

## GENDER TERMINOLOGIES AND AN APPRAISAL OF GENDER STUDIES IN AFRICA IN CONTEMPORARY TIMES

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### **Abstract**

*The term gender now appears to have become a cliché in Africa. It is often bastardized, used inappropriately or ignorantly. Yet, the study of gender and gender discourses loom large and as a matter of fact, is a necessity in contemporary Africa. Using the descriptive research design and deductive approach to study, this study attempts to explain gender objectively, expresses some of the major terms used in gender discourses and evaluates gender studies in contemporary Africa. Data for this study are analyzed qualitatively. A posteriori trends show that the term gender is often misconceived or partly understood by a good number of Africans cutting across the formally, informally, poorly and even highly educated. This jeopardizes efforts to boost gender consciousness and acceptance in Africa. Jargons and coinages distinctive to gender discourses and studies are also elucidated for better comprehension of gender and its nuances. More so, this study assesses the status of gender studies/discourses in Africa using the Nigerian experience. Among other things, this study shows that gender is an overused term that has not been fully internalized by a lot of Africans. A lot of gender issues have loosened up but a lot more are yet to be addressed. To ensure equilibrium and harmony in African societies, a more effective dissemination of correct and objective African perspectives on gender in Africa is strongly advocated for the betterment of African societies. This somewhat onerous task falls mostly on the shoulders of government and gender scholars.*

## **Introduction**

Gender study is an inter-disciplinary field of study that has continued to gain momentum within and outside the academia. It is a social reality that has been there for a very long time, even though it was only made popular as a term in the 1970s. Since then, it has continued to expand as a field of study. There have been a lot of (mis)conceptions about the term gender in Africa even though the term has become a cliché. Bradley (2013) however notes that its meaning “is quite slippery” (p.1). Some African women for instance import the western idea of gender which is incongruous with African culture and experiences, while others act on deficient knowledge about gender. Yet, others learn the wrong or toxic version of gender which makes it appear as if gender is a war terminology between men and women. A good percentage of those that use the term gender and try to defend a particular gender when gender issues are discussed usually do so blindly without in-depth knowledge and therefore subjectively. One can say unmistakably, that gender nuances in Africa are different from the case elsewhere and the level of appreciation and acceptability also vary greatly. There is therefore need for proper/unbiased sensitization of gender in Africa and proper application of the term in appropriate situations to achieve balance, inclusion, equity and justice so as to give way to harmony and enhanced development in Africa.

This descriptive study will therefore apply the deductive approach to study and qualitative method of data analysis as it looks at the meaning of the concept - gender. Certain terms and coinages used frequently in gender studies/discourses will also be explained. This explanation will make for easy comprehension and assimilation of discussions on gender and also equip gender scholars/students with professional terms used in the field. More so, gender studies/discourses in present-day Africa with particular reference to Nigeria will be reviewed.

## **Concept of Gender**

It is not very easy to conceptualize gender because of its ambiguous nature. It is however said to be about the social standing of men and women, but it seems to be intricately connected to biological sex and then to women. Scholars however disagree on certain areas of its relationship with sex. Gender is a socio-cultural construction that assigns ‘appropriate’

demeanor, attributes, roles, attitudes, opportunities, activities to men and women, popularly known as the masculine and feminine genders. Gender is transmitted through the process of socialization in a particular society or a given culture-area. As a socio-cultural make-up, gender is transmitted by parents, guardians, pedagogues, religion, culture, the media and even peers. It is to be contrasted with sex which is by and large a biological and physiological make-up of male and female. Sex is differentiated with the terms - male and female, while gender uses the terms masculine and feminine. "Gender refers to the varied and complex arrangements between men and women, encompassing the organization of reproduction, the sexual divisions of labour and cultural definitions of femininity and masculinity" (Bradley, 2013:1).

More so, United Nations Development Programme (1986), as cited in Oluyemi-Kusa (2009) asserts that,

the term gender denotes the qualities associated with men and women that are socially and culturally, than biologically determined. Gender includes the way in which society differentiates appropriate behavior and access to power for women and men. Although the details vary from society to society and change over time, gender relations tend to include a strong element of inequality between women and men and are strongly influenced by ideology". (p. 207).

