

Gender Equality in Contemporary Nigeria: Problems and Prospects

By

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Extended Abstract

Introduction

Prior to colonialization by the British, women in the communities that comprised contemporary Nigeria, exerted tremendous influence in the socio-political and economic spheres of their various communities. Women's 'voice' did constitute an important political 'voice' that could not be ignored, thus women were active participants in the decision-making and administrative processes of their communities. Although, women's participation was marginal as compared with that of the men with their 'maximum' political power being minimal vis-à-vis that of the men, however, women's views were considered as an important and critical factor to community life (Mba 1982; Awe, 1992). Thus, women in these societies occupied a position that was complementary to that of men, rather than subordinate to them.

The advent of colonialism and the Victorian ideology of the exclusion of women from the public sphere practiced by the colonial government altered this arrangement. Colonialism reinforced indigenous gender hierarchies negatively and thus pushed women to the background as colonialism exploited Africa's gendered social divisions of labour negatively to the disadvantage of women, thus increasing women's vulnerability to violence and exclusion (Mama, 1997; Amadiume, 1995). In effect, the exclusion of women from the public sphere resulted in an unequal gender order, so that in wealth, power and status, women were at a disadvantaged relative to the men.

At independence, the Nigerian State did not significantly reconstitute the inherited colonial patriarchal structures that limited women's participation in the public sphere. Hence, women still had limited access to both tangible and intangible societal resources. Till date, the situation has still persisted as women are still faced with various handicaps and restrictions such as low participation in politics (Aluko & Ajani, 2006); widowhood

rites and disinheritance (Oyekanmi, 2008); female genital mutilation, poor access to education, healthcare, jobs, land, credit, early marriage, etc (FMWA, 2006).

However, in recent times, successive Nigerian governments, in reaction to the various International Conventions and Covenants on women have undertaken legislative and administrative reforms that would give women full access to economic and productive resources. These have resulted in an improvement in the status of women. Women now enjoy greater participation in governance and its institutions. More women now occupy ministerial positions and seats in parliament. For example, during the 2003 – 2007 administration, there were six women ministers out of a total of thirty four and ten women special advisers out of a total of thirty five as well as twenty one female representatives out of a total of three hundred and sixty (Afolabi-Akiyode, & Arogudade, 2003). Women have also enjoyed an increase presence in the labour market and in education. Currently, women's participation in the industrial sector stands at 11%. Similarly, women represent 87% of those employed in the service sector (FMWA, 2006).

However, women's progress while steady has been painfully slow. These improvements notwithstanding, women in Nigeria are still faced with enormous obstacles as the growing recognition of their contributions in recent times has not translated into significantly improved access to resources or increased decision-making powers. Women still hold only 3% representation in national government and still constitute the majority of the poor and the illiterate. Women still constitute 65% of the 70% Nigerians living below the poverty line with their income and purchasing power being US\$ 669 as compared with US\$ 1,628 for the men (UNDP, 2006). Similarly, while males constitute 58% of Nigeria's adult literate, females constitute 41% (UN, 2005).

Theoretical Framework

The paper will adopt an eclectic approach. Theories of gender roles in society as well as theories of the political state would be used to explain the differential access of men and women to societal resources. Specifically, the biological and cultural explanations of gender roles would be explored to demonstrate the persistence of gender inequality in Nigeria. Similarly, theories that explain the nature and character of the Political State would be explored to explain the differential results among States in narrowing the gender gap. This in effect would help to explain why the Nigerian State adopts the kind of measures it does towards achieving gender equality. It will also explain reasons for the successes or failures of these measures.

Findings

The paper would bring to the fore the various dimensions of gender equality/inequality in the various spheres of the Nigerian society such as in the economy, education, politics, health, legal rights, etc., using secondary data. It will also highlight the reasons while the progress in achieving gender equality in Nigeria has been painfully slow.