
Gender Relations and National Security in Nigeria Up To 1999

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Abstract

There is a growing concern over gender relations around the world. The scenario is particularly rife in continental Asia and Africa. Gender inequality has its foundation in male constructed socio-cultural norms/traditions culminating in the evident patriarchal societal order in most societies including Nigeria where male dominance prevailed in all aspects of national life from the economy to politics including decision making at the family level. It was the concern for women's plight that led to the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). The United Nations equally made a declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women. There was also the Beijing Convention which advocated for 30% women political representation. But, despite its ratification by most nations around the globe including Nigeria, and the establishment of constitutional and legal frameworks providing equal rights to all irrespective of gender categorization, women still suffer from all sorts of socio-economic and political deprivations including violence arising from gender prejudice. This is manifested in the low access to education, health facilities, landed assets, credit facilities, important political positions and others. Yet, women have contributed significantly to the development of Nigeria the recognition of which is apparently ignored. It is against this backdrop that the paper examines the nature of gender relations in Nigeria up to 1999 and its implication for national security which included poverty, malnutrition, adverse effect on maternal health, prostitution, the spread of HIV/AIDS virus amongst women and so on. The paper recommends women educational and economic empowerment coupled with greater access to key political offices as the way forward in engendering national security in Nigeria.

Keywords: National Security, Gender Inequality, Women, Politics, Economic Empowerment, Education.

Introduction

Gender relations in Nigeria today has entrenched itself into the National Question. Over the years, women have been oppressed, marginalized and exploited by their male counter-parts in politics, economy and other spheres of our national life while in reality they have contributed immensely towards

national development. This has stimulated women liberation movement manifested in various forms of feminism debates, demonstration, research and documentation by enlightened women which in contemporary times has increasingly sensitised other women on the question of violence against them, citizenship and their fundamental rights. This paper therefore examines the implication of gender inequality on national security.

Conceptual Clarifications

Gender

Gender is the socially constructed aspects of differences between women and men. Symbolically, it connotes cultural ideas and stereotypes of masculinity and femininity i.e., it is a form of social representation that undervalues what are considered feminine attributes thereby denying recognition to women. Gender also means the sexual division of labour in institutions and organizations i.e. a system of unequal distribution of economic resources that favours one sex against the other. (Mahdi, 2006:11) This issue has disturbed the minds of feminists over the years.

The feminists view the gender question as an inevitable phenomenon in all male dominated societies- capitalist, socialist or communist. They contended that the changing of gender roles is only feasible when a culture's social structure is modified. They concluded that "No social structure is desirable if it is maintained by oppressing a majority of its citizens" (See Schaefer, 2008:183)

Conflicts theorists conceptualized gender inequality as that of unequal power relations between men and women in which case the latter is subjugated by the former both in terms of income/wealth and prestige. (Ibid., p.182) Thus, Marxism has been a powerful tool in the hands of freedom fighters against the exploitation of a given class in the society including women.

Sub-altern studies, coined from the term sub-altern utilized by Antonio Gramsci, indicating "any person or group of inferior rank and station, whether because of race, class, gender, sexual orientation ethnicity or religion" referred to the post-colonial deconstruction of the historiography of South Asia which was characterised by elitist bias. This was rectified to incorporating the role of the sub-alterns in social and political changes in the area. (Wikipedia, the free encyclopaedia). In other words, sub-altern studies emphasized the holistic nature of history and argued that labourers, prisoners, women and all other socially disadvantaged peoples of the world should be studied as they are also part of the historical process and contributed to historical developments.

The current research is anchored on the feminist perspective and calls for equal citizenship rights to all persons irrespective of gender categorization.

