

Gender and The Development of African Historiography in Contemporary Times

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Abstract

The role of gender in African historiography has being a topic of interest in contemporary times. Since the late twentieth century, the literature on African women has grown immensely. This can be linked to a number of things, such as the political influence of the women's movement and the crisis of conventional development theory and practice, which led to the expansion of the women-in-development initiative. The expanding boundaries of historical epistemology and research, particularly the growing interest in and the creation of new methods to social history, have sparked interest in women's history especially where historiography is concerned. Historical records point to the fact that women continue to be mostly absent or inaccurately depicted in the forefront of African history despite the abundance of writing on women and women's history. They are either completely absent or are portrayed as innately inferior and subordinate, suffering under male oppression forever. Aside such notions, this paper will showcase the relevant roles gender has played in the development of historiography despite the diverse challenges experienced. It adopts mostly the qualitative method of historical research in its approach and strongly believes that greater diversity and inclusivity of gender in historical reconstruction will promote justice and fairness in the African society, and advance the development of historiography.

Key words: Africa, Historiography, Women, Gender Role, and History

Introduction

Historiography is the study of historical writing and the methods used by historians to interpret and analyze historical events. Gender has unarguably played significant role in the development of historiography, both as a subject of historical inquiry and as a lens through which historians interpret and analyze the past. The phrase "Gender Role" was coined by John Money during part of his research on intersex people in 1955. It was used to refer to the ways in which these people express their gender identity. Although there are exceptions and variances, it is mostly focused on views of femininity and masculinity. The types of behaviours that are considered acceptable, proper, or desirable for persons based on their real or perceived sex or sexuality are often dictated by a set of societal standards. To put it another way, gender roles refer to societal norms based on a recognized gender classification.¹ The specifics, regarding these gendered expectations may vary substantially among cultures while other characteristics may be common throughout a range of cultures.² In most African countries, descriptions of the structures of everyday life reveals the family as an institution that enacts gendered divisions of labour, as it relegates most women to the private sphere and most men to the public sphere. A study of the implication of this normativity of the public/private distinctions between men and women indicates that as long as women's natural social role consist in reproducing a private sphere of family, motherhood and marriage, their access to the public sphere of work, decision making, law making, knowledge production, culture production and politics will remain minimal.³ This has turned out to be one of the challenges to the role of gender in African historiography. It is important to note that the concept of gender used in the course of this paper is majorly in relation to the female folk (women).

In Africa, many of the problems associated to gender role in historiography were created by colonialism and this has contributed to the inequality that exists on the continent today. Historical analysts and

¹ J. Acker, "From Sex Roles to Gendered Institutions" *Contemporary Sociology: A Journal of Reviews* Vol. 21 No. 5, 1992, 565-569.

² "Gender Role", <https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/gender_role?e_pi=7%2CPAGE_ID10%2C1228263543> Accessed 24/05/2023.

³ Christopher Ochieze, "The Role of Women in the Politics of Southeast Geo-Political Zone of Nigeria, 1999-2007. An Unpublished M.A Work, University of Awka, 2010, 4.

researchers like Stiftung⁴ and Mutume⁵ posit that women in Africa, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa have not benefited from the international campaign to improve their visibility. The colonial period witnessed a major decline in women's role in the development of African history. Before Colonialism, the major source of historiography was oral tradition, which was mostly carried out by women in form of storytelling, chants, songs, hymns, etcetera. And this was passed from generation to generation. However, with the introduction of western education which emphasized on historical writings, the role of these women in history began to dwindle. As a result of the colonial patriarchal system which emphasized on exclusive dealings with the male population, women were sidelined in written narratives amongst other.⁶ The colonial authorities placed the attainment of their historical idiosyncrasies to a direct dealing with men alone rather than the inclusion of women in such narratives. One may point out that the level of education of women at the time was a serious limitation to women's involvement in history writing, as the colonial patriarchal system had also discriminated against the women in educational empowerment with their excessive focus on the male folk. In Nigeria for instance, by 1920, the ratio of boys to girls in secondary school was 35:1 and by 1965, the total number of girls in Southern Nigeria who enrolled into school stood at 23,143 as against 157,746 boys. The same has been established in tertiary level of education, as female enrolment rate remains below those of the males.⁷ In addition to barriers to education and economic inequality, African women face significant challenges in political representation. Without adequate representation of women in all spheres of life, many of today's inequalities will be difficult to address in historiography. The subject of this research paper will be approached in two sub-themes: Firstly, the relevance of gender in African historiography; and secondly, the militating factors against gender in African historiography.

