

## **THE IMPACTS OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF FEMINISM IN THE PRESENT DAY NIGERIAN SOCIETY**

**Uchenna Nympha Nkama**

Philosophy Department, University of Port Harcourt Rivers State

**NIGERIA**

### **ABSTRACT**

The development of the struggles around the world for the liberation of women differs from nation to nation. The basic issues feminism combats are gender inequality and the oppression of women. These basic issues are deep-seated within the Nigerian society. The issues of gender equality and women liberation have garnered momentum around the world more than ever. There are policies on regular basis promoting gender equality. Some employers are practicing non-discrimination in employment. Women are strongly encouraged to apply for certain employments, grants and a host of other opportunities to give them equal standing with men. The implementation of such related policies has been the main focus of women's movement in many countries. The problem confronting this study is whether this is the case with women movements in the Nigerian society. The aim of the study is to critically examine the impacts of the development of feminism in the present day Nigerian society. The paper submits that, while many Nigerian women from north to south and east to west are resolute, strong and impactful, others are weak and wasting away in religious bigotry and traditional cowardice. The conclusion is that religion, culture, and patriarchy may need to be jettisoned and modernism embraced to combat the oppression of women and gender inequality in Nigeria.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Feminism is the movement for the emancipation of women. In the 18<sup>th</sup> Century Europe, unmarried women had little protection under the law while married women lost their legal identity. Women were disenfranchised, and when they are out of a marriage, the rights over their children were almost denied them. They were lagging in property ownership, signing of contracts and in retaining lawyers. This condition was given stronger impetus by William Blackstone (1758). According to Blackstone, husband and wife are one person in law. That is, the very being or legal existence of a woman is suspended when she is married. Or at least, incorporated and consolidated into that of the man under whose wing, protection and cover she performs everything. The impact of this historical circumstance is that women lost every sense of being to men in marriage and in the society at large.

The historical circumstance that subjugates women under men is the bedrock for gender disparity in employment, politics, education, and human rights in general. It is also the ground for the modern day quest for gender equality which has its development way back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The issue of gender equality has today garnered momentum around the world more than ever. There are policies on regular basis promoting gender equality. Some employers are practicing non-discrimination in employment. Women are strongly encouraged to apply for certain employments, grants and a host of other opportunities to give them equal standing with men. The implementation of such related policies has been the main focus of women's movements in many countries. Whether this is the case with women movements in

Nigeria is the problem beckoning for the study. The aim is to critically examine the impact of the development of feminism in the present day Nigerian society.

The progress of women's struggles around the world differs from nation to nation. Majorly, the struggles are influenced by social, economic, political, educational and religious undertones. In addition, cultural and ethnic influences are inclusive of feminine movements in Nigeria.

Feminism videotapes a rejection of women oppression, and a commitment to women's liberation from all forms of oppression. The oppressions sometimes come in different shapes and sizes. There are internal as well as external oppressions: psychological, emotional, socio-economic, and political as well as philosophical oppressions (Mama and Salo, 2001, p. 59). Mama and Salo submission corroborates with UN General Assembly definition of violence against women that any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life is violence against women (Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women, 1994, Article 1).

All the forms of oppression and violence against women are in full flesh manifestations in Nigeria. However, it is important to note that in Nigeria, the alleged inferiority of women to men is overtly seen in our different institutional, cultural and traditional settings. The impact of the alleged inferiority of women to men is what has culminated into gender inequality in Nigeria that is deep-seated within the polity. Gender inequality is widespread in Nigeria as a result of the fact that Nigeria is overshadowed with neo-colonial structures and engulfed with underdevelopment and religious bigotry.

The extent of the religious bigotry is corroborated by John Mbiti (1982). According to this scholar, "Africans are notoriously religious and each people has its own religious system with a set of beliefs and practices..." (1982, p. 1). This submission is evident in the present day Nigerian society. Religion, more than anything else, greatly influenced primitive people's understanding of the universe and their relationships with it. Despite the spate of modernism, little has been done to change the religious inclinations of the average Nigerians. The various religious attachments among Nigerians explains the reasons for the tight hold of gender inequality within the Nigerian society.

### **The Development of Feminism in Nigeria**

In 1947, a National Women's Union was formed in response to several anti-colonial resistance activities by Nigeria women. Prior to the Nigeria colonial period, many Nigerian women in the southern region participated actively in public life and had independent access to resources as different from what it was in the 18<sup>th</sup> century Europe. Women collectively had social and political influence through their associations and representatives. This was not, however, the case with women of the northern region of Nigeria especially the Hausa-Fulani where Islamic religion restrained their commercial as well as political activities.

