

**INEQUALITY AND DISCRIMINATION IN NIGERIA  
TRADITION AND RELIGION AS NEGATIVE  
FACTORS AFFECTING GENDER**

**A**

**PAPER PRESENTED**

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## **TRADITION AND RELIGION AS NEGATIVE FACTORS AFFECTING GENDER INEQUALITY AND DISCRIMINATION IN NIGERIA**

### **ABSTRACT**

*The Cultural Policy of Nigeria (1988) which is the official document guiding the operation of culture sector defined Culture as the totality of the way of life of a given society. This definition is consistent with the directive on Nigerian Culture as enshrined in section 21 of the Nigerian Constitution. This section empowers the cultural officers to intervene in all public policies in Nigeria including gender and ethnic inequalities, discrimination and other human right abuses. Nigerian Cultural sector through its 8 Parastatal including National Commission for Museums and Monuments, National Council for Arts and Culture etc. has from time to time organized workshops, Lectures, Symposium etc. on issues that are of concern to the sector which are more often general issues that do not single out gender, though on few occasions we dealt with gender issues. The cultural sector should be able to define its scope of work in the manner to transcend the creative aspect of culture to include the philosophical, the material and the institutional aspect of Culture because Culture is the baseline of everything. Culture is one of the limiting factors in the development of Nigerian women. This aspect of Culture includes traditional beliefs and religion as in preference of male to female children, inheritance laws which denies female of any inheritance, early marriage which truncates girl's education. Widowhood practices that deny women social and economic right. Female genital mutilations to avoid promiscuity. My paper examines the implication of a strong cultural background, which has been identified as major factors of female gender inequalities in Nigeria. The paper also examines how the negative cultures can be changed through education and show that its removal will not necessarily westernize our society but it will make the environment more conducive for everybody to participate in the national development.*

## **NIGERIA**

Nigeria is located in West Africa, just the north of equator. The 1914 political amalgamation of the Northern and Southern Protectorates by Lord Lugard of Great Britain gave birth to Nigeria, Africa's most populous country. Going by the demographic figures of the National Population Commission of 2006, Nigeria is populated by more than one hundred and fifty million persons and with different and distinct languages, cultural attitudes, sensibilities, varied religious belief systems and practices. Nigeria occupies a total area of 923,768 square kilometers. English is the official language from the British colonization. Nigeria got its independence on the 1<sup>st</sup> of October 1960.

The Federal Republic of Nigeria has the Executive, Legislative and Judicial arms of Government. There are 36 states and Federal Capital Territory, Abuja as well as 774 Local Government Areas.

There are two main religions in Nigeria, Islam and Christianity and variety of indigenous beliefs across the country. There are three major ethnic groups, the Hausas, the Yoruba and the Igbo. Northern Nigeria is the home for Islamic communities such as the Hausas, the Fulani and the Kanuri. The Igbo are mainly Christians and are located in the eastern part of the country while the Yoruba, who practice either Christianity or Islam, are located in the western part.

Nigeria is a land of rich and diverse Cultural heritage, with a wide array of sophisticated visual arts and has produced a host of traditional crafts. The talent, creativity and versatility found in its festivals, music, sculptures, literature and films are well known all over the world, and has a robust film industry known around the world known as Nollywood.

## **INTRODUCTION**

"When I see how women are treated, I really don't want to become one" these words of a 15 year old girl, Zahra, quoted in the French magazine GEO revealed a grim reality of the discrimination which Nigerian girls and women suffer throughout their lives.

In traditional African societies like Nigeria, culture has a pervasive influence on how women are treated. The Culture Policy of Nigeria (1988), the official document regulating the administration of cultural matters, lends credence to the fact that culture represents the totality of the way of life of a given society. It is therefore no surprise that all discriminations against women tend to seek justification in cultural moves, beliefs and practices.

It hurts to observe that most Nigerian women are held down from realizing their full potentials, all in the name and game of culture.