Relevance of Gender in African Historiography

The roles, contributions and achievements of gender in African historiography cannot be overemphasized. Recent writings on history have shown the increasing roles women have played in the development of historiography. Although their efforts are quite applaudable, it still leaves room for more. This subsection will examine the role of gender in historiography with focus on how gender has influenced the interpretation of historical events, the development of historical theories and the construction of historical narratives.

Gender and Historical Interpretations: In retrospect, gender has played significant roles in shaping the interpretations of historical events. African historians or authors of African history textbooks differ in their approaches and research methods, in the subjects they study, the interpretations they advance, and in their ideological outlooks.⁸ In other words, they have approached historical events through a gendered lens, analyzing the ways in which gender roles and expectations influenced the behaviour of historical actors. A good example can be drawn from the works of feminist historians like Wallach J. Scott⁹, who examined the ways in which gender shaped political and social institutions, irrespective of the various ways in which most historical narratives have tried to marginalize or erase women's experiences from history. Paul Tiyambe Zeleza¹⁰ had further buttressed these marginalization in historiography when he affirmed that most authors of African history have two things in common - they are sexist in such a way that they downplay the significant role that women have played in many facets

⁴ Heinrich Boll Stiftung, "A Critique of Africa's Post colonial Freedoms Through a Feminist Lens: Challenging Patriarchy and Accessing the Gains", < <https://za.boell.org/en/2021/07/07/critique-africas-post-colonial-freedoms-through-feminist-lens-challenging-patriarchy>> Accessed 21/05/2023.

⁵ Gumisai Mutume, "African Women Battle for Equality", < <https://www.un.org/africarenewal/magazine/july-2005/african-women-battle-equality> > Accessed 24/05/2023.

⁶ Chima Korich, "The Invisible Farmer? Women, Gender and Colonial Agricultural Policy in the Igbo Region of Nigeria, c. 1913-1954", in Chima Korich, *African Women: A Reader*, United States: University Reader, 2009, 227-228.

⁷ Nina Mba, *Nigerian Women Mobilized: Women Political Activities in Southern Nigeria 1990-1965*, Berkeley, Institute of International Studies, University of California, 1982, 35.

⁸ Paul Tiyambe Zeleza, "Gender Biases in African Historiography", *African gender studies: A Reader*, pp. 207-232 < https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-1-137-09009-6_11> Accessed on 21/05/2023

⁹ Wallach J. Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis", *The American Historical Review* 91, 1986, No. 5, pp. 1053-1075.

¹⁰ Paul Tiyambe Zeleza, "Gender Biases in African Historiography"...

of African history and are predominately male. More often than not, women are either completely ignored or, when they are, they are discussed in terms of their stereotyped reproductive responsibilities as mothers and wives. The terminology employed frequently devalues the actions or experiences of the women being discussed. Additionally, women's lives are typically shrouded in a cloak of timelessness since the institutions that are brought up in conversation about them, like marriage, are considered as timeless. Women are reduced to trans-historical entities outside the mechanics of historical change because they are seen as immutable and as stewards of some ageless legacy. These biases are amply evidenced by a review of some of the most popular history textbooks. Although writers such as Zeleza have highlighted the biases of historians in respect to gender and historiography, it is important to point out the roles gender have played in historical interpretations especially in recent times. The world has witnessed more female historical interpretations today and this has gone a long way to incorporate diversity in the writing of historical events.

Gender has also influenced the interpretation of historical sources. Historians have increasingly recognized that historical sources are not neutral, and that they reflect the biases of the people who created them. For example, the diaries and letters of women have often been dismissed as unimportant or trivial, but most feminist historians such as Scott¹¹, and Purvis¹² have argued that these sources offer valuable insights into the experiences of women and the ways in which gender intersects with other aspects of identity such as race, ability, class, etcetera, to shape their lives.

Gender and the Development of Historical Theories: Historical theories have been developed over time by scholars, researchers and historians to explain events and phenomena that occurred in the past. These theories are shaped by various factors such as culture, ideology, politics, and gender. While contributions of men to historical theories have been widely documented, the role of African women in shaping historical theories has been largely overlooked. African women have played crucial role in shaping historical theories through their experiences, perspectives and contributions to historical research. One notable African woman who has contributed to historical theories is Ama Mazama. As a historian and scholar who has dedicated her career to studying the history and culture of Africa. She has written extensively on African history, including the contributions of African women to the continent's development. In her work, "The Afrocentric Paradigm"¹³, Mazama argues that African history has been marginalized and misinterpreted by western Scholars, and that an Afrocentric approach is necessary to address this imbalance.

