

PHILOSOPHY AND GENDER EQUALITY IN NIGERIA: ISSUES, IMPACTS AND PROSPECTS

Purissima Emelda Egbekpalu, PhD

Dept. of Philosophy Madonna University, Nigeria
08035758597; epury@rocketmail.com

Abstract

Philosophy offers a rational and critical outlook on the life and activities of the people within given contexts as it tries to solve existential issues of the moment. The role of philosophy in gender issues is a sacred one which is adapted from the general role of philosophy in human life and existence. It has been well established that women suffer from men's chauvinism and are being subjugated, derogated, abused, etc. due to patriarchal dominance and gender roles in many cultures including Nigeria. This paper analytically investigates myriads of habits, assumptions, personal, social, economic and political practices that sustain gender inequality and injustice against women and proffers practical ways forward. It further examines the meaning and significance of gender equality through clarifications of its concepts, goals, values and impacts. The paper discovers that women desperately continue to seek for equal treatment with their male counterpart though subtler now than in the past years because the major fight has been done and major battle won which brought about new and positive developments in their lives and that of the society in general. The paper concludes that gender equality is not to be understood as gender sameness which is mere theory and utopic. It therefore recommends gender fairness and common ground of practice through enlightenment and empowerment.

Key words: Philosophy, gender, equality, feminism, Nigeria.

Introduction

The issue with gender equality is a very complex one. Due to bio-social reasons, various cultures (Lerner, 1986) reserve specific roles to each gender due to their anatomical distinctions. The ugly treatment against women elicit in them questions about the dignity of their human worth in relation to their male counterpart. In reaction to those ugly experiences, women are often heard saying 'what a man can do, a woman can do it even better' and such expressions. As such, they yearn for justice and equal treatment.

Gender inequality is often the major cause of violence against women (Egbekpalu, 2017). Perceived patriarchal dominance in various cultures including Nigeria is said to be at the basis of gender inequality and all forms of ugly practices against women. The main goal of feminism (Ani, 2019 p. 8) is "to disturb the system of relations that have deprived women and favoured men

for centuries...it hopes to recognize and assert the full equality and humanity of female and male in every society.

Feminism (Mama, 2011 p. 1) is an “ongoing struggle to free women from centuries of oppression, exploitation and marginalization in all the vast majority of known human societies. It is also a call to end patriarchy and to expose, deconstruct and eradicate all the myriads of personal, social economic and political practices, habits and assumptions that sustain gender inequality and injustice around the world.” Down the ages, women perceive themselves as being unequally treated based on their gender givenness (Simone, 1956; Clinton, 1996; Wollstonecraft, 2014; Gilligan, 1982; Frieda, 1997) especially in public, political, economic and religious affairs as well as in issues regarding ownership of properties, love and sex, work, etc. and even in some cultural norms and practices.

Understanding the Concepts: Sex, Gender, Gender Relations and Gender Equality

Sex refers to biological differences between males and females and they are natural, universal and unchanging.

Gender points to a set of characteristics and behaviours expected of men and women in the society based on the assumption that certain qualities are natural to men and women. The masculine and feminine gendered qualities determine their roles and are constructed by given societies through socialization that prepare them for their social roles. How men and women are positioned in their various societies often determines the discriminatory and gender-based treatments they receive. In other words, we are born as males and females, grow up as boys and girls and learn to be men and women (gendered). That is why Simone de Beauvoir (1956 p. 17) argued that “one is not born a woman but rather becomes a woman.”

Gender Relations are the ways in which men and women relate in their societies based on their gender, roles and values attached to them.

Gender Equality is the equal treatment of men and women. It indicates the fact that women’s condition is generally not equal to that of men and solicits for equal opportunities and participation of women in all sectors of life. Feminism is a way of restoring equal treatment of women.

Gender Equality as Different from Sameness

The differences in biological dispositions do not bring about any justification for superiority or inferiority but performance of different but complementary roles. Hence, sex differences do not connote inequality and equality does not mean sameness.

