

**A PHILOSOPHICAL EXPOSITION OF CULTURAL UNDERPINNINGS OF  
GENDER INEQUALITY IN NIGERIA**

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**Abstract**

*Inequality continues to characterize human existence. In some cases it is not given the desired natural attention. Gender inequality is certainly influenced by different cultures and beliefs. In most parts of Nigeria and some other African countries, women are considered subordinate to their male counterparts, which leads to subjugation. In dealing with this issue, this paper first looked at culture itself as a set of beliefs and practices of a society and inequalities in those cultures. Culture is part of the fabric of every society and shapes the way things are done and understood in the society. It includes modes of life, fundamental values and value systems, traditions, and beliefs. It also defines gender relations. This paper therefore using analytical and expository methods examined those areas that African cultures are still struggling in this 21<sup>st</sup> century to improve upon. Thus, by attempting to unmask the cultural underpinnings of gender inequality, the paper hopes to advance the type of cultural change that could promote true equality between men and women.*

**Keywords:** Philosophical Exposition, Cultural Underpinnings, Gender, Inequality, Nigeria

**Introduction**

Gender inequality has been reverberating in Africa-Nigeria society for many centuries now. The issue stems from among other things the attitude and the belief that see women as of less worth and less worthy. It manifests itself in a variety of forms, including the restriction of women from participating to the fullest in the social, economic, cultural, and political life of society. Of course, the situation is far better now than it was in the past, but women are still denied full and equal participation in many aspects of life in society. Despite many years of feminist activism and social change, virtually every important political, social, cultural, and economic institution is still dominated by men: legislatures, courts, corporations, labour unions, the news and entertainment media, education, science, medicine,

religion. Study shows that women make less money than men even when they do the same or similar work which, of course, they have a hard time getting; that they shoulder the bulk of child-rearing and housework, even in families where both husband and wife work full-time; that they are on the receiving end of the crimes of rape, domestic violence, abuse, and harassment. The same situation obtains in the field of academics. In many universities, for instance, women hardly head some departments; does it mean there is none qualified to such positions? If the answer is no, how then do we explain the situation?

Of course, “few would dispute the assertion that the discursive habits of gender and the gendered social structures that exist in most societies favor men over women”<sup>1</sup>. The denial could stem from the privilege of those who benefit or hope to benefit from the problems.

In its 1948 ‘Universal Declaration of Human Rights’, the United Nations unambiguously recognized and declared its commitment to the equality between men and women, stating that “all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.”<sup>2</sup> This declaration can be found subsequently in the constitutions by all UN member states, including Nigeria. If people are by nature equal, why then does the problem of gender inequality persist? This paper argued that as far as Africa is concerned the problem is far deeper than any mere declaration can effectively redress; instead, the problem appears to have cultural underpinnings that have to be carefully isolated before any meaningful and effective solutions can be found.

### **Brief historical survey of gender inequality**

It is very important to know that the emphasis on equality between women and men is seeking for equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities of women and men. Equality does not mean in any way that women and men will become the same but that women’s and men’s rights, responsibilities and opportunities will not depend on whether they are born male or female. The researcher is very much aware of the diversity between men and women. They cannot be the same outside the ontological existence. The demand of gender equality requests that the interests, needs and priorities of both women and men are taken into consideration. Equality between

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Kevane, (2014). *Women & Development in Africa*. Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., United States of America. P. 17.

