

GENDER EQUALITY DISCOURSE: CRITIQUE OF THE FEMINISTS' VIEW IN IGBOLAND

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Abstract

Gender equality has been raising serious academic and social discourse amongst scholars around the globe over the years. This has led to the emergence of a school of thought popularly known as “feminism”. Among the famous feminist scholars was the French feminist, Simone de Beauvoir, who argued on the rights and equality of women amongst their men counterparts. The feminists advocate the rights and equality of women amongst men. As the ideal of equality is conceptualized globally, and enshrined in the conventions of most international organizations such as the United Nations, as appeared amongst the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) items. Hence, realizing this has been considered a serious challenge in Igboland of Nigeria. The challenge seems to be predicated on what we can simply describe as the “pseudo-dignity of women” in Igboland. Applying analytic method, we shall analyze the concepts of gender equality and inequality in relation to the feminists’ views. We also give a global understanding of gender equality as contained in the projections of the United Nations' Charter and SDGs. We argue that these rights, as projected by the feminist school of thought, are yet to find their place in Igboland of Nigeria due to the "pseudo-dignity" of women. We also contend that the Igbo people of Nigeria do not disregard womanhood, its dignity and equality with men, but that women disregard themselves by distorting their own womanhood.

Key: Gender, Inequality, Gender Equality, Discourse, Feminism, and Igboland

Introduction

Gender equality discourse is predicated on the claim that women are not respected and never considered on the same pedestal with their male counterparts. This misconception has led to the emergence of feminist theory influenced by the works (or thoughts) of a French famous feminist, Simone de

Beauvoir. Enemuo and Obijekwu (2018) in their article titled “The natural dignity of womanhood: The need for woman to celebrate woman as woman” pointed the misconception regarding the said inequality between men and women. This paper took a different position on the said claim of the feminists. They argued that by nature women are bestowed with some natural powers or responsibilities which may likely not be same with men due to their natural and existential purposes. These natural and existential purpose or characteristics do not mean that they are not equal with men. The fact remains that they are assigned with different responsibilities in the universal enfoldments (Enemuo and Obijekwu, 2018). This position is slightly different from the feminists’ argument that women have not only been accorded rights inferior to those of men, their status is implicitly taken as inferior and as a result of that, it has dampened their emotions, thoughts, activities and subjugation in social relations(Enemuo and Obijekwu, 2018: 33).This claims also portrays that woman are powerless in the society and that men are domineering and have relegated women to the background: politically, economically, religiously, culturally, and even socially (Enemuo and Obijekwu, 2018: 33). The authors contrarily argued that it is out of place to hold that women are powerless in the society or rather to claim that women are powerless because if what it takes to be powerful is for one to get what one wants, then women should be far kept from the definition of powerless. Women from history have always the natural and the fundamental capacity to get what they want, be it academic qualification, wealth ...the only difference between men and women in power acquisition lies in their approach and methodology (Enemuo and Obijekwu, 2018: 34).

Feminists have continued to advocate for the equality of men and women which from the time immemorial was there, and was not denied of them. Even the scripture attested to equality of men and women from creation. The book of Genesis gave the act of creation of men and women on equal basis and as God’s plan for making a world which He considered perfect and good for man and woman (Chukwuedo, 2018). In creation, there is no indication for inequality between men and women.

Ogbodo (2016) cited in Enemuo and Obijekwu (2018) asserted that feminism developed from a position of opposition, opposition not to men but the “oppression” of opposition. For Nweke (2004) feminism centers its demands on the basis that men constantly frustrate the right of women to take control of their own destiny. With this claim, feminists strive to equalize themselves with men in all areas of life. In this work, we argue that women have been the ones that have been denying themselves this equality due to their behaviour or mishandling of their nature. They have been the ones that have initiated their claimed oppression or subjugation.