Reference is often made to the biblical passage (Gen. 2:7) of the creation of man (Adam and Eve) and various interpretations are made both in favour of men and women depending on the wave of the argument. God's humble assessment of his creative work found that everything is good except that man should be alone. God was not proud to maintain the *status quo*, he made a woman from the man's rib so that man should be happy as he originally intended for which loneliness would have been a hindrance. As the creation of animals portrayed unsatisfying dominance and a mismatch which did not fulfil the purpose, He took time (Gen 2:21-22) to create a fitting companion (substantial equality between man and woman) that brought about fulfilment and fullness of creation. Culture should constantly review their practices as the world evolves. Equality and complementarity of man and woman was demonstrated in the creation account when Adam acknowledged the presence of Eve with such an anthropomorphic expression "bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh". How Adam knew that Eve was made from his bone justifies the perception of the equality between them (Gen. 2:23).

At this juncture, it is noteworthy to delineate that gender equality does not necessarily remove the traditional roles bestowed on each sex. It does not also mean that men and women are the same. After all, men are gifted with masculine nature, while women on the other hand are also naturally equipped but with feminine body and soul that account for their extraordinary qualities for motherhood. Gender equality rather means that the rights, opportunities and responsibilities of individuals are not just based on sex as they exercise their roles within and outside the family in a manner that makes them uniquely different. So understood, each gender (Egbekpalu, 2013) should be accorded the respect due to him or her.

Violence Against Women are often Gender-Based

In African setting including Nigerian, male dominance over female is significantly perceived for examples the preference of male child over female child and consequent inequal exposures to education, job opportunities and public services. These and other likely factors account for subjugation of women which renders them more vulnerable and more susceptible to oppression and exploitation. UNESCO report (2019) revealed that there exists significant increase on sexual and domestic violence, against women. Such violent acts (Egbekpalu, 2017) consist of intimidation, threat or sexual harassment, rape and sexual assault (including marital rape), forced kissing, domestic violence, spousal battering, sexual torture and abuse of female children, traditional practices that are harmful to women (such as female genital mutilation), forced prostitution and any form of forceful sexual contact and unwanted sexual behaviour.

Philosophical Assumptions on Gender Equality

Gender equality has been meaningfully discussed in the field of philosophy. It assumes that:

- Most violence against women are rooted in discrimination and inequality. The women folk have been notably marginalized of necessary exposures including the acquisition of relevant skills to think clearly, develop better and contribute constructively to the growth of their nations for the ion of human dignity. Consequently, they fall prey to various abuses and violations that dehumanize them.
- UNESCO report (2019) revealed that there exists significant increase on sexual and domestic violence, gender pay gap, issues of birth control, ownership of properties, conflict between work and motherhood, love and sex, job type, hiring rate, etc.
- Many international and national fora call for fair gender treatment and protection of women. The protection of women's right came into greater force during the last century. The rights of women were expounded far beyond the suffrage agitations to embrace other aspects of life especially as they concern women such as reproduction rights.

Historical Timeline of International Events on Gender Equality

In order to promote social justice and human dignity as well as to preserve the lives and integrity of the citizens:

In 1948, The Universal Declaration of Human Rights categorically declared the universal accessibility to education as the essential instrument for human formation and development. Women cannot claim their rights if they are not well enlightened of them.

In 1979, The universal Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) also referred to as an international Bill of Rights for women set core principles to protect women's right where the rights of women were outlined under law to liberate them from all sorts of violence, discriminations, marginalization and social injustice. This was adopted by 180-member states. Agenda for national actions were set to enable equal opportunities to employment, political, economic, educational, health, public life in order to encourage gender equality and discourage discriminations against women.

In 1993, the United Nations (*On the Elimination of Violence Against Women*) declared that violence against women is (North, Rothenberg & Partner 1993, p. 1194) “any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, psychological or sexual harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life.”

In the same year, a couple of years after CEDAW and 45 years after UN declaration of human right, there was a declaration that “women rights are human rights” by United Nations in Vienna which brought gender issues in close relationship to human rights and created attention to non-violence of such rights.

In 1994, there was an international conference on Population and Development (ICPD) to advance the rights of women and gender equality. The conference adopted the autonomy of women as a necessary condition for sustainable development.

