin American miners are women. Recently, too, according to This Day Newspaper of March 10, 2002, out of the 24 newly appointed judges in Lagos State of Nigeria, 18 were reported to be women while 40% of the Permanent Secretaries in the State were also women.

Globally, there has been a steady progress, though slow, in the role played by women in politics. Figure 1 is a representation of women as percent of total parliamentarians world-wide, between 1999 and 2006. The figure shows that the percentage of women in politics worldwide rose steadily from 5.034 percent to 7.195 between 1999 and 2006.

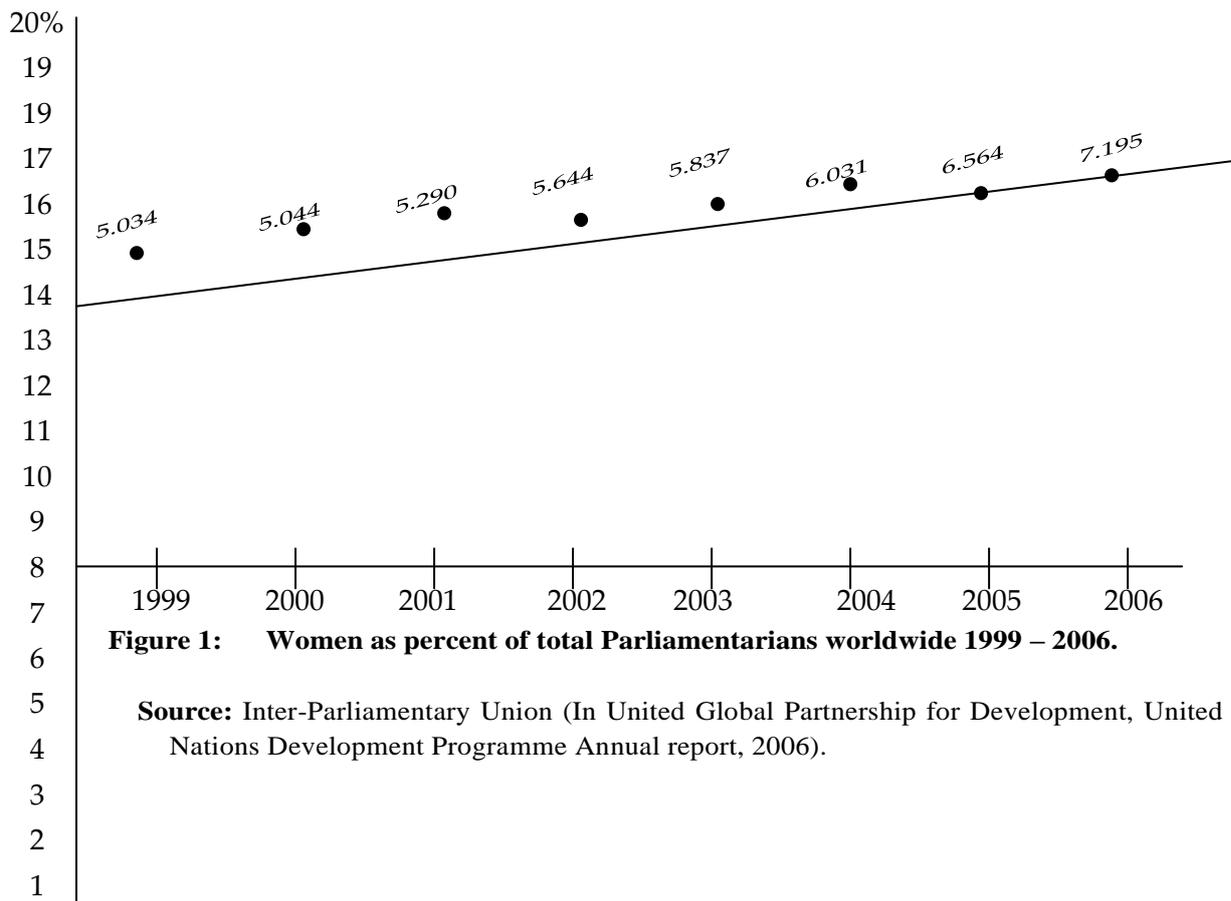


Figure 1: Women as percent of total Parliamentarians worldwide 1999 – 2006.