For any society to develop and progress it must embrace change and objectivity. The Nigerian society cannot afford to lag behind. The transformation agenda of the Federal Government of Nigeria should be holistic and inclusive of the need to liberate the kinetic energy of all citizens without any discrimination to seek self actualization and contribute to national development.

My paper is therefore a cry for justice because I believe that it is within our powers to eliminate all the man-made discrimination and subjugation against women.

### **GENDER DISCRIMINATION AND INEQUALITY: THE FACTS**

The 1999 Constitution of Nigeria prohibits discrimination on the grounds of gender, but customary and religious laws continue to restrict women's rights, As Nigeria is a federal republic, each state has the authority to draft its own legislation. However, any law which is contradictory to Federal Law or the Constitution can be challenged in a Federal Court and cannot subsist. The combination of federation and a tripartite system of civil, customary and religious law makes it very difficult to harmonize legislation and remove discriminatory measures. Moreover, certain states in the north follow Islamic (Sharia) law, although not exclusively and only in instances where Muslims

make use of Islamic courts. Adherence to Islamic law reinforces customs that are unfavorable to women, including those relating to freedom of movement, and to marriage and inheritance. As of 2006, the Abolition of all Forms of Discrimination against Women in Nigeria and other Related Matters Bill' was under consideration; it is unclear whether this has been promulgated into law. Nigeria ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women in 1985

Many of our societies, in spite of great leaps and strides of global community which have rightly buried such conceptions of the second fiddle place of the woman, have not succeeded in rising from this perception. They still see women from the prism of commodity of use.

Today, there are still societies which see a woman as subservient to man, in mental and biological capacity, this is why in spite of glaring monumental achievements of women in the globe and phenomenal rise of the role women play in the world, gender sensitivity or perception of women having mental equality to man has remained unappreciated.

The 2012 Gender in Nigeria Report shows the gender imbalance in the following areas:

1. **Education**

In eight Northern States over 80% of women are unable to read compared with 54% for men 70.8% of young women aged 20-29 in the North-West are unable to read and write and only 3% of females' complete secondary school in the northern area?

2. **Health**

Nigeria has one of the worst maternal mortality rates in the world with one woman dying every 10 minutes during delivering. That is 545 deaths per every 100,000 successful deliveries. Nearly 50% of Nigerian women are mothers before they turn 20. There in inability to access quality

health care services, poor access to safe childbirth services and lack of adequate and affordable emergency obstetric care. In some part of my country, religion does not allow women to deliver in the hospital. This is a taboo as the husbands will not be happy to see their wives opening up to a doctor for any form of vaginal examinations. So from young age, the girl child is taught how to deliver her baby unassisted. This leads to infections and death.

3. **Property Rights**

Women are denied legal right to own property or inherit land. In North-East Nigeria, women own only 4% of land and just over 10% of land ownership in the South-East and South-South. When your parents leave all sorts of wealth for the children, most times, the female children have no right to partake in the sharing of their father's wealth. Daughters' inheritance rights under customary law vary considerably across the country, but in no region does customary law grant women equal inheritance rights with men. Nigerian women have very limited ownership rights. Civil law entitles women to have access to land, and a few states have enshrined equal inheritance rights into law, but certain customary laws stipulate that only men have the right to own land. For women without the means to purchase land on their own, in practice, their ability to obtain land flows solely through marriage or family. Data from the government indicates a significant gender gap in land ownership.

4. **Violence**

Levels of violence against women are high. Battery and marital rapes are not considered a crime. Women are sexually harassed, abused and killed, even for rituals. When a woman is involved in adultery, which of

course is committed with a man, the woman always gets punished by either public stoning or by hanging while the man walks away free.

