

## **GENDER INEQUALITY: A CULTURAL PROBLEM IN IGBO LAND**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Gender issues in the past decades had been a problem in Africa and in Nigeria in particular where woman were considered less important than their male counterparts in their families, cooperatives, business and academic matters. This paper focused on the Igbo people of Nigeria as it tried to look at the concept of gender, culture and problems of gender inequality. It analyzed the provision of the 3rd millennium goal which is to promote gender equality and empower women. It also examined the areas gender inequality has its affects on women and also looked at the need to wipe out inequality and the effects of achieving the MGDs in 2015. Inherent in typical African nations are gender disparities and inequalities which determine role expectations from the males and the females. The women were regarded as species that are only good for marriage and domestic purposes in their families. Our thanks go to the United Nations adoption of the millennium declaration of September 2000 by 189 heads of the member countries which had set goals (MDGs) for the eradication of hunger, poverty, and inequalities in the low-developing countries.*

*Keywords: Gender inequality, cultural problem, Igbo land*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Women issues on gender inequality, poverty, hunger and illiteracy have gone world-wide in the past decades. This is connected to the neglect and discrimination against the women-folk which is evident in most cultures or societies. Communities in the world and Africa in particular hold tightly to their traditional belief systems, customs and values. The role of African women is stressed and centers on housewifery, motherhood and child caring. As a result of this, illiteracy constitutes problems in the women folk all over especially in the developing countries. Research has shown that women, who constitute a large percent of the world's population, are illiterates, and more so, an illiterate society hinders progress (Ike, 2005).

The issue of poverty affects women more than men because many women are denied access to education and income generating activities due to a combination of socio-cultural factors such as gender discrimination, widowhood practices, etc. As a result, many women cannot contribute effectively to nation building. Women suffer more from environmental degradation since they are closer to nature.

This environmental degradation includes food scarcity and women are the worse hit. For instance, in riverine areas, there are cases of rivers overflowing their banks thereby destroying crops. The exploration and exploitation of crude oil has adversely affected the people's means of livelihood in the communities. Poverty is the bane of women. People, mostly women and children die daily from poverty-related problems. Women are observed to have low quality of life than men because gender inequalities exist ever before birth and worst through school age adulthood (Metero 1993). Empowerment is a vital tool in any developmental programme. Women empowerment is a means of integrating women into developmental programmes and processes by leaving them with opportunities and challenges aimed at tapping and developing their talents such that they can compete favorably with their male counterparts in making the world better for every one.

Ayodele (2004) cited some gender analysts such as Randall and Comte; Harotombos and Hearald as saying that gender differences as a result of biological/genetic discrepancies are the root of gender disequilibrium in men and women and the role they play in the society, and that gender roles are culturally determined and the inequalities between sexes result from socially constituted power relationships.. Nwafor (2010) comments that this biologically induced division of labour results from hormonal/genetic discrepancies in sex; hence the men are more aggressive, power-packed with their ability to perform harder tasks while women due to their physique are frail and limited to less strenuous jobs. The issue of male role stresses negative complex relationships which consider women as inferior stock whose sole usefulness lies in the satisfaction of the emotional need of man. The role of women therefore revolve around sexual objects, dutiful wives, mothers and handlers of domestic chores (Ayodele, 2004).

The differences between men and female are not signs of defect, damage or disease. Women are just separate sex and do not imply subordination to the male sex. This is in support of gender equality. The cultural theory views gender differentiation/inequality as culturally defined, devoid of biological/genetic make-up. That is to say that the culture of a society determines the role played by male or female in a given society. Thus, there arise the division of labour in terms of women's works and men's work which is practiced in the society. Gender simply refers to sex which is described as the attribute that makes a man or woman. This is based on biological factors only but when we talk about gender inequalities, it refers to the social and cultural aspects which make the difference to what man or woman can do. This brings about gender inequalities as man-made not as nature-made. Because it is man-made, gender issues can change over time. Women now work in government offices, and are independent in business, can earn money and even more than male counterparts, can drive cars and aeroplanes as pilots, are doctors, engineers, lawyers, etc.

According to Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary (1998), gender means classification of a noun or pronoun as masculine or feminine. Gender inequalities on

the Local level were based on social values, opportunities, resources of man, etc. Gender inequalities led to some social vices such as the following:

**Violence:** This is classified into domestic, sexual, physical, emotional/psychological and socio-economic violence. The violence concerns husbands and wives, friends and loved ones. For instance, husbands see it as a right to deal with their wife whenever they think that the wives have disobeyed them or where there is disagreement on an issue. There have been cases where wives are beaten to death, starved or even abandoned by their husbands and sometimes the men will leave their wives for another woman. Some families avoid training girls in school. This also can lead to prostitution and/or early marriage. Boy and girl friends fall out when the girl seems to disagree with the boyfriend even when their relationship is not pronounced or welcomed by their families. The same thing occurs with loved ones without considering/remembering that they agreed to live together. Sometimes, the women are not allowed to have freedom of movement such as visiting relations or taking part in the family affairs. Some men do not accept their wives relations or maids.