During the colonial era, women in the southern region of Nigeria played outstanding roles in the societies collectively and individually. There were community gatherings where market women asserted their rights. The market women formed an association through their gatherings that will become strongly and politically influential. The colonialists imported the 18<sup>th</sup> Century status of women in Europe to Nigeria which destabilized the implementation of

social, economic and political rights of women. It brought about deficiency in women's representations in the public sphere.

However, in 1929, what could be known as the official launching of the movement for the emancipation of women in Nigeria erupted. There was women's war in Aba called 'Aba women's riot' which protested against British tax policies. There were several women attempts to resist the colonial policies that were not in tandem with their long-lived mannerisms. A National Women's Union was formed which is considered the brain-child of the anti-colonial resistance in 1947.

In a 1948 further development, women protested in Abeokuta against excessive taxation. However, the women's struggle for the emancipation of the female folks intensified and the post-colonial period ushered in the Federation of Nigeria Women's Societies (FNWS).

### **Feminism and the Nigerian society**

Since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, women's struggle in Nigeria against discrimination and gender-based violence has been on the limelight especially during the fight for national independence and improving the quality of lives. However, the Nigerian women did not fare well during military rule in Nigeria, given that no woman ascended to the zenith in the Nigerian army.

During Nigeria's Second Republic (1979 – 1983), all Nigerian women were enfranchised to participate in the electoral process; women in most parts of northern Nigeria did not participate in the elections. Many of them were disenfranchised de facto by the electoral requirements and irregularities. For instance, tax receipt presentation as a qualification to participate (Shettima, 1995, p. 62). At the wake of Babangida's regime, an association 'Women in Nigeria' (WIN) was commissioned to give input on the perspectives of women. It recorded great achievements.

Currently, the impacts of feminist activity in Nigeria have been very positive. Most activities center on equality and equality is involved with assertiveness, consciousness-raising, and recently, women empowerment (Nwachuku, 1996, p. 15). It is well understood that in the present day Nigerian society, Nigerian 'feminism' has been non-militant and non-confrontational. Nigerian women have a preference for advocacy and lobbying in an attempt to foster peace and stability in the home and society and demanding self and social advancement for women. As Okeke (2000) puts it, Nigerian women's status as mothers, wives, and queens, roles in religious rituals and community decision making, and their work as traders and farmers contradict European norms. At the moment in Nigeria, women are represented in political parties, businesses and public life despite the dismal percentage.

### **The Difficulty in women liberation in Nigeria**

The impacts of the development of feminism in the present day Nigerian society have been very significant. However, the point still remains that there are still encumbrances to feminism's task of liberating women in Nigeria. For instance, culture and tradition, religion, human physiology, poverty/unemployment constitute serious difficulty in many ways.

*Culture and Tradition:* Culture plays an extensive role in traditional African societies like Nigeria. It embodies the summation of the way of life of people in a given society. Culture and tradition as it were, have been the justification and refuge for inhuman treatments against women. It is a culture that has imprisoned women and denied them the realization of being

treated inhumanly in Nigeria. Feminists must thrive to combat the long-standing cultural and traditional statusesque limiting the full manifestation of women. It is not in doubt that the structure of traditional society and its dominant position of the male have more or less catapulted the male to a point of chauvinism in society (Ottong, 1991, p. 117).

*Patriarchy:* According to Aluko (1999), patriarchy as a worldview assumes alienation of women. It places the male on the center of reality and makes the masculine normative. In such a dispensation, a woman cannot be anything but inferior. It has been a known fact that the post-independence African States like Nigeria is patriarchal, but this has been blamed on the colonial regimes which excluded women (Mama, 1995, p.39). Most women are trapped in the daily business of securing the survival of themselves, their homes and localities but this is a portrayal of staunch patriarchal power and all the social, political and economic injustices meted out to women, Africans and Nigerian in particular. Feminists in Nigeria must advance resiliently liberating women from patriarchy.

*Religion:* Religion and religious institutions have been described as the driving force responsible for the reproduction of gender ideologies that oppress and subjugate women; and asserting the superiority of men (Mama in Adamu, 2008, p. 137). Religion basically plays a dominant role in private and public life in most developing countries. It is often used against female liberation which is seen by some as western cultural imperialism (Para-Mallam, 2006, p. 409). Through religion, women get indoctrinated to biblical and quranic injunctions and decide to stay put by them. This makes it more complex for women to imbibe and develop transformative feminist agenda to remove structural barriers to their capabilities as a human being which is supposed to promote gender equality.