We also argue on the “pseudo dignity of women” in general and Igboland in particular. This paper considers the feminist position which bothers on the defense of the rights and equality of women amongst men. It draws from the ideals of equality as conceptualized globally, and enshrined in the conventions of most international organizations such as the United Nations with reference to the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) item on gender equality. The main position of this work is that these rights, as projected by the feminist school of thought, are yet to find their place in Igboland of Nigeria due to the pseudo-dignity of women; not that the Igbo people of Nigeria disregard womanhood, its dignity and equality with men, but that women disregard themselves by distorting their own womanhood.

Conceptual Analysis

Gender

Merriam-Webster (2020) defines “gender as the behavioural, cultural, or psychological traits typically associated with one sex”. World Health Organization (2020) defines gender as the roles, behaviours, activities, attributes and opportunities that any society considers appropriate for girls and boys, and women and men. (Haig, 2004) notes *gender* is the range of characteristics pertaining to, and differentiating between, masculinity and femininity. This depends on the context which may include biological sex; that is, the state of being male, female, or an intersex variation, sex-based social structures, that is, gender roles, or gender identity.

Obasis (2018), in her work titled “Gender and Sex Education in Africa”, defines gender as the socially constructed roles, behaviours, activities and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for men and women.

In line with this, Akpabio(2005) sees gender as the socially and culturally defined and constructed roles that men and women play in societies; roles which are shaped by economic, historical, and cultural determinants. Collaborating with this definition, Ogbuagu(2005) cited in Obasi(2018) notes that gender is socially constructed for the purpose of allocating power, duties, responsibilities, statuses, and roles in any given social milieu or context. Commenting further, Ogbuagu (2005) states that the concept, gender is universally conceptualized either as an organizing concept which can be innocuously interpreted as neutral (that is without bias) or as a value-laden concept which is applied to imposed discriminatory practices against one group by another within a given setting.

From the foregoing, we can deduce the following points: first, gender is a social construct; culturally, socially or psychologically constructed unlike the concept of sex which is a natural or biological phenomenon (male and female, boy and girl); second, gender as a social construct is socially constructed to assign duties, responsibilities or roles to males and females or men and

women in societies and as well indicates statuses, behaviours, activities and attributes; and finally, gender carries discriminatory imports.

Equality and Inequality

Equality and inequality are two opposite terms. *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2007) notes the concept *equality* is a loaded and highly contested concept. In the world of politics, it has been a controversial concept, and probably the most controversial of the great social ideals. This controversy lies on its precise definition or notion. The term “equality” signifies a qualitative relationship; it signifies correspondence between a group of different objects, persons, processes, or circumstances that have the same qualities in at least one respect, but not all respect, i.e., regarding one specific feature, with differences in other features (*Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2007). Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2020) defines equality as the state of being equal, especially in status, rights, or opportunities. Equality is ensuring individuals or groups of individuals are not treated differently or less favourably, on the basis of their specific protected characteristics, including areas of race, gender, disability, religion or belief, sexual orientation and age (<https://www.ed.ac.uk>, 2020). Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary defines equality as the right of different groups of people to receive treatment. According to *Cambridge Academic Content Dictionary*, equality is a situation in which men and women, people of different races, religions, etc. are all treated fairly and have the same opportunities (Cambridge University Press, 2020). On the other hand, inequality is a situation where people or a group of people are treated different maybe due to race, sex, gender, disability, ethnicity, religion, etc. It is simply an absence of equality.

Gender equality

Combining gender and equality we have “gender equality” which has been so prominent in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). For decades now, United Nations (UN) has been advocating for gender equality around the globe. UN, in the article, "United Nations: Peace, dignity and equality on a healthy planet" notes that gender equality, besides being a fundamental human right, is essential to achieve peaceful societies, with full human potential and sustainable development. To avoid confusion here, let us define gender equality. The phrase "gender equality" is defined as when the different behaviours, aspirations and needs of women and men are considered, valued and favoured equally. This does not imply that women and men have to become the same, but that their rights, responsibilities and opportunities will not depend on whether they are born male or female (Wikipedia, 2020). The article number five (5) of the sustainable development sets its goal as: to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. Gender equality from the notion of SDGs is not only a fundamental human right, but a necessary foundation for a peaceful, prosperous and sustainable world.