<sup>2</sup> United Nations (2015), “The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)”. Illustrations by Yacine Ait Kaci (YAK). Available at [Error! Hyperlink reference not valid.](#). Accessed on 02/05/22

women and men is seen both as a human rights issue and as a precondition for, and indicator of, sustainable peoplecentred development.<sup>3</sup> The appearance of the United Nations Charter of 1945 and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 is a sign that gender inequality has been in existence in the world history. "It was the first official worldwide recognition of women's equality and non-discrimination on the basis on sex. However up until the late 1960's the focus was on women's reproductive roles, as women were seen as wives and mothers and their main issues were supposed to be obtaining access to food... nutrition and health care".<sup>4</sup> one of the most well-known aspects of gender inequality was the prohibition of women's right to vote.<sup>5</sup>

Second, marriage was typically, a man's affair. Women's role were solely on child bearing, nurturing of the children and management of the home whereas the man earned the income and acted as the head of the household and prime decision-maker. In fact, it is assumed under the law that a wife's body was also the possession of the husband, to the extent that a husband could rape his wife against her consent. Third, women were also restricted from property inheritance, which is still alive till today in some Nigerian-African cultures. Fourth, education was also gendered. More opportunities were given to the boys than the girls. The girls were rather given home training since that is where they belong.<sup>6</sup> Etc. One of the concerns of this paper is to showcase, what was behind the discriminations against women.

## **Cultural Underpinnings**

### **Patriarchy**

Patriarchy is a system where men rule and dominate women. Men are effectively in control of important aspects of life, including property and decision-making. Patriarchy appears to be one of the strongest aspects of the African culture. It begins from the family and infiltrates other sectors of the the society, including religion, education, and politics. It is the patriarchal practices that lead to the control of the

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<sup>3</sup> UN, 2001, Gender mainstreaming: strategy for promoting gender equality. Available at <https://un.org/womenwatch/osagi/factsheet1.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Chege, 2007. *Gender and development-historical framework*. Available at <https://acuaknow.jrc.ec.europa.eu/en/gender-water-and-development/15666>

<sup>5</sup> Mobolanle Ebunoluwa Sotunsa, (2008). *Feminism and Gender Discourse: The African Experience*. Ojoko - Biri-Kale Press, Sagamu, Ibadan-Nigeria. p. 1

<sup>6</sup> Future Learn" "A brief history of gender (in)equality" University of Exeter. Available <http://www.Futurelearn.com/info/courses/understanding-gender-inequality/0/steps/66837>

female gender by men, in fact, men generally tend to rule over women as though they were given the right to do so by the accident of their birth as male, creating in the process a kind of gender inequality that subordinate's women to men, to the extent that women do not even have control over their own lives, including their own sexuality.

Patriarchy is a very strong ideological outlook and practice that pervades most aspects of life. With its taproot firmly established in African culture, it has indeed created deep-rooted problems for African women. Due to its longevity and penetration, it has made women themselves to see it as normal. The patriarchal structure of society has indeed conditioned women to feel and think of themselves the way patriarchy feels and thinks of them, and to accept patriarchy as natural, and that is the real problem, because it has succeeded in making most women lose consciousness of their true identity and worth and the culture has made it very difficult for them to dislocate from the traditions they were made to imbibe. In some cases, it is in fact women themselves who champion patriarchal causes and oppose anything that challenges various forms of patriarchy

### **I. Female Submissive Consciousness**

Cambridge dictionary defined submissive as “allowing yourself to be controlled by other people or animals”<sup>7</sup> It is readiness or willingness to submit to someone's authority without any iota of alteration. One hears comments from women saying that inequality is part of humanity. It is natural. This is because, they have come to accept it as the right way of life, without knowing that it is a social construct. What this means is that those with such “consciousness accept the gender system of their society”<sup>8</sup> Therefore, a true solution to gender inequality premised on patriarchy will come only when women regain the original consciousness of their true identity, when they unlearn all that patriarchy has taught them to believe about themselves, and when they begin to discard imitation for originality, dependence for independence, and ignorance for knowledge. Then will true gender equality begin to emerge.

### **II. Religious Beliefs about Women**

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<sup>7</sup> Cambridge English Dictionary. Available at <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/submissive>. Sourced on 23/05/2022.