National Security

Security has been defined in terms of the nation-state, thus the notion national security. An elementary definition tended to reduce the meaning to the possession of armies, guns, and war, but it is much more than that. This is because, individuals and groups, ethnicities and religious groupings, political and ideological groups and corporate mercenaries including other institutions like the transnational corporations and multi-national corporations, international financial institutions i.e. the World Bank as well as the global arms trade are important dimensions of the national security question. The conventional definition of security stresses protection from harm, war and foreign invasion for the citizens of a country within national boundaries. (Source, Bernedette Muthien, Engendering Security, <File:///E/engendering.htm>) It is instructive to note however that, national boundaries in Africa are colonial creation and largely artificial and variously disputed e.g. the case of the Bakassi Peninsula.

A more realistic definition of national security should include other aspects of safety, security or well being encompassing the environment, basic human needs, food, shelter, identity and dignity i.e. protection from hunger, poverty and sexual assault for women and children. Indeed, protection from homelessness, illiteracy, unemployment and discrimination on grounds of class, gender, spirituality or sexuality. (Ibid)

When all these are put in place, to a considerable extent, a nation could be deemed to have attained national security. But how can this be when women are relegated to the background; when gender-based violence abounds. Women are increasingly becoming victims of rape, domestic battery, economic abuse and exploitation.

Where and How Did Gender Inequality Originate?

The fundamental difference between a male and female is noticed during fertilization when the Y chromosome fuses with the ovum and eventually produced a zygote that evolves as a boy but the X chromosome formed a girl. Apart from this, all other processes are the same for both sexes, the period of gestation for the formation of the babies (male and female) are the same. Again, research has demonstrated that the Y spermatozoon is weaker than that of the X with regard to lifespan. Therefore more baby girls survive the first six months of infancy than baby boys. Despite this early biological evidence

supporting the stoicism of the baby girl as opposed to the boys, the former is largely discriminated against in the society right from birth. While the birth of a baby boy is welcomed with enormous excitement and ceremony, the reverse is the case for the feminine gender. (Batubo, 1992:121)

Women are placed at the bottom of the societal strata as though they were slaves to men and not truly humans. Men have manipulated religion, customs and traditions to define the position of women in the society which is done in order to maintain their dominance. Little wonder the world in its entirety is generally chanted as "man's world." Unfortunately, some women even echo such slogans accepting it as dogma. But who could blame them when even the term history is gender biased. It seems to postulate that history is basically made up of men's activities on earth overtime. The role of women in the motion of history appeared to be silent and passive. Therefore, even the sources of history are dominated with men's activities.

The question here is, did gender disparity originate from our religions? The answer is no! In his assessment of "Shariah and the Woman Question," Sanusi (October 2002:29) forcefully contended that, "even a cursory student of Islamic History knows that all the trappings of gender inequality present in Muslim society have socio-economic and cultural as opposed to religious roots. This is natural because not only are men the ultimate beneficiaries of this inequality but also because only those who are victims of injustice tend to see it and appreciate the absurdity of attributing it to God." He further argued that the interest of the Holy Prophet and his companions with regards to women was based on "freeing them from bondage to man, giving them rights in marriage, inheritance, participation and economic empowerment as well as raising their status to one of equality with men as servants of the same God, though allowing for male leadership in areas of joint effort, mainly marriage and family."

Indeed, even the religion of Christianity did not place the woman at the base of the societal strata. A woman according to the book of Genesis was extracted from the rib of a man. (Genesis Chapter 2 Verses 21-24) The man is made the head of the family in the area of marriage. There was nowhere in the Bible where it was stated that a man should treat the woman as a slave rather, he was enjoined to love her as himself.

From the preceding, it is increasingly becoming clear that the factors responsible for gender oppression in our society are not religions but a multiplicity of causes ranging from socio-economic reasons to cultural and

traditional norms etc. These have made gender inequality to continue to loom larger and larger such that even the position occupied by women in history appeared to be undermined by men. In the case of the role played by Queen Amina of Zazzau, for example, M. Adamu contended that "From the beginning of the sixteenth century, Zazzau embarked on territorial expansion in the west and south. According to historical tradition, the Zazzau army was led in some campaigns by the Gimbiya (Princess) Amina, daughter of Bakwa, who also fortified Zaria and Kufena with wide city walls. There is nothing in the literature or the non palace oral traditions to show that Amina was ever a monarch in Zazzau. Her name is not found on any of the lists of Zazzau kings; she lived and died a princess admittedly a very influential one but never a queen." (Quoted in Oyedele, 2008:137).