Source: Inter-Parliamentary Union (In United Global Partnership for Development, United Nations Development Programme Annual report, 2006).

Implications

The implications of the changing role of women in the society must be appreciated. First, it has led to the democratization of gender roles in society by enabling the women to explore and exploit their potentials and to contribute to national development. This trend is against the situation in some societies in the past, in which the women were barred from performing certain roles for reasons of their sex and not for lack of skill or ability to execute the task. On the other hand, the new trend, even at the social and psychological levels, has deepened the latent mutual suspicion between the male and female folk, whether at tile family level, in government establishments or in the industry.

FORCES OF CHANGE

There are some identifiable forces or factors which have facilitated changes or transformations in the traditional role of women in Africa and Nigeria in particular. These include the influence of western civilization, urbanization and industrialization, as well as legal reforms, human rights activities and globalization.

With its powerful tools of education, urbanization and industrialization, western civilization is believed to have seriously influenced the traditional social institutions particularly the traditional family institution. The implication is that since women’s fundamental roles are traditionally located within the family, many or some of these roles and values which they held must have undergone some drastic changes. Ogunlade (1990) had explained that since African societies came into contact with western civilization about four centuries ago, some of their cultural values and roles have undergone drastic restructuring and new roles have also emerged, at the same time.

With the increasing tempo of urbanization and industrialization, women, like their male counterparts, are increasingly migrating to urban centres to take advantage of economic opportunities in the government establishments, commercial outfits and in the private/industrial sector. Education has also facilitated and enhanced women’s social status; equipping them with, new skills, knowledge and competences to

compete favourably with men in different professions and to assume roles outside their domestic domain. Furthermore, through legislation and other governmental legal reforms, there have been some noticeable changes in the traditional role of women in Nigeria. It is through these processes that some of the obnoxious practices against the women such as female circumcision, non- inheritance of property and widowhood practices have been challenged in law courts. Admittedly, too, some women organizations, human rights and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Nigeria including the National Association of Women Journalists (NAWOJ), the Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA), Civil Liberty Organization (CLO), National Council for Women Societies (NCWS) among others, have remained committed to women liberation and gender equality in Nigeria. It must also be stated that the United Nation's proclamation of 1975 as International Year for Women, the 1975-1985 as "the decade for women", as well as the Regional Conference on women empowerment held in Dakar, Guinea in 1995 and the 1996 Women Conference in Beijing, China, have all added impetus to women's awareness for change

globally and in Nigeria in particular. One other factor which has facilitated and influenced change in gender role performance by women in Nigeria is the nomination of women representatives to fill perceived lacuna in gender roll

Gender Roll Gap

It must be admitted that, though some success have been recorded in the enhancement of the status of womanhood and the attendant role performance of women globally and in Nigeria in particular, the gap is still a far cry from being filled. It is reported that, with notable exceptions, such as Rwanda and the Nordic countries, women are conspicuously absent from parliaments, making up on average, only 16 percent of parliamentarians worldwide (United Nations, Development Programmed Annual Report, 2006). The situation is also applicable to the developed nations of the world like the United States of America, Britain, France, Western Germany, Japan, etc.

In Sub-Saharan African countries including Nigeria, the gap is even more as revealed in table 1.

Table 1: Gender Desegregated Table of Elective Political Positions: 1999/2003 in Nigeria.

Post	Sex		Total	Advantage		
	Male	%			Female	%
President	1	100	-	-	1	100% male
Vice President	1	100	-	-	1	100% male
Governors	36	100	-	-	36	100% male
Deputy Governors	35	97.22	1	2.78	36	94.44% male
Senators	106	97.25	3	2.75	109	94.5-% male
Local Government Chairpersons	765	98.84	9	1.16	774	97.68% male
Councilors	8667	98.49	143	1.61	8810	96.88% male
Federal House of Representative	347	96.39	13	3.61	360	92.78% male
State House of Representative	978	98.79	12	1.21	990	97.58% male
Speakers State House of Assembly	35	97.22	1	2.78	36	94.44% male
Ministers	35	79.54	9	20.46	44	59.08% male

Source: Women Participation in Parliament in Nigeria, Posted to the Internet on March 23, 2009, by the author, MOG.