Boys are more valued when born and this can be observed by the richness of the ceremonies organized when they are born. Women are not allowed to say or decide on where to bury their father etc. There is the case of sexual violence which involves forceful sex or rape, incest, forced prostitution, etc. For instance, some husbands insult their wives by demanding sex even when their wives are not fit for such. The most annoying aspect of this is that the relations will not frown at such act, rather they would support the men saying that culture demands that the women should attend to the man whenever he demands it. If husbands should love their wives, the wives are bound to obey/respect their husbands as well.

Another aspect of violence caused by gender inequality includes, physical combat, emotional or psychological violence.

**Physical violence:** Some women have miscarriage in the cause of fighting with their husbands while some are been disabled in one way or the other.

**Emotional Violence:** The emotional or psychological violence such as threat to deal with woman, disowning child especially a female child and hatred, not appreciating any good thing done by the woman or the wife. This is a very bad way of humiliating mankind and this kills the inner mind in such a way that the woman is frustrated and confused. Socio-economical violence: Another aspect of gender inequality prominent among the Igbo people is the socio-economical one. Here the women are not protected rather they are exposed. For instance; if a woman is caught engaging in adultery, she is publicly disgraced and punished which may involve stripping her naked, while her male counterpart is left un-touched and if by mistake she is pregnant she suffers it alone. Sometimes when the woman gives birth to female they are not cared for or provided with shelter and the same hatred or treatment is extended to the child if it is a female.

## **THE CONCEPT OF GENDER AND GENDER EQUALITY**

Millennium development declaration undertook to achieve a global vision for empowerment on the condition of humanity, throughout the world in the areas of development and poverty alleviation, peace and security, protection of the environment and human rights, particularly the advancement of women's right and gender equality as critically necessary for progress.

Differences exist between male and female in every known human society. This is evidenced in terms of responsibilities assigned, activities undertaken, access to and control over resources as well as decision making. For instance, the male child is trained for business and politics outside home and in the wider society, the girl child is trained for marriage and home affairs. The challenges associated with the two orientations are not the same.

According to the United Nations' (2001) Gender Issues and Advancement of Women, gender systems are established in different socio-cultural contexts, which determines what is expected, allowed and valued in a woman/man and girl/boy in this specific context. Gender roles are learned through socialization processes: they are not fixed but changeable. Gender systems are institutionalized through educational system, political, economic system, legislations, culture and tradition. Gender concept is not inter-changeable with women rather it refers to both men and women. Gender equality does not remove the traditional roles bestowed on each sex neither does it mean that men and women are equal. It rather means that the rights, opportunities and responsibilities of individuals are not based on sex. Wika (1996) views the logic of equality not as a rejection of existing traditional roles and responsibilities between the two sexes but a dire need to recognize and encourage women's contributions. This is essential for development.

Similarly, the UN views gender equality not only as social justice but also as a pre-condition and an effective indicator of sustainable people oriented developmental processes. Also, Chukwuma (2004) submits that essentially man and woman are equally created and are endowed with naturally assigned roles for the growth and stability of the society. Any attempt to subvert these roles may result in disequilibrium and disharmony in nature. Gender equality should be an objective consideration of the interests, needs and priorities of both sexes. It is not a woman issue but should fully receive the attention of men as women. To this effect, we need to define gender equality and gender inequality in order to clear the misconception.

Gender equality is the proportion of shared resources between men and women, which a school of thought believed might not be achieved in this generation because of some cultural, economic, political, psychological and social factors. On the other hand, gender equality refers to fair sharing of resources, status positions etc between men and women. For instance, the Belgian declaration of 1995 supports 30% for women in all political positions. One may want to ask why not percentage equal for both men and women. The experience throughout the world especially in Nigeria still reveals that the 30% seat recommended for woman has not been realized.

The concept of gender inequality is just the reverse of the discussions on gender equality. This talks about the situations whereby female gender are being discriminated against from having a fair share in the national resources, privileges and opportunities available for all citizens in the areas of education, politics, economics, health, positions status, etc. It is this prevalent situation that the MDGs no. 3 is out to address.

### **CAUSES AND SOLUTIONS OF GENDER INEQUALITY**

Gender issue is one of the most discussed topics in the recent times. There is a growing awareness that females constitute more than half of the world's population (UNICEF, 1998). Despite the fact that females are more than their male counterparts, women and girls are still being discriminated against. However, a number of reasons are responsible for this, which explains the situation in various countries of the world especially in Africa, Nigeria and particularly in Igboland. The reasons are natural, limited resources, religion, male counterparts' barriers, ignorance and reluctance on the part of females and cultural barriers.