In 1995, the 4th World Conference on women held in Beijing extended women’s right to include women empowerment. The then USA 1st Lady, Hillary Rodham Clinton made a very remarkable speech (5th Sept. 1995) on the abuse of women that sounded to all ends of the world which eventually was termed ‘*Hillary doctrine*.’ It was principally targeted at government, organizations and women themselves. Her (Clinton, 1996 p. 98) bi-directional refrained phrase, “If there is one message that echoes forth from this conference, let it be that human rights are women’s rights and women’s rights are human rights, once and all” that re-enacted the 1980s and 1990s feminist’s agenda (Clinton, 1996 p. 100) emphasized that “as long as discrimination and inequalities remain so common a place, everywhere in the world, as long as girls and women are valued less, fed less, over worked, underpaid, not schooled, subjected to violence in and outside their homes, the potential of the human family to create a peaceful, prosperous world will not be realized.” She (Clinton, 1996 p. 101) also delineated that “Women must enjoy the rights to participate fully in social and political lives of their countries if we want freedom and democracy to thrive and endure.” Her speech also highlighted that the empowerment of women has moral, humanitarian, political as well as security implications. She asserted that women’s right and violation against women be made a national security issue which forms one of the primary responsibilities of each government. As member states adopted the 1995 Beijing declaration of the Women’s right for the interest of humanity, they were advised to give annual reports to evaluate progress.

In 1998, Pope John Paul II called the attention of the world to the “Dignity and Vocation of Women” (*Mulieris Dignitatem*) in his Apostolic Exhortation of the Marian year meditation as he highlights the strict equality of men and women in the dignity of being persons and as such having common dignity and vocation in life. To this effect, the great Pontiff, Pope John Paul II reflecting on the dignity and vocation of women expressed in his apostolic letter (1998) that, “human dignity commands members of the society -man and woman alike- be allowed to take part in the decisions that affect them in the climate of genuine freedom.”

In 2000, the United Nation Security Council advanced her scope to incorporate issues on women, peace and security especially in conflict and war zones. In the same year, eight Millennium Development Goals were adopted to uphold social justice.

Millennium Developmental Goals (MDGs) on Gender Equality

At the Summit of United Nations Millennium in September 2000, leaders of 189-member countries including Nigeria signed a historic millennium declaration targeted at a set of eight measurable goals with realistic monitoring mechanisms widely known as Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) for the improvement of human life and existence with deadline by 2015. These goals served as a good reminder for many of the rights that were neglected. For example, many nations still uphold discriminatory laws for marriage, land, property, inheritance, etc even after CEDAW of 1979. Among these goals and specifically the third goal was to promote gender equality and empower women. These goals especially the second and the third; education for all and promotion of gender equality as well as empowering women (Egbekpalu, 2017) have been evaluated to be the bond of other goals as they have both intrinsic and extrinsic values. The evaluation of 8MDGs by 2015 revealed that significant progress were made in some areas but there were still grey hairs in many other areas. For example, labour deaths, still birth, infant mortality, as well gender-based violence, etc. are still on the increase.

From MDGs to Sustainable Developmental Goals (SDGs)

On the expiration of MDGs by 2015, a post-2015 agenda was launched (SDGs) to set forth the actions generated by MDGs with focus on building a sustainable world with equal values on environmental, social and economic sustainability. The MDGs now formed the basis for the global development agenda of 2015-2030. The same goal appeared as the 5th of the 17 goals of SDGs (Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls).

Today, well meaningful individuals and organizations and even non-government agencies position themselves for the rights of women and identify new trends of injustice and discriminatory practices against them. This aids formulation of policies and enhancement of strategies to sustain actions.

Philosophy Interrogates Feminism vis-à-vis Gender Equality

It is very obvious that women desperately continue to seek for and to carve significant places in the world especially in the building of their nations. However, it is important to ask whether feminism is still relevant in 21st century in Nigeria. In fact, at the threshold of 21st century, there was a serious debate as to whether feminism is still alive or dead, relevant or not. Philosophy questions above all the relevance of feminism in our time.

Why Continued Need for Gender Equality in Nigeria? Is the goal of Feminism with regard to Gender Equality not yet completely been achieved?

It is obvious that feminist movements in Nigeria have brought about new and positive developments in the lives of women. For examples,

- In the university, the number of female students even almost outnumbers that of male.
- Women are now found in all fields of profession
- Many women exercise their carriers and are financially independent

Based on the above and other related reasons, one asks:

- Is feminism still necessary in this century and in Nigeria?
- Is it not something done with and should be dusted?
- Haven't the cries of women been heard enough?
- Has the battle not yet been won?

Well, it is often said that “an equal world is an enabled world”. One thing is clear, feminism is more subtle now than in the past years for obvious reasons. The major fight has been done and major battle won. Again, the movement has established itself. Women empowerment is now an important topic of discussion that encourages raising of the status of women through education, entrepreneurial skills, vocational trainings, decision-making, etc.

