

Socio-Religious Norms and Gender Inequality in Nigeria

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Abstract

This paper examines the gender inequality in Nigeria, a persistent challenge that is deeply rooted in socio-cultural norms that shape cultural practices and the everyday life of a Nigerian. The paper focuses on how religious beliefs and cultural traditions intersect to reinforce gender inequality in Nigeria. Drawing on contemporary literature, the paper explores the influence of patriarchy, religious interpretations and the many socio-cultural expectations on women's access to education, economic opportunities, political participation and property rights. Findings are that, although religion can be seen to promote moral order and foster social cohesion, its interpretation within patriarchal contexts can sometimes perpetuate gender inequality. The paper therefore agitates for reforms through education, policy implementation, and gender-sensitive theological engagement.

I. Introduction

Gender inequality in Nigeria is multifaceted owing to historical, cultural and religious influences that form it. Socio-religious norms are the shared beliefs and practices derivable from cultural traditions and religious teachings which shape gender relations. It is the socially and culturally produced expectations, roles and identities assigned to male and females. Furthermore, gender impacts how issues are viewed in society through class, age, ethnicity and marital status, while religious traditions legitimizes gender hierarchies through entreaties to sacred authority. In Nigeria, patriarchal systems are societal frameworks in which men are entitled to more possessions of power and privileges than women. Disadvantaging women socially, economically and politically (Wood and Eagly, 2002). This act portends forms of discrimination which continues to add to the persistence of gender inequity. Discrimination against women is defined as "any distinction, exclusion, or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment, or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil, or any other field on the basis of equality of man and woman" (UN, 1979).

Gender equality, as well as societal disparities in general, has always been topical. While some scholars suggest that biological factors, particularly early hormonal

production, play a significant role in gender development, others suggest that these roles are naturally ascribed Haralambos & Holborn (2007). On the other hand, Obodoegbulam (2012) contends that they are culturally imposed. With both assumptions, one begins to ponder, what characteristics define a female or male? Are there differences between males and females, and how do we account for these differences?

Although there has been so many advocacy for gender equality world over, Nigeria continues to experience cases of gender disparities in access to education, employment, healthcare, politics and leadership positions. No doubt, one way these frameworks can be checkmated, remains through culture and religion.

II. Conceptual Clarifications

Socio-Religious Norms

Socio-religious norms are a combination of approved traditions and practices of societies and religions that guides behaviours and social organizations. These norms are often influenced by a people's belief systems that shape gender roles. In Nigeria, these belief systems are the three major religious traditions, such as Christianity, Islam and African Traditional Religion.

Gender and Gender Inequality

Gender as a concept has been a global phenomenon for a long time. Sex is defined as the biological categorization of male or female, as determined by physical variations in genetic composition, reproductive architecture, and function. Gender refers to the social, cultural, and physical meanings, behaviors, activities, and characteristics that a society considers proper for male and female members. This social classification of male and female is based on a collection of psychological characteristics and role aspects that society has allocated to the biological category of sex. This is what Akpabio (2005) means when he defines gender as the socially and culturally defined and manufactured roles that men and women play in society, roles that are formed by economic, historical, religious, and cultural factors. In any particular social environment or context, such structures are built for the purpose of allocating powers, duties, responsibilities, statuses, and positions.

Gender inequality refers to persons being treated differently and unfairly based on their gender, resulting in unequal access to opportunities and resources.

III. Theoretical Framework

Psychological Theories of Gender

Several theories have been proposed to explain gender roles that have existed throughout history. However, in order to proffer answer to the posers raised in the introductory part, we will focus on psychoanalytic theory of gender by Sigmund Freud.