<sup>8</sup> Kaplan, Temma. (1982). Female Consciousness and Collective Action: The Case of Barcelona, 1910-1918. *Signs*, 7(3), 545-566. Available at <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3173854>. Accessed on 04/05/22

Africa is incredibly religious, and it is different to speak of an African culture that is not profoundly permeated by religious beliefs and practices. The way various religious traditions see and treat women, therefore, has grave impact on the promotion and sustenance of gender inequality in the continent. In reality gender inequality appears to find incredible support in the culture and traditions of various religions in Africa. For example, in the Islamic religion, discrimination against women has reached the point where it is referred to as Gender Apartheid. In this religion, women often are hardly treated as human beings. Their life and activities are closely monitored and curtailed. It was reported in 2005, for instance, that a hospital in Tehran was “accused of refusing entry to women who did not wear head-to-toe covering. In 2002, in Saudi Arabia, religious policemen prevented 14-year-old school girls from leaving a burning school building because they were not wearing their headscarves and abayahs.”<sup>9</sup> In many African countries, Islamic women must be veiled from head to toe in public. They live in purdah and lead segregated lives. Girls are forced into early and arranged, often polygamous marriages, and often to much older men. Three months ago, an interview was conducted by QuarterTo12 with Rotimi Sankore on Data, Terrorism and Nigeria’s future available on YouTube. During the interview, Rotimi mentioned that in Northern part of Nigeria, 60-80 percent children at the age of 12-13 are forced into marriages. What this means is that those girls have no education, no skills, etc.

Christianity is not an exception. It has its own loopholes against gender equality. Patriarchal symptoms are very strong in Christianity and these have strengthened the traditional customs which men use in controlling women. For example, in the account of creation in the book of Genesis, it was said that Eve was created from Adam’s rib and this has made women to occupy a subordinate position both in the Church and family. Women are thus often viewed as second class citizens who were created for men. Secondly, St Paul’s letter to the Colossians 3:18 strongly emphasised that the woman is expected to be submissive to her husband while the husband in turn should love her.

On its part African Traditional Religion could be said to be largely responsible for all the cultural mindset and practices that sustain gender inequality in Africa, since

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<sup>9</sup> Mona Eltahawy, (2002). “They Died for Lack of a Head Scarf”. The Washington Post. Available at <https://www.washingtonpost.com...> Accessed on 21/04/22.

African culture and religion interpenetrate each other in a very profound sense. What we find in traditional African culture can in fact be said confidently to be a cultural manifestation of African traditional beliefs and practices. But with several external influences that have helped to shape the current African culture, African Traditional Religion perhaps engenders gender inequality with greater intensity.

### **Indices of Gender Inequality in Nigeria**

The paper enumerated the following indicators of gender inequality.

#### **1. Male Child Preference**

On the 5<sup>th</sup> of February 2022, a young friend of mine gave birth to a baby boy. Her family greeted the birth with a lot of excitement; she was said to have now registered herself fully in her matrimonial home and solidified her marriage. This is only a single instance of the mentality that generally greets the birth of male children in Africa. Many happy marriages have in fact been destroyed and many women made unhappy where no male children were born. Male children are respected and given higher priority than the female. A reason for this is that most Africa society is largely patrilineal; the male child stays in the family and is considered the one with the responsibility to propagate the family name and line and for the family's fortune and future; the female child is simply expected to be married out. It becomes a big problem for a woman where she does not have male child.

#### **2. Evidence of Early Socialization**

Growing up in the family mixed with boys and girls, our mother will always make sure that the girls are in the kitchen helping, if mistakenly, she finds you playing with boys when you are supposed to be in the kitchen or doing other house works, she will scold you and sometimes use the words 'do you not know that you are a girl?' etc. Thus, from their earliest childhood children are prepared by society and family for what the same society defines as their proper gender-specific roles. While male children are prepared for public life and for important family and societal responsibilities, female children are prepared largely for childbearing and for kitchen management. Thus, "women's roles are greatly influenced by the cultural environment in which they find themselves" and "gender roles tend to emanate from culture other than biology."<sup>10</sup> The extent to which this arrangement robs women of the opportunity to be creative and to take society-wide initiatives cannot be overemphasised-

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<sup>10</sup> Restituta B. Igube, *Women and Gender Studies* (Abuja, Nigeria: Sir Kuf Ventures, 2004),147.