However, feminism is still relevant in our century; our contemporary world, in our nation. It may be even more important at this critical time than ever. It is (Edalcatchew, 2016 p. 38) “a process of creating power into individuals over their own lives, society and in their communities.” More empowerment of women will ensure more economic stability for peaceful living and sustainable development. It continues to avail women the opportunity to lend their voices to harsh realities against them and to question the *status quo* both in personal and public spheres. However, feminism remains a controversial issue for obvious reasons.

The Sacred Task of Philosophy on Gender Equality Specified

In this evolving world, the value of gender equality changes with time. Hegel (1989 p. 3) claimed that “every philosopher is a child of his time and none can jump over his own shadow: every philosophy then is its time grasped in a concept.” Current philosophers should be able to address the issues of their own time to avail dignified life to the people of their time. Philosophy has a very unique role of clarifying the identity, meaning and purpose of gender equality and the issues revolving around it to help in re-articulating the vision and mission of feminist movement in the contemporary time. In other words, philosophy should integrate diverse experiences of feminism and chart new and useful course in protection of women rights in the interest of all. Harmony is

the symphony of life. For a sustainable development, men and women play significant parts of a whole.

New Interpretation of Feminist's Creed in Relation to Gender Equality

With regard to gender equality, philosophy should be able to re-interpret the feminist creed to suit the current situation by:

1. Clarifying the concept of feminism in respect of gender equality
2. Establishing true self-assertion for functional effective outcomes.
3. Advancing the possibility of gender balance by addressing the root of the factors that cause the imbalance.
4. Addressing the existential needs of women within the ambient of feminism
5. Helping feminism to make a paradigm shift to accommodate the socio-cultural adjustments.
6. Adopting feminism that addresses the cultural needs of the people. That is to say, feminism that is truly Nigerian for the Nigerians by Nigerians and in Nigeria in the light of the ideology of the people and avoid western practices. In other words, gender roles should be appropriately defined according to the national and cultural values and needs of the given moment.
7. Positioning feminism in positive dialogue with culture which is dynamic and adhering to the law of changes for as Chinua Achebe asserted that "when a tradition gathers enough strength to go on for centuries, you do not turn it off in one day."
8. Constantly re-enacting the meaning and purpose of feminism and its related terms will help to analyze the past alongside with the present experiences in order to shape the future.
9. Harnessing the mind for positive evaluation of men and women (re-orientation, cognitive re-appraisal)
10. Highlighting the nobility and dignity of women
11. Elucidating what it means to be a woman- the feminine touch that depicts subtle but powerful roles of women.
12. Helping women to take responsibilities and accept assets and liabilities in charting a new and better course for the future.

In so doing, philosophy exercises the following distinctive and sacred normative and analytic tasks:

- It creates a rational outlook that interrogates the basic assumptions of feminism
- It grapples with the issues of human conduct and value system of the people to think clearly in traditional manner suitable for feminism
- It studies, understands, analyzes and criticizes in general the principles of our cultures, while interpreting values and developing better ideas that override cultural differences.

- It critically evaluates the activities of the people and suggests practical guides for healthy feministic movement
- It constantly and consciously clarifies the concept of feminism in favour of human dignity
- It creates awareness for fuller participation of everyone in the society in freedom of thought and action and empowers one to control and manage one's own destiny in favour to human dignity

Resultantly, the qualitative and sustainable development can better be strengthened through feminism

Philosophy, Gender Equality and Today's Nigeria

Following the above, the 21st century feminism should focus specifically on humanistic and existential dimensions considering the current condition and needs of the nation and be rooted in our national values and philosophy which delineated five main existential objectives that include:

- A free and democratic society
- A just and egalitarian society
- A united, strong and self-reliant nation
- A great and dynamic economy
- A land full of bright and equal opportunities for all citizens

The philosophical analysis of these five beautiful objectives (Egbekpalu, 2017) will definitely help to create a platform that encourages equal treatment of the citizens, while at the same time discourages the favour of the strong against the weak, the rich against the poor, etc. as this clogs the wheel of both individual and national development and makes the nation to suffer a lot of setbacks.