Psychoanalytic Theory of Gender

The psychoanalytic theory originally propounded by Sigmund Freud (1985-1936) emphasizes the role of an active mind, early childhood experiences and how internalized social norm shapes human behavior. Its key points are the concept of id, ego, and superego. Others are repression, identification and internalization (Freud, 1923/1961). In their work on *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*, Chodorow & Mitchell (1978) a gender view of psychoanalysis theory, arguing

that gender roles are deeply embedded in the psyche through early socialization and familial structures. This means that socio-religious norms can be shaped within individual childhood. The Nigerian society which is known to be highly religious and culturally strong raises children within strong religious and culturally solid environment with clearly defined gender roles. Through identification, girls internalize submissive roles as modeled by their mothers, while boys internalize authority and dominance as modeled by their fathers. These internalized roles become part of the superego as Freud will put it, shaping moral expectations and self-perception. Thereby, ascribing gender inequity as an externally imposed concept which is psychologically sustained and unconsciously accepted by individuals.

Religion, the Superego and Moral Authority

What has religion got to do with it? Religion plays a major role in the formation of superego in the representation of moral standard. In Nigeria, religious doctrines have strongholds on religious practitioners, and as such, a religious doctrine defines what is considered “appropriate” behavior for men and women. Teachings that emphasize female submission and male leadership internalize moral codes, causing women to feel guilty when deviating from prescribed roles even when they feel marginalized. Psychoanalytic theory, reveals how religious authority is both external and internalizing the same time, making gender norms difficult to challenge.

Repression and gender Expression

In the area of repression, women have been seen in the Nigerian society to suppress desires for autonomy, leadership, or even economic independence due to fear of social and religious sanctions. Similarly, men are known to have repressed emotional vulnerability due to masculine expectations. These repressed desires further exacerbate psychoanalytical tension and promote rigid gender roles in Nigeria. Psychoanalytical theory argues that the traditional patriarchal family structures reinforces gender hierarchies through everyday interactions where the father is viewed as the authority figure while the mother plays supportive role shapes the children’s understanding as of power, authority and gender relations of inequality within the home.

As a matter of fact, socio-religious norms play out both consciously and unconsciously as religious and cultural beliefs influence behaviours. Discrimination is legitimized through gender inequality as women’s resistance to political and religious leaderships may stem from a place of unconscious biases formed through early exposure to patriarchy in the home.

Theoretical Integration

The psychanalytic theory provides a valuable framework for understanding how socio-religious norms sustain gender inequity in Nigeria. It reveals that inequality is not only embedded in social structures but also internalized within individuals’ psyches. Ultimately, integrating psychoanalytic insights into gender discourse allows for a more holistic approach to addressing inequality in Nigerian society.

Gender Schemata Theory

Sandra Bem pioneered the Gender Schemata Theory in the early 1980s, which is a social-cognitive theory about how people in society are gendered from an early age and

the impact this gendering has on their cognitive and category processing throughout their lives (Starr & Zurbriggen, 2016). The theory states that an individual's attention and behavior are influenced by an internal urge to comply with their evolving schemas. Typing will begin when youngsters are able to encode and organize information according to what is thought suitable for each sex.

This implies that children begin to establish concepts and theories about what it means to be masculine or feminine at a young age, and that they use these beliefs to categorize information, make decisions, and govern behavior. Gender Schematic persons are more likely to divide their environment and regulate their conduct based on gender, whereas gender schematic people, according to (Bem, 1981), are less likely to arrange information or regulate their behavior based on gender.

Gender schemata claim that culture has a role in gender development by serving as a point of reference for the establishment of gender schemata. Children are not only ready to encode and organize gender information, but they do it in a social setting that determines male and female identity (Bem 1985). In other words, the gender schema theory states that children form gender schema based on their experiences and cultural gender traits.