### 3. Unequal Opportunities

Gender inequality manifests itself also through unequal opportunities. Here we are talking about opportunities for good education and employment that are made available to women, to enable them to realise themselves as fully as possible as persons; we are talking about remunerations commensurate to the work they do; we mean their access to appropriate rewards and promotion for their efforts. In fact, women tend generally to earn less than their male counterparts for the same amount of work. Considering their commitment and contributions to the proper functioning of family and social life, it is arguably that women work harder and contribute more, but their contribution is not considered by society to be consequential enough as to merit appropriate appreciation and reward. "The United Nations estimates that between sixty-six to eighty per cent of Africa's farm work is shouldered by women. Many girls in these regions have to drop out of school because preference is given to boys. The *raison d' etre* (of this is that the meagre resources available should cater for the boys, since they are the ones who will always be with their parents."<sup>11</sup>

### 4. Women in Public Life

Historically, leadership carries the notion or belief that men make better leaders than women and this impression is still common today. Although the number of female leaders has increased, they are often named as an afterthought. Women continue to aspire to leadership positions both in the public and private sectors. Great strides have been made in the political realm, and women's participation in both the freedom struggles and democratic processes of many African countries have been notable. For instance, Uganda has reserved a specific number of seats for women in its legislative houses. More women are taking up academic and economic leadership positions. However, this participation has not always translated into equal representation in leadership positions. Once elections are conducted and positions are assigned, for example, one realizes that women are no longer visible. "The societal conventions regarding gender and leadership traditionally exclude women, and top leadership is viewed as a masculine domain".<sup>12</sup> She further argues that "the cultural construction of leadership in itself instigates difference and this is only now being transformed or contested as women gain access to leadership positions"<sup>13</sup>. She continues by saying that

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<sup>11</sup> Restituta B. Igube, *Women and Gender Studies*

Josephine M. Kiamba,(2008). "Women and Leadership Positions: Social and Cultural Barriers", Wagadu, Vol. 6, P.8. Available at <https://appweb.cortland.edu/ojsindexphp/Wagadu>

<sup>13</sup> Josephine M. Kiamba,(2008).

In African societies, “it is believed that men lead and women follow.”<sup>14</sup>

An obstacle to women’s full participation in public life is men’s resistance. Men generally do not want women to share power with them as a result of the age-long tradition and culture that excludes women from public decision-making. In African culture, clan-based system of governance does not give room for women’s participation in decisions outside the family level. This is also due to the cultural perceptions that view women as incapable of leadership. Because women were brought up with this wrong notion, they had always thought that public decision-making was only for men and believed that men know better and will manage society’s affairs more properly. Experiences will better answer if that is the case.

#### 5. Right of Inheritance

The realisation of women’s human right to inherit property, which according to the law of nature everyone has the right to, is still a dream to be achieved in some African cultures. Although there is some improvement on this issue, the imbalance is still very glaring. The institutionalization of the imbalance remains common in African customary law. For example, under most African systems of customary law, women have no right to inherit from their husbands, they are not regarded as sharing ownership of marital property; they are excluded from ownership of land and are almost without remedy upon divorce.

#### **Polygamous Practices**

Polygamy is a classic instance of gender inequality. It is a weapon used to degrade women but which is very harmful to the moral fibre of society and public health. It encourages concurrent multiple sexual relationships and in some cases is the main driver of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. More than that, it reduces women to the level of mere property which a man may acquire as many as he wants and can afford. In truth no woman wants to share a man, just as no man wants to share a woman. In an arrangement where two or more women are sharing a man in marriage, it is rather obvious that none of them can claim equality with the man.