The inequality in Nigeria today is not patriarchal dominance as such but what I may consider as background inequality, familial inequality, class strata that encourage economic, educational, social, political gaps. The same woman who feels under privileged in comparison to her male counterpart will offer jobs to others (mostly her relations and friends) not on the basis of merit but on 'who knows who'.

Philosophy should be able to offer a critical outlook and analysis of what it means to be a man or a woman and set strategies for actualization of potentials. True liberation of women is the discovery of feminine qualities and place them at the service of mankind. It is not necessarily being in antagonism with men. Women have proven themselves great enablers of economy through their entrepreneurial skills and sheer desire for greatness in various spheres of life. They have subtle powers which are even more influential than the overt masculine authoritarian powers when applied appropriately. For examples:

- Often children's affinity goes more to their mothers for obvious reasons.
- As such, mothers are more celebrated than fathers in most cases.
- Mothers are like gods to their children.

- Wives bring in her own people more into the family than their husbands.
- Women organizations prove very much stronger than men's organizations in various settings and levels across the nation.
- The Umu-okpu/Umu-ada (traditional women wing) union especially in South-East Nigeria is a very strong and cohesive one.
- A girl is handled delicately because she is considered as an egg- cooked or raw.
- The pregnant women are usually very much respected.
- Many men succeed or fail in life, thanks to female siblings and or wives and even friends. We often hear that behind every successful or unsuccessful man, there is always a woman.

A few instances of matriarchal dominance also abound:

- a. In traditional African setting, those days with polygamy, children are usually identified with their mother's name.
- b. In Ohafia area (Abiriba) for example, the practice of matrilineal inheritance rules.
- c. In most African cultures, the *Ada-s* (first born females) have and exercise very serious powers in their parental families even after they have been married out.
- d. In African-Igbo culture too, the *Ada-s* are so well respected and are involved in some important family decisions.
- e. In some cultures, men can't dismiss their wives without the approval of 'umu ada' (traditional women union of the kindred) and they can't even enter the kitchen unless with the support of your sisters.
- f. The current ugly experience of widowhood in Africa is out of greed and wickedness.

Women should tap into their inner cores. How? Precisely through philosophical enlightenment, education and other empowerment channels, women can discover their inner strengths. Ignorance is a clog in the wheel of life. The classical Greek philosopher, Aristotle observed that the educated differs from the uneducated as much as the living differs from the dead. Therefore, every one; man and woman has a fundamental right to education for a more fulfilled and peaceful life. The empowerment of women and the achievement of gender equality have both intrinsic and extrinsic values and at the same time are situated at the heart of the attainment of all the other goals. Particularly, healthy, educated, empowered, employed women with integral formation approach of knowledge and good character can inflame stable constructive development that can efficiently break cycles of poverty; for self, family, nation and the world at large as well as improve maternal health and consequently reduce child mortality, etc. Against this background, education is an inevitable pathway to and gender parity and sustainable human and social developments.

Conclusion

Gender Equality: A Reality or an Utopia?

One thing is clear, humanity itself is limited. Human beings are generally limited. Men and women are finite beings. Each gender sharing in human nature is as well limited. Freedom is a thing of the mind. Boundaries need to be respected. Don't mind Sartre who posited that man is freedom and he is not free not to be free. Naturally, men and women are created equal. But at the basis of gender roles are the physiological endowments and the fact remains that women are kind of physically fragile; not weak and are enriched by men's strength, sense of courage, protection and security. On the other hand, men are hearty but intrinsically weak and are enriched by women's warmth, sense of purity of conduct, patience, endurance, resiliency, dedication, attentive love, understanding, sense of order and proportion. Hence,

- Complementary roles of the gender are needed.
- Fullness of creation is balance of emotions, contributions, thoughts, roles and interdependence of man and woman in facing life's challenges.
- Rightful application of powers is highly needed.

Recommendation: Gender Fairness

Based on the above analysis, this work advocates for gender fairness for all. Enlightenment is the key to its realization. Therefore,

- Education for all; men and women should be placed on a common ground of practice
- Education of leaders for recognition and respect of human dignity
- Dignity of human persons and oneness of creatures as having the same creative source
- Equality is not to be understood as sameness.

Equity in relationship is not strictly $1+1=2$. It is but a perceived sense of equality in the contribution of each which brings about satisfaction. Power is usually taken, not given. It entails mastering the act of breaking out of glass cage without cuts, bruises and bleeding.

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