**Natural Causes:** Naturally, women are shy, timid and sometimes they resist change. They feel reserved and because of that, they refuse to join or accept certain responsibility within the society. Therefore, women need to come out of their shells and break off all natural barriers, including stress involved in child birth etc.

**Limited Resources:** The women are not considered much when distributing natural wealth, position and other benefits based on the excuse that the available resources are limited compared to the number of people to be taken care of.

**Religious causes:** Religion is one of the causes of inequality experienced by women. This emanated from the Holy Books- the Bible and the Koran where it was said that the first named man-Adam was the head of the woman. This tradition and culture have been built upon and misinterpreted to mean oppression which allows men to lord and oppress women in every setting. Women are not given access to power opportunities, sometimes they are stripped of God given entitlements.

**Male counterparts Barriers:** If referred back to the religious causes that gave men the opportunity to dominate women and take upper position in authority at every sphere of life, women are deprived of privileges to advance or take part in the decision making processes. While the MDGs declarations and the set target and indicators are laudable, centuries of educational exclusion, gender discrimination, gender inequality have been entrenched in Nations culture worldwide, with particular reference to the Igbo race of Nigeria.

**Ignorance and reluctance:** the inequality and discrimination between male and female gender is further enhanced by the attitude of women which indicates ignorance of their positions and rights. Sometimes female gender feels reluctant or even rejects opportunities when given in the family setting or in the society. Many girls even refuse offer to be given sound education by their parents instead many of them prefer to go and learn trade, many resort into early or pre-mature marriages.

**Cultural Barriers:** African culture as it affects religion misinterprets the religious book and give men the advantage to oppress their women folk. In Nigerian families and in Igbo land as example, girls were not given opportunities to go to school and where they were allowed to attend a school, they are not given opportunities of higher education. Since women are naturally shy, timid and sometimes resist change, they feel reserve and refuse to join or accept certain responsibility within the society. Where women are encouraged to take advantage of higher educational opportunities, no deliberate attempt is made to lower admission standards in their favour. From the foregoing, one can say that the issue of gender inequality has some remote and pronounced causes, which manifest in political, economic, educational, social and religious dimension. Other ugly effects of gender inequality are simply seen in the following areas:

**Maltreatment of widows:** Some widows are accused of killing their husbands and as such are treated with humiliation and denied of certain rights in Igbo land in their immediate family and environ.

**Family Property:** The women are denied of their fathers and husband properties even when they helped to acquire them for their fathers\parent or husband. Denial in taking part in the family matters: In cases where matters like boundary disputes, settlement of cases and decisions on where to bury their deceased members or who inherits a man's property are discussed the women/daughters are not allowed to make their contributions.

**Unjust Treatment on the Women:** In cases of adultery, women are punished not their male counterparts whom they committed the offence with. The funniest aspect of this is that when a woman is caught committing adultery, she is punished and if she catches the husband, she is also punished. Equally, if a woman quarrels with her husband, she is penalized. For instance if a woman is not fit to make love with her partner and he reports that she has been starving him, Igbo culture demands that she should beg the husband for forgiveness as well as giving him sex when he demands it.

**Male Child Preference:** In Igbo land as well, male children are preferred to female ones. This is seen in the way the male ones are welcomed through feasting, jubilation shouts i.e. the "oro onu" the males receive four jubilation shouts while the female ones receive two or three shouts and some release of gunshots, for males etc. Sometimes, the smallest male child of deceased men are allowed to say where their father is to be buried or any of the male relations of the man without taking into account what the wife or the grown-up daughter has said. The late man's house, barn and other properties are not shared unless a son or any of the male relation is there as well.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has been able to identify gender inequality as a problem confronting Nigeria as a country among other less developed nations of the world and the Igbo

people in particular. It also tried to explain the concepts of gender equality and inequality and in view of all these, suggested some strategies that can enable Nigeria to achieve the MDGs number 3 which is on empowering the women for better development of the country.

The problems of gender inequality facing our country Nigeria can be tackled by the adoption of the educational strategies towards achieving the MDGs. Such educational strategies must provide opportunities for the under-privileged and vulnerable women who cannot enroll into the formal school system. Seya (2005), writing on Adult Education and Africa development in the context of globalization observes that there is a relationship between countries. It further went on to explain the conditions under which African human capitals and literacy can be developed so as to prepare mature African men and women to face the challenges of an increasing unequal world system and contribute to the emergence of what is now referred to as an enlightened globalization. Adult education usually refers to any form of learning undertaken by or provided for mature men and women outside the formal schooling system. Girl's secondary schools should be established in the rural communities where the majority of the people reside, in view of cost effectiveness, interest and participation.

- Women NGOs should rise up to the challenges of the millennium and set-up activities to empower their less privileged/fortunate women.
- Government should provide a political will, encouragement and support to address the problem.
- Women should come out and be bold to take up challenges, etc.

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