Contrary to gender equality is gender inequality, which the feminist thinkers have been waging war over the decades now by defending the equality of men and women. These discrepancies are attributed to cultural and social phenomenon or manipulation to place men over women. Gender inequality is a situation where men are acknowledged to override or dominate women. In this situation, women are considered unequal with men due to some biological, cultural and psychological constitutions or differentiations. Despite the biblical account of creation of men and women, which the feminists considered inadequate and illogical, the feminists project the equality of men and women believing that what men can do, women can do it better. They advocate for the inclusion of women in leadership and politics; other areas include rights of women in the societies, proper education as their male counterparts, economics, health, etc.

Simone de Beauvoir, Feminism and Defense of Gender Equality: A Critique

The French known feminist, Simone de Beauvoir has made effort to reposition women back to their original position; not the one assigned to them by their male counterparts. Simone de Beauvoir, a French writer, intellectual, existentialist philosopher, political activist, feminist and social theorist, championed the course of women. Most of her postulations are seen in her works which include; *The Second Sex*; *She Came to Stay*; and *Mandarins*. The *Second Sex* remains most outstanding among other of her works. The work was first published in 1949 in French where she reinterpreted and changed the known existentialist maxim that existence precedes essence into a feminist one when she said that “One is not born but becomes a woman”(Beauvoir, 1949: 267). Her sex-gender distinction was the offshoot of this assertion. Prince (2005) and Neil R (2010) note that the distinction between sex and gender differentiates a person’s biological sex from that person’s gender, which is based on either social roles (gender role) or personal identification of one’s own gender based on an internal awareness(gender identity). According to Mikkola (2018) sex-gender distinction is the distinction between biological sex and the social and historical construction of gender and its attendant stereotypes. Beauvoir argues that “the fundamental source of women’s oppression is its (femininity’s) historical and social construction as the quintessential other” (Bergoffen, 2015). This Beauvoir’s position maybe considered incorrect or rather fallacious here. Women’s oppression or so-called inequality is not “fundamental” source as she said or used the word, because feminine nature of women is intrinsic and natural to them as a sequential character and attachment to their ontological nature. We may rightly say that the fundamental source is the women’s approach to their nature and womanhood; their attitude towards their nature. This is exactly where the initial oppression might be originated. The feminists ideology or

movement to reconstruct their hampered or distorted ontological structure, which they themselves destroyed decades or centuries back, and which many have continued to be destroy even in contemporary society, has been an unending project. .

Hawkesworth (2006); Longermann & Niebrugge(2010); Laura Brunell and Elinor Burkett, (2019), describe feminism as a social movement, political movement, and ideologies meant to define, establish, and achieve the political, economic, personal, and social equality of the sexes. This approach, taken by women, is on the basis that men are more recognized in the society, their voice is more heard than that of women. This, for women, is an unfair treatment. So their campaign for rights include: rights to vote, to hold public offices like men, to work, to earn fair wages, equal pay and elimination of gender pay gap, to own property, to receive education, to enter contracts, to have equal rights within marriage, and to have maternity leave; they fight to ensure access to legal abortion, and social integration and to protect women and girls from rape, sexual harassment, and domestic violence (Echols, 1989). All these and more are the demands of the feminists initiated by Beauvoir's work as one considers the assertion, according to Beauvoir, that women are as capable of choice as men, and thus can choose to elevate themselves, moving beyond the "immanence" to which they were previously resigned and reaching "transcendence", a position in which one takes responsibility for oneself and the world, where one chooses one's freedom.(Beauvoir,1949).