The foregoing definitions summarize the meaning of gender. Gender is not based on biological sex even though it is widely believed that one's sex determines one's behavior and function in the society. Biological sex is just a component of gender but not its determinant. Ayanga (2011) would say that "nature makes us male or female, society and culture make us masculine or feminine" (p. 8). Haralambos, Holborn and Heald (2008) and Bradley (2013) inform that the position that biological sex is not the determinant of gender is held by most, but not all sociologists of gender and feminists. For Haralambos, Holborn and Heald (2008), many scientists and a few psychologists and sociologists belong to the school of thought that men and women 'naturally' behave differently, suggesting that sex determines gender. Their stance has however been criticized and somewhat debunked. (Oluyemi-Kusa, 2009; Mutunga, 2009; Ritzer and Stepnisky, 2014; Ayanga, 2011). For this study, the opinion of majority of sociologists of gender and feminists is taken. "It does not necessarily follow that being a woman means being 'feminine', nor that being a man

means behaving in a ‘masculine’ way” (Haralambos, Holborn and Heald, 2008). Therefore, gender could be said to be ‘socio-cultural sex’, where the society, driven by culture, prescribes and proscribes behaviours and roles to men and women. It has to do with all about men and women in the eyes of the society and culture.

Apart from the biological features like sex chromosomes, sex hormones, internal reproductive structures and external genitalia, that differentiates sex from gender, gender is cultural, learned, relative and changes with the society; while sex is cross-cultural, inborn, universal and does not change spontaneously. Hence, gender roles can be performed by both sexes, while traditionally, sex roles can be performed by only particular sexes. For instance, while house chores and cooking are gender roles assigned to women in most African societies, men too, can do the chores and cooking without any hitch. However, lactation is a sex role that only nursing mothers can play. Men lack the capacity to do that because it is biological. In the words of Mutunga (2009) therefore, “gender is thus a socially constructed identity through which roles are assigned at different levels and which can differ according to culture and can be changed by circumstances” (p. 365). However, “in common parlance of recent times, gender has also become a euphemism for sex, i.e. male or female, man or woman, as biologically, socially and legally defined” (Oluyemi-Kusa, 2009, p. 208).

In defining gender and in gender discourse generally, women’s issues seem to preponderate. The reason is because the socio-cultural allocation of gender characteristics has been largely detrimental to women or so they claim. Hence, gender studies feature feminism prominently. Feminism is a social theory and women’s movement that addresses the issues of exclusion and oppression of women. It resists male chauvinism, misogyny, androcentrism and champions gender equality. All the fuss about gender mainstreaming focuses on women empowerment. In explicating gender, it is almost inevitable not to touch feminism. It therefore appears that the term gender is synonymous with women. (Oluyemi-Kusa, 2009; Mutunga, 2009; Litoing, 2011; Odinye and Odinye, 2010; Okonta, 2010; Wariboko, 2016). According to Ritzer and Stepnisky (2014), it was a feminist sociological theory in the 1970s that developed the concept of gender as it is used with respect to the distinction between biologically determined attributes and socially learned behaviours.

Ritzer and Stepnisky (2014) trace the development of this concept to one of feminism's basic questions – why is all this (the invisibility and/or exclusion of women from the scheme of things) as it is? In response to this question, the feminist theory drew attention to this distinction between innate and imbibed attributes/behaviours. One can therefore say that gender in the sense that it is being studied here, is a construction of feminism (women's issues/struggles). Therefore, in Litoing (2011)'s words, "the feminization of the gender discourse is justifiable" (p. 5). Expressing similar thoughts, Ayanga (2011) states that "the gender discourse has been more about women and the issues affecting them than about men. One may say that there has been a feminization of the gender discuss to such an extent that men have felt marginalized from the discussion" (p. 10). In Oluyemi-Kusa (2009)'s words, "in many contexts, one finds that a reference to gender is a reference to women" (p. 207).