Causes of Gender Inequality

Economic factors that revolve around unemployment, low wages and poverty which compel most women to depend on their husbands to meet their needs have been identified as some critical sources of gender inequality in our country. Sani (2001:164) argued that, inspite of women's contribution to economic growth and development of their country, they are not recognized. In addition, she succinctly demonstrated that most works that women do in the domestic sphere like house-work, gathering of firewood for use as fuel, drawing of water, handicrafts and child-care and in agriculture such as subsistence food production, food processing and preparation especially for the family, remained economically undervalued. They did all these without payment, yet subjected to over-labour.

In addition to this, in small scale industries where their services abound, women are faced with low income and economic abuse. This tended to reduce their ability to obtain credit facilities from the banks or other organizations in order to empower themselves economically. There is no doubt that poverty alleviation is focusing more on rural woman which is fair enough but this should be extended to urban dwelling women as well. For, according to the argument of Odey, (December 2007:93) which lend credence to the views earlier expressed by Sani, as long as women remain the most disadvantaged gender in our society, they still ought to commend serious attention in the Nigerian poverty reduction framework. He added that, the basic features of women constituting a disproportionate number of poor Nigerians lie in their few/low access to economic activities mostly in the reproductive areas which are either unpaid or taken for granted and women have a lower share of the national income than men. Within the house-hold, there are massive income/ consumption disparities

to their disadvantage and in credit/loan facilities, they receive smaller than men. Thus, they continued to rely on their husbands for most of their needs.

Socially, the society viewed women as properties. This begins right from their immediate family units who also oppress and exploit them. They are regarded as chattel that could be sold to another man during marriage. In matrimony, there are different attitudes to male and female extra-marital affairs. While a husband may expect compensation in the event of infidelity on the part of his wife or he may bear her, there is no clear course of action or compensation for a wife whose husband committed a similar offence. In this variation in punishment or non-punishment, Mahdi (op. cit., p.204) argued, lies the status distinction between women and men.

Traditional norms/ culture are another ardent promoter of gender inequality in our society today. In Africa, cultural and traditional practices are used to defend certain forms of violence against women. Some of these cultural practices have been found to be degrading and harmful for example, the case of female genital mutilation. Secondly, in certain parts of the country, when a woman loses her husband, she is subjected to some humiliation to prove her innocence. On the contrary, no man has ever been subjected to such a treatment on the occasion of the death of his wife. Also, most communities, excluding the Islamic societies often denied women inheritance of their family estates mostly landed properties following the demise of a father or husband. (Sani, op. cit., p.164)

The discrimination against women is severe to the extent that they are denied some essential things of life like formal education. Yet, it is a critical element of self realization, freedom, knowledge of the world around one and empowerment including how to tackle challenging situations. Some families view education of the girl child as a waste of time and resources because she will be given out in marriage and the funds expended on her education may not be recovered from the bride price. Education is considered an investment that is expected to yield dividends i.e. material and monetary benefits. Thus, to invest wisely is to educate only the male child who eventually assists his family through the construction of house(s) for his parents, sponsoring the education of his siblings, financial support, and so on. On the other hand, the girl child is viewed as incapable of venturing into this due to restrictions from her husband. As a result of this notion, parents are ready to mortgage their houses and lands to see their sons through university education but the female child is not given such attention. The few privileged girls are only sponsored through school to

enable them acquire minimum qualification for the nursing or teaching profession which the society deemed her domain anchored on the assumption that too much education will prevent her from getting a husband. ((Batubo, op. cit., p.121)