Socio-Religious Foundations of Gender Inequality in Nigeria

The Nigerian society is known to be deeply embedded in cultural values, where male dominance holds sway. Gender issues stems from the family where a male child is being celebrated, handled as being precious and groomed in such a way that he has the upper hand over the girl child. As a result of this type of upbringing, he possesses a domineering power over the girl child. As a man, he is seen as the head of household who is in charge of decision making. This domineering nature of men over women makes women overtly dependent on the men, thereby making them docile and failing to seek better ways of self-developing. On the other hand, the girl child is taught to be respectful and obedient to the leadership and authority of the men in the family. As a woman or wife, she is to be submissive to her husband and not speak when he speaks. In some extreme cases she is not to be educated as it will be a waste of the family resources to educate a girl child who will grow up and get married off into another family. And if she manages to be educated, she is advised not to be “over” educated so that her exposure will not chase away potential suitors. Another excuse is that she “over” educations will make her not to be submissive to her husband if at all she will see a man who will marry her due to her level of exposure. These suggest that children first learn about gender in the family their first place of socialization. This implies that gender identity is not something that comes naturally to them. Kohlberg (1966) a cognitive developmental theorist, believed that as children's intellectual powers develop, they gain the ability to perceive the environment in terms of categories, including gender categories. Between the ages of two and five, children learn that people are classified based on their gender. They learn that you can only belong to one category, and that you cannot change your category. This will only mean that once children name themselves as boys or girls, they begin to act in ways that are consistent with their gender designations. The situation of women in the family points to a level of gender discrimination that has been severely prohibited by law under the United Nations Human Rights treaty as well as the

International laws provision of equal rights between genders. The UN Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women has considered the international bill of rights for women. Gender equality is not a fundamental human right, but should be seen as a necessary foundation for a peaceful, prosperous and equitable future for any developing nation such as Nigeria. (Wotogbe, 2022).

Religious Interpretations and Gender Roles

Religion significantly influences gender norms in Nigeria through the interpretation of religious texts in Christianity and Islam. Sometimes, African Traditional Religion is used to justify male superiority and female subordination. This is perfectly played out in Nigeria within the confines of marriage where male authority and female submission is greatly emphasized. Ogunyemi, (2018) opines that, when such authority is taken out of context, they can be used to justify controlling behaviours and silence survivors of domestic abuse. Religious doctrines often prescribe women's roles as primarily domestic thereby limiting their participation in leadership and public life. This interpretation has a far reaching effect on how society view and treat women and underpins gender hierarchies. The African Traditional Religions places certain strict restrictions for women. It is believed that women are not allowed to worship, enter, or sleep in some shrines or with their husbands in particular circumstances in African traditional society because they believe that women are (necessary) evils who can diminish the males' charm or the shrine's strength. Women are not allowed to pray or address the assembly in some churches; despite the fact that they preach that women and men are equal in God's eyes. Similarly, women are only allowed to enter certain portions of the mosque (Obodoegbulam, Egesimba & Dimkpa, 2011).

Furthermore, the tension between religion and gender equality remains a pervasive problem of orthodox Christianity. Although the bible teaches equality between both genders, yet some Christian denominations in Nigeria still view women from a place of inequality, inferiority and subordination. (Attoh, 2017). For instance, the Catholic and Anglican churches still struggle with the idea of women aspiring to positions of leadership but can only be allowed to join religious order as reverend sisters, nuns and female lay readers. Only the Pentecostals have shown remarkable reformation in this context. For the Muslims, Ikwuegbu (2005) posits that in Islamic religion, the Quran stipulates that there is no distinction between men and women yet in practice, Islam keeps women in Purdah and do not permit them into the same worship spaces as men.

The politicization of the Nigerian religious space by men and its obvious effect in religious interpretation of sacred texts against women may not be peculiar to Nigeria alone. Evidences show of similar cases in other parts of Africa and the world over, but the overtly patriarchal nature of the Nigerian case compounds the issue for women in Nigeria. More so, when we consider the two borrowed religions, Islam and Christianity and the restrictions placed on women, adding to the pre-colonial considerations that accompanies them, it seems as though there is no way out for the Nigerian woman to climb up the leadership ladder.