Rape is punishable by life imprisonment in Nigeria, but there are no sanctions in the Penal Code against spousal rape. Societal pressure to keep silent and stigma surrounding sexual violence mean that few women report sexual assaults. A few Nigerian states have a law in place to address domestic violence, for example the Domestic Violence Law of Lagos State (2007), Gender Based Violation Law of Ekiti State (2011). However, the country's Penal Code grants husbands permission to beat their wives, provided the violence does not result in serious injury. Police are usually reluctant to intervene in domestic violence cases, unless the woman has sustained serious injury.

## 5. **Weak Economic Base**

Women occupy 21% of non-formal sector positions regardless of their educational qualifications; women occupy fewer than 30% of all posts in the public sector and only 17% of this in senior cadre. Only one in every three employees in the privileged non-agricultural formal sector is a woman. Women's access to bank loans is restricted by their limited financial resources and the difficulties they have obtaining the necessary guarantees. In certain cases, financial institutions demand prior consent of the woman's husband before granting a loan. The National Poverty Eradication Programme and their micro-credit schemes offer low-interest, business-oriented loans and other micro-credit and vocational training programs for women, but access is still low statistics show that less than one-third of loans in Nigeria are awarded to women.

6. **Weak Political Representation**

Women and men have the same rights to vote and stand for election in Nigeria. Women comprise a small percentage of elected officials in Nigeria Senate and House of Representatives even in Ministerial positions. Employed women in Nigeria are entitled to maternity leave for twelve weeks at the state level and up to four months at the national level, and during this time are entitled to receive 100 % of their wages. However a number of discriminatory practices still exist in Nigeria in the private sector; many employers force young single and married women to sign job contracts stipulating that they will not get pregnant for the first three years of their employment

Women are under-represented in all political decision-making bodies. Only 9% of those who stood for election in Nigeria's April 2011 National Assembly elections were women. Out of the 360 members of the House of Representatives, only 25 are women, which is 6%.

7. **Gender Preference**

Traditionally, most parents prefer boys to girls, thus, right from birth women are viewed and treated as inferior or second-class citizens. It is a calamity for a woman to give birth to only girls. The consequence is that the husband must marry another wife so as to ensure that his lineage does not go into extinction.

**The Cultural Dimension**

In the cultural and traditional environment we find ourselves, as a male child grows up, he finds out that his sex confers something extra on him. Women

are deprived of basic rights, using culture and tradition to justify the abuse in the following practices:

1. Husbands are the Head of the families and their decisions are final. Women must venerate, respect and obey their husbands at all times.
2. Most women spend their lives within marriage. They are therefore constructed in the minds of men as dependents and inferiors who need to listen to and follow their spousal leadership and instructions.
3. Whereas men listen humbly to their mothers, aunts and older sisters, they would not display the same attitude with women, not in blood relationship with them.
4. Some educated men have internalized the stereotype that women are emotional and not given to rationality like men.
5. Wholesale adoption of gender ideas from fundamentalist religions subordinating women to men.
6. Such attitude has now become a way of life. They affect the way we run the family, implement development projects and practices including national governance.
7. In the cultural setting, traditional belief is strong that for the continuity of the family lineage, preference of male children to females should be encouraged.
8. In similar vein, inheritance laws deny females any inheritance, since she is considered to belong to her husband, on marriage. In rare cases, when

considered for inheritance, female children get less than their male siblings.

9 Early marriage of female children is encouraged, even though the practice truncates or postpones girls' education, thereby reducing their economic empowerment. Three forms of marriage are recognized in the country: monogamous marriage registered under the civil marriage law, marriages performed under customary law, and marriages performed under Islamic law. The Child Rights Act of 2003 amended the Constitution to set the minimum age of marriage at 18 years of age, but only 16 of Nigeria's 36 states have adopted the Act. As a result, states laws on the minimum age of marriage vary: in southern Nigeria, the minimum legal age for marriage is between 18 and 21 years of age, in the north it ranges from 12 to 15 years (Islamic religion). The 2003 Demographic and Health Survey estimated that 33.2 % of girls between 15 and 19 years of age were married, separated, divorced or widowed. Additionally, the DHS found that nearly 22 % of married Nigeria women were betrothed by age 15, a figure that rises to 46 % by age 18. As of 2008, a process of reviewing existing family laws was being undertaken by the Nigerian Law Reform Commission, with a view to eventually proposing a new, comprehensive family law.