Furthermore, due to the nature of gender relations in Africa, women are more affected during conflicts. They suffer social and psychological trauma as a result of the economic and political difficulties. Again, there is the proliferation of violence against them during conflicts as some of them are being raped, kidnapped and utilized as sex slaves. Sometimes, this is regarded as a strategy for terrorising and dehumanising women of the enemy group. Following extreme hardship, women take greater economic responsibilities at home to care for the many children turned orphans or abandoned during conflicts. To worsen the situation, some of the women who shoulder such tasks are themselves widows or deserted by their husbands and male relatives occasioned by the conflict scenario. Indeed, women led households, women refugee returnees and socially vulnerable women all encounter economic hardship which affected their nutritional level. (Yusuf-Sadiq, 2007:187)

Again, women constitute 49.6% of the Nigerian population which could translate into effective determination of the Nigerian electoral process and results. Indeed, Best and Abdul-Qadir (2007:239) have indicated that although women have been made to be conscious of their rights to vote but a number of them have not been voted to leadership positions due to the socially constructed imbalance in gender relations made by men. Thus, such political awareness was basically meant to lure and/ or convince them to vote for the men folks during elections. Also, politics in the country is very expensive right from the campaigning stage. Given the low economic status of most women this has barred them from venturing into it. Again, it is characterized by "intimidation, thuggery, violence and character assassination" even late night political meetings which is not conducive for women. Little wonder due to the preceding obstacles only few women are found in politics and occupying leadership positions.

The Role of Women in National Development from Historical Perspective

Women all over the world and throughout history have contributed in one way or the other to societal development. In the case of Nigeria, apart from Queen Amina, Nana Asmau of the Sokoto Caliphate readily comes to mind. She was the daughter of the 19th Century Sokoto Jihad leader, Uthman dan Fodio. She was a prolific writer and had over 44 works to her credit and regarded as the

educator of women. She contributed meaningfully in the administration of the Sokoto Caliphate through her literary works and strove to uphold the Jihadist cause and sustained the Shehu's ideals within the community even after his death. (Sani, op. cit., pp.9-10). Indeed, other prominent historical figures who contributed to the society of their time included, Madame Tinubu, Queen Emotan of Benin, Queen Kambasa of Bonny (Ibid) and Princess Inikpi of the Igala Kingdom.

Apart from their role in politics, women participated actively in the advancement of pre-colonial economy. Their contributions are visible in agricultural production, cottage industries and trade. The manifestation of their feat in this respect was the acquisition of properties including chieftaincy titles. Colonialism however led to the relegation of the role of women because the political and colonial economic structures constituted were male dominated. The Native administration, export-import operations of the capitalist economy and the European trading companies – John Holt, U.A.C, SCOA, P.Z and others was gender biased as the entire system was male dominated. The monetization of the economy coupled with the change in communal land tenure system resulted in the privatization of land which became accessible to those who had the money (men). Thus, women were disempowered politically, economically and socially (Toyin O. Falola, *The Role of Nigerian Women*. Encyclopaedia Britannica, www.britannica.com) yet, they were exploited by the system which involved women in the payment of taxation. Some of the resistance against such policies could be seen in the Aba Women Riot incident of 1929.

However, despite the overt emphasis on patriarchy during the colonial era, some women still made their mark in the annals of history. One of such was Chief Mrs. Olufumilayo Ransome Kutia, a teacher, an active member of the Nigerian Union of Teachers (NUT) founded in 1934 and an astute politician. Her concern for the welfare of women led to the formation of the Abeokuta Women's Union in 1946. Its central objective was to alleviate and remove the causes of hardship to women and promote gender equality. In 1951, she contested elections into the House of Assembly in Egba Division. By 1958 to 1960, she was the leader of the opposition party in the Council. In 1971, she was awarded with a Doctorate degree in law in recognition of her immense contributions to the society. (Sani, op. cit, pp.8-9).

Since independence, women have contributed to the economic development of Nigeria: their labour count in small scale industries such as textile, tailoring, soap and detergent producing industries. The United Nations report in 1995,

pointed out that 60 to 70% women are engaged in small scale industries. They also contributed in the agricultural sector assisting in the sustainability of food security in Nigeria. Indeed, women constituted 47.8% of the agricultural labour-force in 1997. (Ibid., p.21).