However, this situation is not sacrosanct. The Nigerian woman has a responsibility of striving to breakthrough these religious barriers that were underpinned by cultural and religious authorities to give way to a new ethic of gender equality within the religious

space.

Early Marriage and Gender-based Violence

Socio-religious norms contribute to harmful religious practices and gender-based violence. In Northern Nigeria, child marriage is a norm backed up by religion and society. Child marriage which is marriage before the age of 18 is a problem with multifaceted dimensions and consequences. Wotogbe (2022) notes that although the Nigerian government has tried to stamp out child marriage with the enactment of the Child Rights Act of 2003, the practice is still prevalent because States in Nigeria are yet to enact the Act under their own state laws to ensure its enforcement. This social menace is fueled by religious and cultural expectations as a means of preserving family honour. Child marriage leads to poverty of the girl child who is forced into marriage without being allowed to grow into the age of economic and financial independence. It leads to illiteracy of the girl child who was not given the opportunity to be educated and be self-aware before being married off. It leads to myriads of health challenges for the girl child whose body is not fully developed for certain marital expectations required of her young body. Whatever reasons there are for upholding this tradition, the negative impacts surely outweigh them all. Interventions must be put in place by the Nigerian government to address this socio-religious norm that portends no good intentions for the girl child.

Education and Gender Disparities

It is a known fact that gender inequality and disparity in education is not a recent phenomenon in Nigeria, especially for girls in certain regions. There is an avalanche of research literature that historically, the restriction from education which girls face is often fueled by religious and cultural reasons. Mohammed (2000) notes that the obstacles to the girl-child education are historically, socially and culturally rooted. This is obvious when we consider the fact that in the northern part of Nigeria, the custom of early/forced marriage is a constraint to women education. In the Eastern part of Nigeria, it is the fact that a woman will be married off to another family, and as such nobody should waste funds on her education. In some cases, she is used as collateral to borrow money to send her brothers to school. Some girls agree to get married early with the promise of being sent to school by their husbands. But an often time, the chance of this promise to be fulfilled is slim as the possibility of this is solely dependent on the disposition of their husband.

Deeply rooted in poverty are unequal chances of women in getting education. Many Nigerians operate below the poverty line; hence they cannot afford to send their children to school (Adiele & Mbachu, 2011). Worst still is that where opportunity presents itself, the male child is usually considered first, even where such a child is less academically inclined.

Access to education should be granted to everyone who is entitled for it irrespective of gender. This means that all obstacles responsible for education deprivation of the girl-child should be removed. The right of child education is fundamental and this should eradicate all forms of gender bias to education.

Economic and Political Marginalization

Marginalization refers to a social process of being relegated to the fringe of society. This implies being excluded from meaningful participation in society. An example

of this, is the marginalization of women from politics and economy. Gender inequality significantly affects Nigeria's socio-economic development. Women in Nigeria face economic and political disadvantages and the resulting effects hampers on the society, since the political and economic empowerment of women should benefit the society. Certain constraint to women's political and economic empowerment in Nigeria arises from culture and tradition. Tradition and culture create enabling grounds for inequality to thrive through sex-stereotype. As a result of culture and social norms, women are made to believe that they are inferior, objects for male gratification and are subjected to many harmful practices some of which are, domestic violence, marital rape, harmful widowhood practices and denial of inheritance. Obodoegbulam et al., (2011) observes that in the rural areas, women, rarely have access to financial resources, making it difficult for them to obtain loans from the community purse; they must also bring a male surety. Even if they earn the money themselves, women in some societies are unable to spend it without the agreement of their husbands or, if widowed, a male family member. Furthermore, in the majority of communities, only male children have the ability to inherit land. Even married women do not have the legal right to inherit land. All these negative practices infringe on women's rights to economic empowerment.