Another gender scholar and historian who has contributed to historical theories is Nwando Achebe. In her work "The Female King of Colonial Nigeria"¹⁴, she focused on the history of women in Africa, with specifics to the life and times of Ahebi Ugbabe, a powerful woman who ruled a region in colonial Nigeria. Through her research, Achebe challenges traditional notions of gender roles in African societies and argues that women played a significant role in shaping African history. Historical works such as this, unarguably, helped to shape Afrocentric theories bothering on gender in recent times.

¹¹ Wallach J. Scott, "The Evidence of Experience", *Critical Inquiry* 17, (1991), No. 4, pp. 773-797.

¹² June Purvis, *Women's History: Britain 1850 – 1945*, London: Routledge, 1995, <<https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/edit/10.4324/9780203930151/women-history-britain-1850-1945-june-purvis> > Accessed on 27/05/2023.

¹³ Ama Mazama, "The Afrocentric Paradigm", *Journal of Black Studies*. <<https://doi.org/10.1177/002193470103100401> > Accessed on 26/05/2023

¹⁴ Nwando Achebe, *The Female King of Colonial Nigeria: Ahebi Ugbabe*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011.

Other African Scholars such as Gloria Chuku¹⁵, Chimamanda Adichie¹⁶, Nina Mba¹⁷, Egodì Uchendu¹⁸, amongst others, in their various works have also contributed to historical theories through their extensive writings on African history; specifically, on the Igbo culture in relation to how it has shaped gender experiences. More important to note is that theories in history writing have been adversely influenced through gender activism and political engagements. For example, women played significant roles in the anti-colonial struggles that swept across Africa in the mid-twentieth century when the likes of Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti in Nigeria, Josina Machel in Mozambique, and Winnie Mandela in South Africa were instrumental in the fight against colonialism and apartheid.¹⁹

The afore mentioned African women through their historical writings, postulations, activism, and political engagements have contributed immensely to historical theories. Generally, African women have played crucial roles in politics and social movements that have shaped African history. Thus, it is essential that the contributions of African women to historical theories are recognized and incorporated into the study of history. Doing so will provide a more comprehensive understanding of African history and the role of women in shaping it.

Gender and the Construction of Historical Narratives: Historical narratives are designed to throw light into past events and their meanings. They are influenced by many factors such as culture, ideology, politics and gender. The role of African women in shaping these narratives has been underemphasized over time. In recent times, historians have increasingly recognized the importance of including the experiences of women and other marginalized groups in historical narratives, and have worked to incorporate these experiences in their writings. This has led to a reevaluation of traditional historical narratives as well as the development of new narratives that are more inclusive and representative of the diversity of human experience. African women have contributed to the creation/construction of narratives in history through their experiences, thoughts and contributions in historical researches. An important example can be seen in their role in African oral traditions. In many African countries, history, in pre-colonial times was passed down orally from generation to generation. Women have been the main guardians of this tradition through stories, chants, and experiences through songs, hymns and other forms of oral expressions.²⁰

African women have also contributed to the construction of historical narratives through their scholarship. Renowned writers such as Adichie, Uchendu, Mba, Achebe, Mazama, Chuku, amongst others, through their various publications or write-ups have shaped the perception of women experiences in historiography. This has to a large extent aided the development of historical writing in Africa.

Militating Factors against Gender Roles in African Historiography

Although there have been tremendous roles and achievements by gender towards the development of historiography, there still exist various challenges that attempt to eclipse these efforts. They include the lack of sources, western colonization of the discipline, dominance of male perspectives, and erasure of women experiences in historical events.

¹⁵ Gloria Chuku, *Igbo Women and Economic Transformation in Southeastern Nigeria 1900-1960*, United Kingdom: Routledge, 2015, 70-85.

¹⁶ Chimamanda Adichie, *We Should All Be Feminists*, New York, NY: Anchor Books, 2015.

¹⁷ Nina Mba, *Nigeria Women Mobilized: Women Political Activities in Southern Nigeria 1900-1965*, Berkeley: Institute of International Studies, University of California, 1982, 70.