In the area of politics, women as pointed out earlier had played significant roles in the politics of their locality right from the pre-colonial era down to the post colonial era. However, politics is one of the areas where the right of women is greatly undermined. After 48 years of the achievement of Nigeria's independence from colonial domination, Nigeria is yet to produce a female President. Why is that so? Secondly, the Federal Parliament is still male dominated. This should not be the case because women have shown that they have the charisma to rule.

The table below indicates the number of Women elected in 1999 elections in Nigeria.

Table 1

Elections	Male	Female	Total
L.G Councillors	5,667	143	8,810
Chairmanship	765	9	774
State Houses of Assembly	971	12	983
Deputy Governors	35	1	36
Governors	36	0	36
House of Representatives	343	12	355
Senate	105	3	108
Vice President	1	0	1
President	1	0	1

Source: Independent National Electoral Commission Report, 1999 as cited in Hajo Sani, *op. cit*, 2001, p.130)

Socially, women's reproductive powers can be seen in their abilities to give birth and raise children. These children constitute the bed rock of the next generation of productive population. In other words, women reproduce the labour force Nigeria needed for sustainable development. They are the engine of social reproduction. That in itself is an important contribution of women to the society and the nation at large.

Women are also saddled with the responsibility of taking care of the family and also served as nurses. Infact, it has been argued that, "either in war or in

peace, women are traditionally positioned to care for the sick and the injured. This is increased during times of war as more injuries are recorded; and it is made worse by very limited healthcare services available" (Yusuf-Sadiq, op. cit., p. 189).

Implication of Gender Inequality for National Security

When women are not given equal rights with men, it poses a threat to national security and the path to national development. The Nigerian constitution guaranteed fundamental human right to all its citizens and by interpretation, equal rights to both men and women. This had been adopted since 1959 and remained in each successive constitution up to 1999. It is incontestable therefore, that in theory, the legal provision for women's right in Nigeria is quite solid but paradoxically, the rights of women have continued to witness violation in practice. (Sani, op. cit., p.160). This should no longer be the case in order to promote harmonious relationship between both genders and obtain women's maximal contributions to national development.

Furthermore, gender inequality causes poverty and its associated malnutrition for women. These represented an instrumental push factor in the emigration of some Nigerian women to foreign countries for commercial sex service, thereby tinting the image of our nation at the international scene. The attendant consequence of this is the health insecurity it poses. The proliferation of the cases of HIV and AIDs pandemic is a serious challenge to national security. The disease was noticed in Nigeria since 1986. Its incidence rose from 1.8% in 1988 to 5.8% in 2001. And, women are more vulnerable to the virus than men due to various factors ranging from low access to education/literacy, early marriage i.e. younger women married off to older men who might have been contracted with the HIV virus through polygamous marriage and the habit of frolicking with many sexual partners out of wedlock, physiological differences between women and men, cultural practices such as female genital mutilation carried out through unsterilized instruments such as razor blades, knives and broken bottles to poverty and violence against women. (Kwaghe, 2007: 239-241) The preponderance of the HIV/AIDs virus is exacerbated by the role of commercial sex workers. Yet, it was the low socio-economic status and prejudices against women in our society that has led some to venture into prostitution.

In the 1930s, commercial sex workers were mainly operating in a localized way in villages and towns. But in the 1970s and 1980s, it metamorphosed into a regional/ national trade especially in economic vibrant urban centres such as Kaduna, Lagos, etc. Before 1999, prostitution had assumed an international

dimension whereby some Nigerian women are trafficked to countries such as Italy, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, the Netherlands, Hong Kong, New York, Rome, France and Belgium. (See, Abdulkadir, 2004:18) Undoubtedly, the implication of this for national security and the image of the nation cannot be overemphasized.