Going by the glaring inequality/oppression/discrimination against women in gender relations in Africa and elsewhere, and consequently, women's struggle for gender equality, women seem to have the center stage in gender discourses. Hence, any gender discourse without due recognition of women (who apparently developed the concept) and feminism may be said to be incomplete. In fact, gender and feminism go side by side. That-notwithstanding, gender, broadly speaking, is not about women alone, but also about men, about masculinity and femininity. Christodoulou and Zobnina (2009) write that "a considerable amount of interesting research is being undertaken, by both women and men, on male identities and masculinity. The increased focus on men will have significant impact on future strategies for working with gender perspectives" (p. 37). More so, Chinweizu (1990) suggests that just like men, women also wield certain kinds of monopolized powers which gives them control over the womb, kitchen and cradle from which they 'control' men and practice covert matriarchy. For him, the perceived gender disparity is not obvious in many traditional African societies, where "men and women have long had parallel organizations and complementary institutional powers" (p. 70).

However, it will be a disservice to scholarship to conclude this conceptual clarification without mentioning the averred 'third gender' and those categorized under the queer group outside the popular binary – masculine and feminine – concept of gender. According to Achieng (2011), the 'third gender' is mainly determined by biological sex. Intersexes fall

into this category. According to her, “intersex is a general term used for a variety of conditions in which a person is born with a reproductive or sexual anatomy that does not seem to fit the typical definitions of female or male” (p. 189). Intersexes are neither fully male nor female and this results to a dilemma in assigning social roles to them especially as it has to do with sports, marriage or gendered jobs. Issues about intersexes, transgender and transsexuals are complex and complicated. Transgender describes one who steps out of his or her gender roles assigned by society. Because gender and sex are loosely connected, males are naturally assigned masculine roles and females feminine. However, in this situation, a male by sex could feel he is, or should be female. He then goes ahead to take up feminine roles and sometimes could even opt for an elective sex reassignment surgery to manipulate his hormones/organs/genitalia to correspond with his chosen gender. Also, gays, lesbians and bisexuals are categorized under transgender. However, they are the minority. So the binary notion of masculine and feminine genders still holds sway in the society.

### **Terms Employed in Gender Studies/Discourses**

In gender discourse, a whole lot of jargons are used. It is therefore necessary that scholars of gender studies as well as other Africans, acquaint themselves with these terms for a better appreciation of the subject matter. Without claiming that the list is exhaustive, the terms explained below are some of the recurrent terminologies used in gender discussions.

***Androgyny:*** A state of indistinct gender characteristics/features where the sex of the individual is either uncertain or mixed. Androgynous individuals usually combine stereotypically male and female traits.

***Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action:*** This is a document that was adopted by the fourth world conference on women in September 1995. It drafted strategies to actualize Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) (see CEDAW below). It gave a comprehensive outline on Action for equality, development and peace. This document has great value for feminists and gender scholars.

***Bisexual:*** A bisexual is somebody who is sexually attracted to both males and females. Bisexuals, homosexuals and transgender are all classified as queer.

**CEDAW:** This acronym stands for Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women. This is an international convention adopted in 1979 by the United Nations' General Assembly. Christodoulou and Zobnina (2009) aver that it is habitually described as an international bill of rights for women. It contains 30 articles that spell out what amounts to discrimination against women and strategies to end them.

**Cisgender:** This is the word for gender normative. It refers to someone whose biological sex, gender identity and expressions match. In other words, the person's birth-assigned sex corresponds with his/her socially assigned sex and the person thinks and acts accordingly.

**Effeminate:** This is a derogatory term that is used to describe men that have weird feminine qualities.

**Femicide:** The killing of girls and women because of their gender in utter disregard for their human right to life.

**Feminization:** The process of giving something feminine characteristics. It could also mean the process of deliberate or inadvertent transformation of a male to female. For instance, a situation where a man develops breasts or loses facial beards as a result of hormonal disequilibrium

**Gay:** Gay is the opposite of lesbian. It is used to describe homosexual males. The sexual orientation of a gay person is mainly directed to a fellow man.