Women are an essential component of any nation's progress. However, male bias in attitudes toward women has remained a fundamental impediment to female leadership. Undefined silent laws that discriminate against female placements and appointments are an example of this. When it comes to women in leadership, Vivian Gornick (2016) avers, "the life of woman, like the life of every outsider, is determinedly symbolic of the life of the race; that this life is offered up, as every other outsider's life is offered up, as a sacrifice to the forces of annihilation that surround our sense of existence, in the hope that in reducing the strength of the outsider-in declaring her the bearer of all the insufficiency and contradiction of the race-the wilderness, grief and terror of loss that is in us will be grafted onto her, and the strength of those remaining in the circle will be increased. In other words, women should give up their lives as a "sacrifice" to placate men who continually seek women's enslavement. Due to the insatiable desires of men for women to be marginalized, stereotyped, and erased from film representations in order for men to be free of "rivalry and competition" and to be happy. This means that female leadership is a threat for men and so they will stop at nothing to see that women never succeed in breaking through socio-cultural and political barriers erected to prevent them from rising to power.

Another constraint to women's political and economic viability is lack of access to finance. Women face barriers in employment, entrepreneurship, and political partnership due to entrenched socio-religious beliefs. Even today, women still face exclusion from executive positions in the political terrain of Nigeria. This has in turn led to the marginalization of women in policy and decision-making process. To reverse this ugly trend, women friendly legal framework in which affirmative action principles should be incorporated into the Nigerian Constitution and Electoral Act and women who are actively seeking political offices and empowerment should be funded and supported.

Implications of Gender Inequality Socio-Economic Development

Gender inequality hinders national development. Women make up half of Nigerian's population, so their exclusion from economic activities limits productivity and innovations.

Health and Well-being

Limited autonomy in healthcare decisions negatively affects women's health outcomes, including their reproductive health and access to medical services.

Intergenerational Effects

Gender inequality perpetuates a cycle of disadvantages that affects future generations through limited education and economic opportunities.

Consequences of Gender Inequality

Some of the psychological effects of gender inequality includes:

Frustration

Due to gender inequality, a lot of ambitious, high achieving women become frustrated as they are limited from reaching their Religious, sociocultural, economic, educational, or political goals.

Anxiety

Unfair treatment and gender-based discrimination women face in Nigeria has been traumatic for many woman; and has to physical symptoms such as High blood pressures and depression lead to deep reflection and significantly alter her mood and daily life.

Depression

A social norm that encourages gender inequality has caused most Nigeria women to slide into depression. This (Kinanee, 2018) describes as one of the most typical frustration reactions, and the most dangerous in terms of the victim's mental, emotional, and physical health. It could lead to loss of interest in hobbies such as sex, inability to concentrate, restlessness, feelings of hopelessness, withdrawal from social activities, and even suicidal thoughts. A progressive mind must also be healthy.

The Way Forward

Legal and Policy Framework

Policies that address discriminatory practices in Nigeria should be implemented to strengthen the implantation of gender equality laws.

Educational Empowerment

Education of the girl child is critical to breaking cycles of gender inequality as education enhances women's agency and societal participation.

Religious Reinterpretation

Engaging religious leaders in gender-sensitive interpretations of sacred texts can challenge patriarchal norms and promote gender equity.

Cultural Transformation

Community-based initiatives that reshape harmful cultural practices and promote inclusive gender norms should be encouraged.

IV. Conclusion

Socio-religious norms play significant roles in sustaining gender inequity in Nigeria through their patriarchal structures which leaves women marginalized. Achieving gender equality in Nigeria has become a necessary condition for sustainable development. For any society to develop, gender parity must first be attained, educationally, economically, religiously and politically. This will allow women at all levels to actively demonstrate their potentials and resources for societal growth.

Certain religious and cultural practices and beliefs that have negative psychological consequences for women should be eradicated. This will require a holistic approach that integrates legal reforms, education and religious engagement. Until Nigeria gets it right with women's development, full societal growth will continue to be a mirage.

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