The table confirms that all the identified political positions are skewed in favour of males. In a study of gender and the democratic process in Nigeria, Ogbuagu (2005) observed that, there is a greater inequity in power relations between the genders represented by occupants of the most powerful positions in the country... terribly biased in favour of men.

Similarly, Table 2 reveals gender inequalities in education, economic status, politics and appointments in the world, Africa and selected countries for some selected years.

Table 2: Gender Inequalities in Education, Economic Status, Politics and Appointments in the world, Africa and selected countries in selected years.

Post	Educational Status, % literate rate (Ageist) 2000		Economic Status, % in Labour (Ages 15-64) 2000		Percentage of women in Parliament October 2001	Percentage of women in ministerial and sub-ministerial positions (1998)
	F	M	F	M		
World	69	83	61	86	14	11
African	52	70	57	86	10	9
Egypt	44	67	37	82	2	5
Ghana	63	80	81	82	9	9
Niger	8	24	71	93	1	8
Nigeria	56	72	50	87	3	5
Kenya	76	89	77	89	4	7
Zimbabwe	85	93	67	86	10	9
Cameroon	70	82	51	86	6	6
South Africa	85	86	50	82	30	-
Argentina	97	97	42	89	21	9

Source: Population Reference Bureau (2002), CTA (2001).

Again, the women are disadvantaged in the “gender equation” on males and females, educationally, economically, politically and administratively.

Table 3 shows sex distribution of members of the Nigerian Judiciary at the Federal level.

Table 3: Sex Distribution of members of the Judiciary, Federal Republic of Nigeria (May 1999 – May 2003)

Post	Sex				Total	Advantage
	Male	%	Female	%		
Chief Judge	1	100	-	-	1	100% male
Supreme Court Judges	15	100	-	-	15	100% male

Source: Federal Ministry of Information (2000). *Nigeria Returns to democracy, First Year Anniversary, May 20, pp 1 – 88.*

The table clearly shows that women are totally disadvantaged in the sex distribution of members of the Federal Judiciary in Nigeria within the period in question.

The above stated statistics on gender role gap notwithstanding, the future prospects of Nigerian women in playing greater roles in various facets of national life are bright. Over the years, the number of educated women in Nigeria has increased. In some states in the eastern part of Nigeria including Abia, Imo, Enugu, Ebonyi and Anambra, it may not be surprising to observe the enrolment of more females in schools than males. Table 4 shows that, in Abia State, for example, girls out-number boys by 55.6 percent to 44.4 percent within the period in question.

Table 4: Secondary School enrolment in Abia State 1999/2010 by Zones and Sex.

Zones	Total Enrolment	Sex			
		Female	%	Male	%
Aba	65831	37809	54.4	28022	42.6
Ohafia	21840	11251	51.5	10589	48.5
Umuahia	26630	16105	54.4	13525	44.4
Total	117301	65165	55.6	52136	44.4

Source: Planning and Statistics Department: Secondary Education Management Board, Umuahia, Abia State, Nigeria.

This trend is in contrast with the national figures of enrolment in the primary, secondary and tertiary education institutions in which males are at advantage (55.5 percent of males and 45.5 percent of females). It is peculiar to the Igbo

speaking states of Nigeria where the boys have taken to trading and other businesses that make for quick financial returns, rather than go to school.

Conclusion and Recommendations

From the foregoing analysis, it is true that gender based roles in some Nigerian societies may be culturally determined. Women have been marginalized and subjected to a subordinate and inferior position vis-à-vis the men. Some of the factors that have influenced gender role discriminations and differentiations include religion, traditions and culture, law and customs, as well as public opinion. As a result of the attendant forces of change including western civilization, urbanization, industrialization, education, legislations and legal reforms, international declarations, as well as human rights activities and globalization, there have been some drastic changes in the traditional role of women in Nigeria. However, despite the success recorded in the enhancement of women statuses and the attendant new role definitions, the gender role gap between the male and female categories is still a far cry from being filled.

Finally, the paper recommends as follows:

The Nigerian society and her members should accept the changing role of Nigerian women as part of the dynamics of change in a globalized world.

The Nigerian government should provide the legal framework and create the enabling environment to enable the women consolidate on their new found roles and actualize their potentials. Importantly, too, there is need to create more awareness among the general populace on the inevitable changing role of women in contemporary society, using such channels and platforms as the media, schools, churches and Community-Based Organization (CBOs) for this purpose.

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