#### 6. Violence Against Women

Women’s unequal rights increase their vulnerability to violence, especially in the family where they ought to have maximum security. Such violence embraces not only wife

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<sup>14</sup> Josephine M. Kiamba,(2008). “Women and Leadership Positions: Social and Cultural Barriers”,



battering but also rape. In some countries in Africa, no specific laws or provisions exist to penalize domestic violence. Even though domestic violence is a widespread problem, it is generally considered to be a private matter outside the state's jurisdiction. This is so because almost every traditional African society is patriarchal, and a woman's place within this scheme is decidedly subordinate. Women who are raped by their husbands are hardly encouraged by the culture to complain and bring such husband-rapists to book, and where they complain they are hardly given a serious hearing. Battered women are told to go home if they attempt to file a complaint with the police. The result is that violence against women, especially domestic violence, go on unchecked. Violence against women extends to sexual violence, including rape, sexual exploitation, sexual harassment, forced and early marriage, and genital mutilation. In South Africa, for example, "rape occurs every thirty-six seconds."<sup>15</sup> It has been observed that in some cultures in Nigeria if not all, if a rapist agrees to marry the rape victim, the crime of rape he perpetuated no longer becomes an issue.

### **Lack of Cultural will for Change**

Women represent the most marginalized group who are particularly excluded socially, economically, and politically. This is both a sign of a widespread gender discrimination at all levels of life in society, and at the same time an indication that gender discrimination enforces social, economic, and political exclusion.

Among the factors responsible for the persistent gender gap between females and males in most African countries like Nigeria are gender relations, cultural practices (such as early marriage, child slavery, and child fostering or trafficking), poverty, and multiple household duties for girls or women etc. Equally contributory is gender stereotype which creates, among other things, low self-esteem and lack of self-confidence for many women, the perception that the women's role in the family supersedes any other role they can play in society, and lack of support from family and government.

The above factors are formidable problems that any effort to tackle gender inequality in society must confront, and is in fact confronting. However, that the problem of gender inequality has not yet been appreciably overcome is not because the contributory factors to gender inequality are so formidable and insurmountable; no, the real problem appears to be an apparent lack of political will for change among African societies. There has been in the constitutions and laws of most

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<sup>15</sup> David John Bwakali, (2001). "Gender Inequality in Africa," *Contemporary Review* 279, P. 270.

African states a clear recognition of the fundamental equality of men and women. A lot of provisions in those laws prohibit gender discrimination and encourage certain measures that aim at fostering gender equality. The real problem inheres in the lack of the will to enforce those provisions. What is required, therefore, is a type of an institutional reform that fully appreciates the gravity of gender inequality and the need for change, as well as the willingness to effect the required change.

### **Way Forward**

The issue of gender inequality embraces the comprehensive search for social justice and extends to practically all aspects of life, social, economic, and political. Reducing gender disparities may not be easy, but it is feasible, and the following considerations could help to advance the cause to an appreciable extent.

#### **I. Changing Cultural Biases**

Denying the existence of gender inequality is a problem in itself. Every case of gender inequality against women, whatever form it takes, is a profound issue of human rights and human dignity. To recognise this at the very outset is to embark on a meaningful journey that has a real prospect of securing gender equality between men and women. For this to happen, there has to be first of all a real and fundamental change in the cultural mindset of African societies. Here Africans need to think differently about what it means to be man and what it means to be woman, about what is natural and what is unnatural, about human dignity, about true gender relations, about gender roles, and about what it really means to be fulfilled and accomplished as a human being. To do that, Africans must detach themselves from their cultural and, especially, emotional biases about the issue. John Churton Collins was right when he quoted saying that 'half of our mistakes in life arises from feeling where we ought to think and thinking where we ought to feel'<sup>16</sup> Women's rights matters need our thinking parts, not our feeling ones. In most cases the root of our emotions are cultural influences that have shaped them. Our cultural influences in the various areas we live worldwide mostly constitute centuries and generations of behavioural norms that have been passed on us without question. Some are good while others are bad.