10. Widowhood Practices: Most widows contend with accusations to being the cause of spousal deaths and invariably denied social and economic rights. "In many instances, the family of a deceased husband will claim rights to the couple's property, leaving the widow destitute. This is done under the impression that the family of a deceased husband in customary practices will claim the couple's property as well as claim her. This is done in pretense that they are under obligation to take care of the widow and her children for the rest of their lives. This to them, justifies seizing the man's properties.

It should be noted that some states have enacted laws protecting the rights of widows, for example the Prohibition of Infringement of a Widower's and Widow's Fundamental Human Rights Law, No.3 was enforced in 2001 in Enugu state.

11. Female Genital Mutilation: Traditionally, women play passive role in sex, her active organ is removed to avoid promiscuity. Thus her sexual need and enjoyment are taken for granted. She has no right to enjoy sex because her primary role in sexual intercourse is to satisfy her partner and for procreation.

Female genital mutilation (FGM) was prohibited in eleven Nigerian states as of 2008, but such laws are difficult to enforce. On a national scale, nearly 30 % of women aged between 15 and 49 years have been subjected to it including me. The incidence of FGM differs considerably by region, and is twice as common in rural communities as in urban areas.

### **The Effects Of Gender Discrimination on National Development**

A complete picture of how discrimination against women is affecting National development may not be handy but some of them are stated below:

- (a) Due to lack of women in decision-making positions, there is low investment in such sectors as health and education that are crucial to human development outcomes.
- (b) Limitation of women's choices and options is hampering the achievement of economic growth and development.
- (c) Women's reluctance to take responsibilities in politics due to lack of economic empowerment to actualize their ambitions
- (d) The increasing incidence of insecurity, violence and crime such as armed banditry, kidnapping, prostitution, child trafficking, cultism, increasing culture of begging are due to poverty in the society which women empowerment can ameliorate.

- (e) Inability to access quality health services and have fewer and better nourished children has impaired material and children's health
  - (f) Large number of out-of-school drop-outs due to early marriage, early child-birth, poor sanitation and shortage of female teachers.
  - (g) Limited contributions to household cash income and limited influence on spending at the family level. Of serious constraints to economic growth are the facts that women are petty traders, subsistent farmers and house helps.
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- (h) The violence now threatening the security and corporate existence of Nigeria is not a happenstance. When violence was perpetuated against women at the domestic front, it was condoned because it was women that were being battered. Now the society is worst for it.

## ● What the Culture Agencies are doing/will do to address the issue

- Nigeria Constitution shows that cultural officers and authorities are the keepers of moral conscience of the society, the cultural workers need to be re-educated to be more attuned to their role in correcting the ills of the society because no other person is equalled to them.
- The culture sector in Nigeria which has 8 agencies should embark on advocacies and sensitization of policy makers at different levels of government on the issues of inequalities.using behavioural modification technics to change the behavioural pattern of the public by using the psychological model for behavioural modification.
- The issue of inequality in my country has been institutionalised and as such it will pose some difficulties changing them. This is likened to a bag of frozen meat from deep freezer, you will need to defrost the attitude

by making the public to doubt the efficacy of their behaviour, eg the female genital mutilation.