**Gender equality/Gender equity:** These terms are often used interchangeably such that their slight difference is ignored. Gender equality which is preferred to gender equity by the UN connotes equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities for all human beings regardless of gender. On the other hand, gender equity in Christodoulou and Zobnina (2009)'s words, means "fairness of treatment for women and men, according to their respective needs. This may include equal treatment that is different but which is considered equivalent in terms of rights, benefits, obligations and opportunities" (p. 49). While gender equity can be manipulated by culture or the society to the detriment of one gender (mostly women), gender equality cannot because it is explicitly defined.

**Gender identity:** This has to do with who or what one thinks one is - male or female irrespective of biological sex. Sometimes, it conforms to birth-

assigned sex and at other times, it is separate from it. In the case of the latter, they express their gender in a way that does not conform to their sex.

***Gender mainstreaming:*** This is about ensuring gender equality in the society by weighing the implications of public policies and legislations as it affects women and men. Women's as well as men's issues, feelings and thoughts should form core of policies, legislations and anything else that mutually affects them in the society so that no gender will feel sidelined or disparaged. The singular goal is to dismantle gender inequality.

***Gender stereotype:*** Fallacious generalizations usually made in relation to gender. Gender stereotypes as regards individual persons or groups are usually unverified and scarcely take recourse to contrary evidence to preconceived views about the nitty-gritty of a particular gender when dealing with individuals. For instance, all women could be stereotypically labeled naggers.

***Gender Violence/Violence Against Women (VAW):*** Any act of violence/harm in public or private by members of one gender on member of the opposite gender. VAW connotes violence/harm in public or private by men or male-dominated body on women/girls because of their gender.

***Gynocentrism:*** This is used to describe something that is too female-centered. In short it means female-centeredness. Something can be said to be gynocentric if it is exclusively concerned with women.

***Herstory:*** This is a coinage used by some feminists as a replacement for the 'his' in history. They assume that men claim ownership of the world, hand down what is known as history which excludes women and perpetuate patriarchy because the 'his' in history grants them that leverage and delusion. Hence, they expunge the 'his' in history and replace it with 'her' so that they can document history that women will not be eclipsed. It is simply about the replacement of 'his story' with 'her story'.

***Heterosexual:*** This is a term mostly used in gender studies to refer to a person that is sexually attracted to or has sexual relations with the opposite sex.

**Homophobia:** This term is used to describe repugnance or negative attitudes towards homosexuals.

**Homosexual:** This is the exact opposite of heterosexual. It simply refers to a person that is sexually attracted to or has sexual relations with the person's own sex.

**Intersex:** Intersex is a rare condition where a person is born with features and organs that do not fit the typical definition of male or female. They usually have a weird blend of features from both sexes.

**Lesbian:** This is a term that is used to describe homosexual females. A lesbian is a female whose sexual orientation is predominantly or partially directed to a fellow female.

**Masculinity:** Socially assigned characteristics or behaviour typical for men. Masculinity is synonymous to maleness.

**Matriarchy:** A social organization in which a female is the family head and lineage is traced through the female line.

**Misogyny:** This term simply means hatred for or prejudice against women.

**Patriarchy:** A social organization that recognizes only males as family heads and pedigree is traced through the male line.

**Queer:** A social theory that explores categories of gender and sexuality. It focuses on gender outside heterosexuality, masculinity and femininity. Queer is used to describe lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgender.

**Sexism:** This connotes hatred, prejudice, discrimination, stereotyping or abusive behaviour against people (often women) based on their sex.

**Transgender:** This refers to someone whose gender identity does not match his birth-assigned sex. It describes one who does not fit into his or her gender expectations or roles allocated by the society. In some occasions, they attempt to transform themselves and their sexual organs to suit their sexual identity.

**Transvestite or Cross-dresser:** This is used to describe someone who dresses in the clothing of the opposite sex.

**Womanism:** This is a social theory that is used by black women and women of colour in lieu of feminism because of the association of white women with feminism. It recognizes women's natural contributions to the society and also captures their efforts and struggles for emancipation on issues peculiar to them as a group of people.