Other factors that further foster notions and beliefs of the inferiority of the female folk include human Physiology, poverty, unemployment, and illiteracy, among others.

### **The Milestones of Feminism in Nigeria**

Historically, several women have stood out for the liberation of women. Queen Amina of Zazzau and Queen Kambassa of Bonny were classic examples demonstrating the feminine might in the military in Nigeria. While queen Amina led troops, fought wars, and forced emirates like Katsina and Kano to pay tributes to her State, queen Kambassa pioneered the militarization of the Bonny Kingdom (Awe, 1992, p. 30-35). The duo legends demonstrate the possibility of winning the fight for women liberation in the Nigerian military and in the world at large. The Iyoba Idia of Benin showcased her ability in Benin City upon the death of her husband. She fought for the right of Obaship for her son, Esigie, and repositioned the political structure of the Benin Kingdom.

Furthermore, Margaret Ekpo of Calabar fought gender inequality and advocated for women's right. Gambo Sawaba of northern origin played outstanding roles in the fight for women's place in the society. Flora Nwapa was the first woman commissioner and Nigeria's first woman novelist. Grace Alele-Williams was the first ever woman university vice-chancellor. Dora Akunyili made an outstanding impact while heading National Agency for Food and Drugs Administration (NAFDAC), Okonjo Iweala is a genius in finance, Chimamanda Adichie is a great novelist, Nana Asmau of Sokoto Caliphate and a host of others. The list is endless. Therefore, while many Nigerian women from north to south and east to west are resolute, strong and impactful, others are weak and waste away in religious bigotry and traditional cowardice. Wake up, women; and join the movement!

There are organizations that have hitherto made it possible for feminism to thrive in Nigeria. The Women's Aid Collective (WACOL) provides one example of a successful contextualized feminist effort to promote women's rights through Sharia. It provides legal education and assistance to women and girls in northern Nigeria. It has initiated legal aid, women's rights and access to justice projects in many northern States. Another organization is Women in Nigeria. (WIN). It organized workshops all over Nigeria helping women to fight for their rights.

As a way forward too, the Enugu State Government enacted laws protecting the rights of widows (The prohibition of infringement of a widower's and widow's Fundamental Human Rights Law, No. 3). There are organizations and policies supporting feminist movements all around Nigeria. Therefore, the impact of the development of feminism in the present day Nigerian society has to continue thriving for the liberation of the female folk.

### **The Way Forward for Feminism in Nigeria**

From the foregoing, it is apparent that feminism in Nigeria is yet to garner momentum like in European and some other African countries. Feminism in those countries has been a success largely because of the availability of employment and educational opportunities for women. Unemployment, abject poverty and other effects of underdevelopment pose a great danger to women.

Most parents are unable to train their children in school. A discriminatory sponsorship favors the male child while the girl child is sent off early to marry, hawking, and in extreme cases prostitute. Most of the girls are further abused and exploited sexually; some end up being psychological battered and also infected with deadly diseases. So much inhuman treatment being thrown at this vulnerable creature called a woman. Gainfully employment and education for the girl child may improve the impacts of the development of feminism in the present day Nigerian society.

Furthermore, religion, culture, and patriarchy may need to be jettisoned and modernism embraced to combat the oppression of women and gender inequality. The involvements of religion and its relationship with customs and traditions have undermined women's position in Nigeria. According to Pittin (1990), such involvements have intrinsic limitations if carried out within an already established religious, customs and traditions boundaries "with an agenda established within the ideology, rather than being a critique of the ideology itself placing it in a specific historical and social context" (p. 22). The incompatibility of gender equality and religious beliefs in Nigeria cannot be downplayed and this will be very unhealthy in the actualization of women's rights. While patriarchy being the cornerstone, culture has greatly impeded the actualization of women's right.

### **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, there is no rationale why women should not raise their voices to combat all the atrocities against them. Gender discrimination hampers economic development. Poverty has caused incidences of insecurity, violence, kidnapping, and prostitution. Feminists in Nigeria may need to continue striving for women empowerment in the society. This will be reduced poverty. Inherited unproductive and visionless customs and tradition of discrimination and subjugation of women may have to be thrown away. Parents should raise children on the basis of equality. Faith groups and movements should eschew the parochial view of women as inferior. Women advocacy groups and institutions are expected to be forthcoming in their

campaigns for justice and the issue of inequality. Finally, women are created equal and not inferior to men. If gender equality is harnessed, Nigerian Women have the potential to contribute to Nigeria's transformation conspicuously. Therefore, excluding women in national decision making would rather impair national development.

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