- Then we will introduce the new attitude and its gains after which we will refreeze the new behaviour to replace the old attitude.
- We will achieve all these through drama presentation at community centres, schools, radio, television, motivational speeches, all these are geared towards appealing to the conscience of the general public.
- We will use drama to describe the new thinking and situations in very positive ways. The campaign will not be a one off, it will be ongoing for a while so as to achieve maximum result.
- We have already introduced culture quiz amongst schools and colleges, insisting on equal participation of boys and girls.
- In organizing the National Festival of Arts and Culture (NAFEST), States are encouraged to ensure equality in the list of their contingent for the festivals

#### **WHAT WE AS A NATION CAN DO COLLECTIVELY TO CHANGE THE SITUATION.**

We need to move with the time, by doing away with inherited unproductive and visionless tradition of discrimination and subjugation of women. We need to set up schemes and projects to grow a gender conscious population without any form of discrimination as follows:

- (a) Parents should treat and raise children on the basis of equity and equality;
- (b) Our societal quest for social stratification or prestige on the basis of gender or sex should give way to equal opportunity for all citizens.
- (c) The Nigerian constitutional provision of equality for all citizens should be enforced to the letter.

- (d) In pursuance of the affirmative action for gender equality the Federal Government should institute a gender audit to identify where gender equity can be strengthened in terms of recruitment, promotion and pay for all public servants.
- (e) The Federal Government should also fashion out an educational policy that can influence parental decisions about the need to educate the girl child.
- (f) Schools and universities should develop curriculum for gender studies in tandem with our cultural policy objective of promoting an egalitarian society where all citizens without any discrimination on the basis of gender or creed shall be encouraged to participate in nation building.
- (g) Cultural parastatal and institutions should be proactive in the development of policy papers and guidelines on how to mainstream all genders and enlist their participation in community and nation building
- (h) Faith groups and movements should eschew the parochial view of women as inferior. After the entire Biblical injunction in Exodus 20:12 is without discrimination.

“Honor your father and your mother” it says. which means God’s view is that women should be honoured and respected.

- (i) The Mass media should contribute in the search for a new lease of life by projecting programmes and views that support equality for all Nigerians. They should assist in educating and enlightening all Nigerians that investment in girls and women is an investment in Nigeria’s future development.

- (j) The women advocacy groups and initiatives should be forth coming with facts and concrete suggestions in their campaigns for social justice. In their conduct and speech they should avoid confrontation and contentions.
- (k) Oyo state, one of the states in the South West Geo Political zones in Nigeria, plans law against violence on women and Children.

The State Governor disclosed this in a very recent two days Women summit organized in the state capital and warned that the Bill when passed would serve as a legal instrument to guide and guard against unwarranted violence against women, Children and other vulnerable persons.

He expressed regrets that African Tradition saw women as weaker vessels and object of use and abuse.

Prohibition of Infringement of a Widower's and Widow's Fundamental Human Rights Law, No.3 was enforced in 2001 in Enugu state. More state should enforce these Laws as soon as possible.

## **CONCLUSION**

At creation Almighty God in his infinite wisdom saw the need for women to complement men in his strides for survival and development. There is therefore no doubt that Nigerian women have the potential to contribute to Nigeria's transformation, given gender equity in harnessing available resources.

In spite of social, religious and cultural inhibitions on the way of women's ability to flourish alongside her male counterpart, the woman had since the Beijing conference of 1995 risen to a position of reckoning in global affairs. The 1995 Beijing conference redrew the map of women participation in affairs of their different communities

However, it noted that in Nigeria today, there is now a great leap from the perception of the place of the woman, which was very low some decades back.

Through the exclusion of women in decision-making roles in our national life, we lose and waste a vast human resource that if well-garnered could help situate Nigeria and Africa properly and beneficially in world global systems.

The exemplary contributions of one of Nigerian illustrious daughters, former managing Director of World Bank and current Minister of Finance and Coordinating Minister of the Economic Team of Nigeria, Dr. Mrs. Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, among others are positive lights in the tunnel that sooner than later Nigeria is looking in the direction of implementing national and international human rights provisions and laws aimed at eliminating all forms of gender discrimination against women.

After all like all human societies, culture is not static. The dynamism of culture should make us march forward and liberate the productive forces of our women for self-actualization and national development. By so doing, Nigerian women will never become westernized but will take their rightful position in the scheme of things domestically as well as globally.

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