So, what is needed is a radical and new way of looking at the various aspects of life as Africans in order to recapture that natural equality of man and woman. Nature has made man and woman free and equal ontologically. There is therefore a serious need to reform the African's cultural mindset. This can be done through sustained effective

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<sup>16</sup> John Churton Collins. Available at <https://www.inspiringquotes.us>. Accessed on 02/05/22

education at all levels, various forms of media campaign, legal reforms, and greater openness in tackling the prejudice and distrust that underpin gender discrimination, and building local networks that can help break down stubborn social attitudes and mindsets.

## II. Gender Sensitization

Sensitising society on issues of gender equality, and negative cultural attitudes and practices can contribute to the promotion of gender equality. However, to be effective, such awareness raising ought to be accompanied by comprehensive empowerment of women, to increase their knowledge of their rights and possibilities both as women and as human beings, and to raise their level of active participation in society's socio-economic and political life. This empowerment ought to focus on the universal manifestation of womanhood and the feminine, with the goal of bringing about a perfect balance between the masculine and the feminine forces of human nature in a harmonious and complementary fashion. Women's empowerment does not end with lifting women from their current marginalised condition in society; it must lead to a wider social change and the creation of a new social order based on the feminine characters of love, compassion, and nurturing, with a view to unifying the forces of the human nature. But for this to happen in reality the primary requirement of the social, economic, religious, and political empowerment of women must be met. When women are empowered in all spheres of life, and when they have the choice and opportunity to lead a publicly active life, only then we can talk about the real progress of society. That is why gender equality and women empowerment are human rights issues at the heart of the real and integral development of society.

## III. Language Reform

Language is one of the most powerful weapons used to perpetuate male dominance by ignoring, trivializing, and sexualizing women. The notorious sexism of the English language not only ignores the numerically larger half of humanity, but actually reduces that half to the level of an appendage, albeit helpful appendage, to the male half by which the entire humanity is defined under the language. The sexism has been imbibed by society. So, excellence, power, efficiency, and strength are expressed in masculine terms under the language, while weakness and inefficiency are almost necessarily characterised as feminine. This characterisation finds its ways into everyday expressions. Thus "women are commonly referred to in terms that have sexual connotations. Terms referring to men (studs, jocks) that do not have sexual meanings imply power and success, whereas terms applied to women (broad, dog, chick) imply promiscuity or being dominated. In fact, the term promiscuous is

usually applied only to women, although its literal meaning applies to either sex.”<sup>17</sup> Any serious attempt to tackle gender inequality must, therefore, address the issue of sexism in language.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has tried to examine the root of the problem and to understand the sociological factors that cause women to have a much more difficult time getting the same benefits, wages, and job opportunities as their male counterparts. The paper argues that the core reason for this gender inequality is that society itself has been shaped historically by males, and this has characterised African societies for thousands of years and makes any attempt to change the situation a very daunting task.

The concern of this paper is about justice as it pertains to the relationship between the sexes. The paper argued that women have the natural rights to personal freedom and autonomy, and should be allowed to exercise these rights on an equal basis as their male counterparts. In doing so the paper tried to explore the cultural underpinnings that helped to create gender inequality in the first place. To reverse this inequality by fostering gender equality, women need more than anything else that they be empowered comprehensively to take full responsibility for their life and destiny, and that they play to the full their rightful role in society, not as that role is defined by men, but as it accords with their true humanity. This requires a radical change of all the limiting factors that have so far contributed to their suppression and oppression. In other to achieve this goal, all hands ought to be on deck. This is not the work of any single individual or group of persons. It is not even the collective work of women alone. It requires instead the combined efforts of individuals, communities, institutions, governments, nations, religious traditions, the global community, and everyone, male and female. When women have relative equality with men, justice reigns, development occurs, economies grow, and society becomes healthier.

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<sup>17</sup> Navaneeta Rath, (2005). “Gender Studies”. Available at [https:// ddceutkal .ac.in /Syllabus/MA sociology/paper-10.pdf](https://ddceutkal.ac.in/Syllabus/MA_sociology/paper-10.pdf). Accessed 22/04/22.

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