Enemuo and Obijekwu (2019) argue in support of this Beauvoir's position in their work mentioned above....women, right from creation, in the natural order, was created equal with men in the original order (Genesis 1: 26-28). This is purely a biblical account of masculinity and femininity of men and women. Hence, the down-fall of man was as a result of woman's attitude. Both the man and woman were chased out from the Garden of Eden – the Beautiful Garden. This singular act created fear in man. The case of the biblical Samson with Delilah; King David with Uriah's wife; and other cases seem to have infused fear in men from antiquity. Putting the record straight, women's oppression or whatever nomenclature it bears is due to fear of destruction and reducing the heroism of men in antiquity as seen or observed in centuries past. Describing women as "weaker sex" is not because of gender issue or reducing their equality with men, but because of the manipulative powers, or rather their sensual powers which can reduce a hero to a slave. That is the reason, in ancient Greco-Roman Empires, the nobles, war heroes and powerful men do not go home or meet their wife during the war or on noble assignment to avoid failure. Typical example was Uriah, in the Scripture who refused going home to meet his wife when King David advised him as such. Even in traditional Igbo society, noble men keep away from the wives. We shall elaborate on this as we go further.

From the foregoing, we come to a contrary view or position different from Simone de Beauvoir's that women's oppression, or inequality with men, is fundamentally based on the women's femininity. This view we consider fallacious, incorrect, and baseless here. We posit that women's oppression is fundamentally based on the women's distortion of their ontological nature and see themselves as sex tools, as pleasurable tool for gods and goddess in antiquity, that is, as tools for pulling down heroes in the ancient Greco-Roman Empire. The fall of Adam due to Eve's conviction to eat the forbidden fruit; the fall of King David, the man after God's own heart with Basheba, the wife of Uriah, and other biblical narratives regarding the fallen of some famous heroes or powerful men in the scripture has shown the power of women. Buttressing this further is the poetry of Homer and Hesiod which collaborated on the activities of gods and goddesses in the affairs of humanity with regard to womenfolk as sexual tools in the service and worship of gods and goddesses. Chukwuedo (2018:18) also refers to Aphrodite Pandemos, and thousand goddesses, who were consecrated to her service while describing the worst moral sins of the city of Corinthians as dishonesty, drunkenness, and above all, sensuality which linked directly to the worship of the Aphrodite Pandemos.

So we re-emphasize here that the observable societal distinction between women and men, or the so-claimed inequality between men and women is not solely as a result of women's femininity as Beauvoir claimed and being contemporarily advocated, but women's mishandling of their nature, and destroying of their womanhood; destroying their attached dignity.

Gender Equality and pseudo-dignity of women in Igboland

What is considered as pseudo-dignity of women in Igboland could be globally applied where women claim that the "body is my body"; by going naked in movies, music and display their womanhood publicly, and at the same time seek to be respected, valued and rated equal with men. Though, the main focus is on Igboland, a part of Nigeria. Igbos are predominantly located in the South-eastern geo-political zone of Nigeria which comprise five states in Nigeria which include: Anambra State, Enugu state, Abia state, Ebonyi state and Imo state. Igbo people may also be seen around South-south geopolitical zones of Nigeria. Generally, Igbo people are scattered all over Nigeria and across the globe. They are known for their uniqueness and republican way of life, both male and female. Respect for women is amongst the things Igbos are known for. It is one of their cherished values, and should at present, be promoted and encouraged. One may wonder if gender equality as advocated by the feminists, even radical feminists, is achievable in Igboland. Put differently, can gender equality be achieved in Igboland? If gender equality is to be achieved, under what condition can it be achieved?

For decades now, the UN has set out amongst its 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals realizing the gender equality in the world and Nigeria. Igbo land is not excluded from the agenda. This paper has argued that the agenda will not be realized if women do not revisit or go back to the original status or ontological nature. Their current state is what this paper considers an exhibition of “pseudo-dignity” of women. There are two wars women over the years have been waging against their counterpart – men, that is; a) war against inequality, and b) war for dignity of women. The idea of equality has been extensively being discussed above. Let us discuss that of dignity here. The difference between equality and dignity is ontology. The ontological equality between men and women is intrinsic and inherent which women have been fighting to regain, which they themselves destroyed over time now.

The concept *dignity* is the state or quality of being worthy of honour. It is an attachment factor to the being of human person be it men or women - both the male-folks and female-folks alike. Dignity is one of the most important things to the human spirit. It means being valued and respected for what one is, believe in and how one lives his or her life (Familyeducation.com, 2019). According to *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary & Thesaurus* (2020), dignity is the importance and value that a person has, that makes other people respect them or makes them respect themselves. It is the quality of a person that makes him or her deserving of respect, sometimes shown in behaviour or appearance (*Cambridge Academic Content Dictionary*, 2020).