### **An Appraisal of Gender Studies/Discourses in Contemporary Africa: The Nigerian Case**

The importance of gender studies in Africa cannot be overstated. Gender is a relatively new field of study that is not cross-cultural and therefore needs to be explored and studied from African cultural perspective. A cumulative study of gender in every human society is apt. Odiye and Odiye (2010) argue that "gender is perhaps the most salient issue and ubiquitous social category in human communities which is socially unavoidable" (p. 457). The awareness of and interest on gender as a field of study around the world is indeed an eye opener to a lot of things that were taken for granted. The study of gender in the light of the peculiar experiences and historical and social realities in Africa is germane and a step in the right direction. Gender, both as an area of study and a social practice has gained international attention. The United Nations for instance, has continued to campaign for gender equality and inclusivity in societies.

Bradley (2013) posits that gender is a "lived experience" (p. 5). It is therefore necessary to evaluate gender as a lived experience in Africa in the contemporary to understand people's actual perception of the term and how it has or has not been applied to daily life and living and in social institutions. It is a known fact that all realities are not defined by the same standards. In Africa, gender experience is distinctive to a great extent. Gender issues in Africa are numerous. Some are experiences shared with most of humanity and others peculiar to Africans, strongly embedded in their experiences. It is intricately connected with African culture and religion and quite recalcitrant and sometimes morbid. The atypical experiences of Africans as regards gender disparity is also partly launched and orchestrated by colonial influence. (Amadiume, 1987; Anikpo, 1998; Okonta, 2010; Eme, 2014).

Amadiume (1987) in her thesis, asserts that gender relations in Africa, judging from her study of Nnobi community in Anambra State - Nigeria,

was adulterated by the colonial rulers. She claims that in pre-colonial times, women wielded so much power; roles were not strictly genderized (masculinized or feminized). Roles were somewhat fluid and women could play masculine roles and be classified as males. Women were economically independent and their goddess-centered religion was a prop to their status. Then came colonialists and their skewed administrative policies and religion that sidelined women. Achufusi (2004), Davies (2013) and Eme (2014) also argue along this line. Achufusi argues that male domination/subjugation of women in Africa was an import of colonialism. For her, “what existed was some sort of inequality and complementarity of sex roles” (p. 244). Anikpo (1998), in agreement with Amadiume (1987) states that gender differences between men and women in Nigeria became pronounced during the colonial period.

Reflecting on gender relations in Africa historically, Ayanga (2011) opines that “throughout history, gender has not distributed power and other socio-cultural resources equally between men and women; ... The distribution has, generally speaking, been in favour of the male” (p. 10). Obviously, gender relation in Africa has never really been balanced. Women claim that culture and religion have always favoured men more than women. No wonder feminism as a practice in Africa (not nomenclature) dates back to the earliest of times in history (Chukwuma, 1998). Stories abide of heroic women in African history who resisted oppression and fought for their rights. This historical imbalance exacerbated during the colonial period and feminism on the other hand, took a life of its own as a social movement in the 1960s/1970s. As a result, African women, deriving from white women’s movements and struggles, and acknowledging that white women’s experiences and struggles do not address the peculiarities of their own experiences, began a struggle to be emancipated from the shackles of gender discrimination and oppression. It is pertinent to state at this point that African feminism, unlike Western feminism, “is not antagonistic to African men but it challenges them to be aware of certain salient aspects of women’s subjugation which differ from the generalized oppression of all African peoples” (Davies, 2013:563). More so, African women are unique and distinct in their struggle because they are mostly heterosexual and are proudly pro-natal unlike their white counterparts. Extant afro-centric feminist theories attest to this fact. Their approach is basically negotiation and what Phiri and Nadar (2006), borrowing from the analogy of Mercy Amba Oduyoye (one of the foremost African women theologians) refers to as “treading softly but

firmly” (p. 2).

What comes to the mind of an average Nigerian for instance, when gender is mentioned is altercations for equality between men and women or women’s *wahala*. The broad meaning of the concept seems to be a preserve of only those academics who deliberately study it and perhaps a few other learned Nigerians. For this reason, gender issues are greeted with a lot of skepticism domestically, politically, culturally and religiously. Even some women whose issues preponderate in gender studies/discourses are bereft of the encompassing idea of gender in Africa and therefore misuse it and act absurdly. Sakue-Collins (2017) rightly states that “uncritical subscription to feminism has the potential to limit and derail genuine liberation” (p. 1). This cliché – gender has however brought about some changes in a very low pace. Much is however left to be desired in the journey so far, judging from international best practices and the Platform for Action on gender equality (discussed under terminologies above) by the United Nations.