¹⁸ Egodì Uchendu, "Culture: The Obstacle to Active Female Participation in Governance Among the Igbo of Nigeria",

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/273122946_Culture_The_obstacle_to_active_female_participation_in_governance_among_the_Igbo_of_Nigeria > Accessed on 23/05/2023

¹⁹ T. Sithole, "Women's Activism and the Politics of Knowledge Production in Zimbabwe", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, Vol. 44, No. 1, pp. 137-151.

²⁰ K. Kassam, "Women, Oral Tradition, and Islam in Sub-Saharan Africa", *Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 116, No. 459, 2003, pp. 304-325.

Lack of Sources: A significant challenge to the role of gender in African historiography is the lack of sources from the female folk. Many historical sources such as official records were produced by men and have focused on the activities of men. As a result, there is scarcity of sources that document women's experiences and perspectives. This has made it difficult for historical researchers to fully understand the role gender in shaping African history. In addition, many historical sources have been lost or destroyed over time, further exacerbating the problem of scarcity.

Western Colonization of the Discipline: Research has shown that historiography has traditionally been dominated by western perspectives, which have often ignored or marginalized the experiences and perspectives of non-western peoples. This has resulted in a distorted understanding of African history and has perpetuated stereotypes and myths about African societies. There is need to decolonize the discipline. Decolonizing historiography requires a total reevaluation of the frameworks, theories, and methods used in African history writing. It also involves a critical examination of the biases and assumptions that underlie the production of historical knowledge. By decolonizing African historiography, it is possible to create more inclusive and diverse narratives that accurately reflect the continent's history and the role of gender within it.

Dominance of male Perspectives: This is one of the major challenges to the role of gender in African historiography. Historically, men have been the primary actors in the public sphere and as such, their activities have been documented more extensively than women's activities. This has resulted in a skewed representation of African history, where the experiences of women are underrepresented. This has led to the difficulties experienced in the comprehensive understanding of African history without considering the role of women in shaping it.

Erasure of Women Experiences: Women experiences throughout time have often been relegated to the private sphere and as a result have largely been excluded from mainstream historical narratives. This has led to the silencing of women's voices and has resulted in an incomplete understanding of African history. For example, the role of women in precolonial African societies has been largely overlooked, despite strong evidences that women played significant roles in the economic, social and political spheres at the time. In Igboland, such evidences can be seen from the various names born by the people of the area - *Nneka* (Mother is supreme), *Nneamaka* (Mother is beautiful) and *Nnebuugwu* (Motherhood is honour) and several folklore songs, depict the peoples belief in the supremacy of motherhood²¹ and women by extension. This goes a long way to showcase the relevance of women in African historiography.

Conclusion

The narrative contained in this paper showcases that gender has played important roles in the development of African historiography. It has influenced the interpretation of historical events, the development of historical theories and the construction of new historical narratives that are not generally associated with the traditional male dominated perspectives in historical construction. Women have played tremendous roles in the construction of historical narratives through their participation in oral tradition, social and political movements and scholarship. Through their contributions to historical research, female gender has shaped perceptions that led to the creation of historical theories and the interpretation of historical events.

Be that as it may, various challenges have graced the role of women in African historiography. This includes challenges such as, dominance of male perspective, western colonization of the discipline, lack of sources that portray the female perspective, and the erasure of women experiences in historical writings, amongst others. However, although these challenges persist, they can be tactfully surmounted, through a concerted effort to integrate the female gender into the study of African History.

For the gender gap to be bridged in the African continent, the issues African women face must become part of the global debate in historical writings. For instance, when the published data from the United

²¹ Chidimma Obiageri Mbamalu, "Nigerian Women Since Pre-Colonial Times: A Historical Survey", 172.

Nations Development Programme (UNDP), reported that perceptions, attitudes, and backgrounds regarding gender roles, prevent women from accessing health care and education, leading to disproportionate levels in family responsibilities, job segregation and even sexual violence²², it gained global interest and various local and international organizations, institutions worked towards ameliorating the situation in Africa. As historians continue to grapple with the complexities of gender and its roles in history, it is important to recognize the ways in which gender has shaped our understanding of the past and to work towards a more inclusive and representative approach. By addressing the aforementioned challenges, it is possible to create a more inclusive and diverse perceptions in historical reconstruction and contribute to an equitable and just society.

²² Stella Barkibinga, Elizabeth Barkibinga, John D. Ibembe, and Pauline Barkibinga, "Levelling the Terrain for Women in Global Health Leadership: A Case of Sub-Saharan Africa", *Women in global Health Leadership* , 2022, pp. 141-155, <https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-030-84498-1_14> Accessed 24/05/2023.