Igbo people have very rich culture, and cherish so much their tradition which has much restriction in certain behaviours or attitude considers abominable, which of course other cultures may consider worthwhile. Culture is considered as people's ways of life. Culture is an embodiment of entirety of people's ways of life, that every aspects of their living. In the traditional Igbo, husband and wife do not live in the same hut. It is not that they are not equality, but the man is trying to protect his power and strength from the woman, that is, to avoid the manipulative power of the woman. Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* gives the scenario of Okonkwo and his wives living in different huts (Achebe, 1958). Women are invited when they are needed to discuss family issues. Each of these actors was carrying out their individual responsibilities, and Okonkwo, as the head of the family, protects his household. Igbo people respect and adore their women, and their dignity being accorded to them.

Though, the women due to their nature and have assigned responsibilities that may sometimes be different from that of the men. Obviously, women do not embark on the works reserved for the men likewise men. Some tedious works or engagements are done by men like engaging in battle or war; wrestling in

traditional Igbo society; serious farming like cultivation of yam is reserved for men, while cassava and minor farming or weeding the farm are reserved for women. Often times, in a loving family or household, the man and the woman do the weeding together. It does not show weakness on the side of the man. Even in this contemporary time, it happens. Above is as a result of women's disposition and misinterpretation of the nature and being, which men capitalized on and used as an advantage over them. That is why they are seen as a weaker sex; avoiding challenges due to them and their nature. Nature shares roles and responsibilities. So there is no sense of inequality attached to it.

Pseudo-dignity of Women in Igboland

Only what is considered as an issue is the question of "pseudo-dignity" of women caused by women themselves. Pseudo-dignity of women in Igboland is a situation where women have distorted their dignity and hoping to gain it back. The term *pseudo* is being apparently rather than actually as stated, that is being sham, spurious; false or pretence (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2020). Dignity as defined above it attaching worth to one's way of life, behaviour or attitude. Many girls, even mothers move around the street naked, promoting sexual promiscuity, promoting rape which has been rampant today in the society. This is as a result of the abominable lifestyle of most child-girls and mothers in various universities and streets. Pseudo-dignity is when women are clamouring for gender equality and dignity of which themselves are to ready to accord themselves. It is not that they would not regain it but should do the needful as regards respecting the core values of decency of womanhood.

Most of gender equality items as contained in the chart of the United Nations are contrary to Igbo culture. For instance, right to abortion, etc., for one to desire to be valued, one must first and foremost value himself or herself; attach to his or her person, way of life and even respecting social values of decency, modesty, and moderation in life or behaving with dignity.

Conclusion

In this paper, effort is made to understand the notion of gender equality which has been standing in philosophical discourse amongst the feminists. The feminists have over time now tried to advocate the equality of women with men. This work traces the foundation of this feminist position to work of Simone de Beauvoir, the famous French feminist philosopher. Moving against the Beauvoir's argument that women's oppression is fundamentally based on the femininity of women, this paper argues that the oppression, social discrimination or exclusion of women is as a result of fear of women that often leads to destruction or down-fall of men. Historical instance were given

both scripturally and historically where women have given themselves as sexual tools to the service of gods and goddesses.

This work also argues from Igbo perspective that women posit pseudo-dignity or equality due to their style of life. With this anti-valued and anti-social attitude or way of life, they have distorted the dignity and reduced their sense of equality with men. This often has led to social discriminations or exclusion from economic, politics, and other aspects of societal activities. We argue that these rights, as projected by the feminist school of thought, are yet to find their place in Igboland of Nigeria due to the pseudo-dignity of women. We also contend that not that the Igbo people of Nigeria disregard womanhood, its dignity and equality with men, but that women disregard themselves by distorting their own womanhood. Until women, in extreme commitment reshape and re-establish ontological state, regain their lost dignity, they will continue to rigmarole in so-called fight for gender equality, which will continue to be a mirage.

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