The struggle to achieve gender equality and break down gender stereotyping of women is on-going in Africa. In Nigeria, Chukwuma (1998) claims that the greatest problem to women’s struggles is “the strangle-hold of patriarchy” (p. 152). Religion has also played as much role as patriarchal culture in perpetuating gender disparity.

That-notwithstanding, in the academic setting, especially in tertiary institutions (perhaps not all), gender seems to be making a head way as both genders are often given a level playing ground in terms of promotions, positions, honorific titles, gender sensitivity in appointments/committee nomination, use of gender inclusive language such as; chairperson instead of chairman, human instead of man, and so on.

On the other hand, the change that is expected to ensue as a result of gender sensitization in Nigeria has been quite slow domestically, politically, culturally and religiously. Women’s unpaid work at home is still largely undermined and violence against women is still prevalent in a lot of homes in Nigeria. More so, the political terrain does not still favour women and even though the situation has improved in so many states, the number of women holding political positions or appointments is still far from being equitable. Gender mainstreaming in Nigerian politics is therefore still a far-cry from the expected. Furthermore, culture and

religion claim sacrosanctity and are even more difficult to bend to achieve gender balance and justice. A lot of oppressive cultures and religious beliefs and practices that prop gender disparity in Nigeria such as the gendering of divinity, depiction of women as an after-thought by the creator, repugnant widowhood practices, male sex preference, inequitable property rights, and their ilk still loom large.

Chukwuma (1998), as at the time of her research, claims that the struggle for gender equality in Nigeria was in the 'reaction' stage, having moved from 'consciousness' stage. She however expresses optimism that it will move to the third stage - 'change'. In this final stage, there will be positive changes in the structure of the society and development will be enhanced. Apparently, the consciousness or awareness stage was inadequately handled. The gap between the learned and often urban dwellers and the unlearned rural dwellers as regards gender awareness is still glaringly wide. The reaction stage has also not fully metamorphosed to positive change perhaps because the first stage was faulty or the Nigerian culture is simply too obstinate. Chukwuma however states, and very correctly so, that "there can be no development in a nation where half of the population is subjugated and disaffected" (p. 161). There is therefore an urgent need to salvage the situation in Nigeria because, borrowing Bradley (2013)'s words, gender disparities between women and men "affect us all in every aspect of our lives" (p. 6).

On the other hand, African men, just like men elsewhere have been largely silent as regards men's issues. This of course, is one of the reasons for an apparent one-sided gender discourse. In his persuasive discourse, Chinweizu (1990) however insists that women's power is superior, matriarchy is practiced covertly and the decried double standard in gender issues actually favour women more. Men's concerns however, does not correspond with the plethora of women's issues. Men that are not pro-feminism in Africa (many are not) have however busied themselves with defending the status quo and repudiating women's claims.

## **Conclusion**

In Africa, particularly in Nigeria, gender is apparently considered an exclusive preserve of women. A considerable number of men and women alike - literates and non-literates are oblivious of what it actually entails. The prescriptions and proscriptions of the international community as

contained in CEDAW, Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and other documents have not been fully actualized even though the situation has improved. Hence, the onus is on the government, academics and well informed Africans to step up gender sensitization efforts in the academic and informal settings so that people will come to grasp with what it is all about and at least be open to it. Gender sensitization in Africa is therefore germane for a rediscovery of the African situation and proper action to address the nuances and peculiarities of Africans with respect to gender. Knowledge they say, is power. Intensified gender studies/sensitization in Africa could precipitate positive change.

Gender is an inter-disciplinary field of study that touches virtually every aspect of life. Most departments in tertiary institutions and even secondary schools can therefore incorporate it into their curriculum. Proper gender education and appreciation that shuns confrontation is highly recommended as a tool that will bring about this desired change and development. Gender mainstreaming and justice can only be possible in Africa (Nigeria) when the relevance of gender discourse is internalized by Africans.

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