In this respect, Mrs Amina Titi Abubakar's Women Trafficking and Child Labour Eradication Foundation (WOTCLEF) played an important role in the promotion and protection of the prestige and dignity of womanhood. It also fought for the eradication of the problems of women trafficking and child's labour in our nation. Some of its achievements include the fact that, in March 1999, some 287 Nigerian girls were repatriated from Italy and Saudi Arabia. Similarly, in June 1999, a further 200 women were deported from Netherlands. (Sani, op. cit, p.71) Thus, WOTCLEF has been able to facilitate the repatriation of young Nigerian women who went to Europe, the Middle East and Asia in search of greener pasture through commercial sex jobs and these ladies were rehabilitated.

Gender inequality is also one of the major causes of high illiteracy rate amongst women and young girls. Some however have access to primary and secondary education. In the area of tertiary especially university education where professionalism is pursued and high level manpower produced, women lacked greater access and/or sponsorship. This represented a challenge to national security.

Apart from education, low access to health facilities has culminated in the increased rate of maternal mortality. In the year 2000, The UNDP Human Development index report ranked Nigeria 137. In 1999, it was estimated that the national maternal mortality ratio was 704 per 100,000 live births which suggests 104,000 deaths annually with regional disparities. The situation was worst in the rural areas with 1,825 per 100,000 live births than the urban centres which had 351 per 1000 live births. Indeed, due to inadequate access to modern health facilities many women are plagued with the VVF health challenge. For, an estimated 70% of Nigerian women give birth at home where obstetric services may be absent in the event of complications. (Cited in Independent Policy Group, Report, 2003:21). The preceding is undoubtedly a challenge to national security and sustainable national development thus needed redress.

Recommendations

Women should be given more opportunities in politics; more seats in the Federal Parliament. They should be part of the decision making instrument of the nation. And, the cost of politicking and electioneering campaigns which have become astronomically high or quite expensive because men made it so in order to bar women from the corridors of power, should be reviewed. Indeed, a female president can emerge in Nigeria some day if the whole women population said yes and if elections are based on free and fair procedures.

Education is a sure means of women empowerment and participation in decision making. The present gap that exists between boys and girls in terms of accessibility to western education should be bridged. This is because most female children were not sent to school by their parents or guardians. Those who were lucky to be enrolled were often confronted with the misfortune of dropping out of school as a result of early marriage, unwanted pregnancy and cultural beliefs that de-emphasized girl child education.

There must be a conscious effort on the part of women to resist all forms of what can be termed the manipulation of religion and culture by men to perpetuate their dominance. To achieve this, there must be unity amongst the women. Women should endeavour to stamp out jealousy, envy and any negative trait that could bring rancorous situation amongst them resulting in factions. And, in the words of Odey, (op. cit., p193) "they need a clear understanding of gender relation, a sense of self worth, the right to control their lives as well as the capacity to exercise their bargaining power and the direction or pace of changes that affect them."

Women should be given greater access to productive resources, credit facilities from the financial institutions for investment in agriculture, trade and other entrepreneurial pursuit. The acquisition of landed properties should not be viewed as the exclusive reserve for men. Employment in the organized public sector should increasingly open up for the absorption of women labour-force. For most women that have been reduced to the level of chronic poverty, aggressive anti-poverty measures should be undertaken to facilitate their recuperation. In other words, women economic empowerment is a necessity for the attainment of national security in Nigeria.

The government across the levels viz, Federal, State and Local Government should render their support to women in their struggle against gender

inequality. This is in view of the fact that while violence against women is on the increase, violence against men on the part of women is negligible or near absent.

Conclusion

Gender discrimination in any given society engenders oppression, inequality and violence. To attain national security and meaningful development in Nigeria, men should begin to move away from domination towards women and see them as partners in progress because in contemporary times, women like Professor Dora Akunyili, the one time Director-General of NAFDAC and Minister of Information and Communication; Dr. Ngozi Okonjo Eweala, the Managing Director of World Bank and the Minister of Finance, Evelyn Oputu, the Managing Director of the Bank of Industry, Professor Rukkayatu, former Minister of Education and others have demonstrated beyond reasonable doubt that women have the charisma to attain any height in our political, economic and social sphere if given the opportunity.

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