

Gender Role Differentiation and Social Mobility of Women in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT The paper examines gender role differentiation and its effect on the trend and pattern of social mobility of women in Nigeria. Although biological categorisation of humans is vital, in reality, it is the culturally constructed gender differentiation into masculinity and femininity that is most fundamental in defining what role males and females play in society. The roles males play are highly valued and rewarded than that of females. This division of roles along gender lines place women in underprivileged position in terms of power, prestige and wealth. The paper argues that gender role differentiation negatively restricts the life chances of women thus, affecting their mobility pattern. However, changing institutional arrangements tend to alter social mobility in favour of women in contemporary Nigerian society.

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria is a country in West Africa. It shares borders with the Republic of Benin in the west, Chad and Cameroon in the east, Niger in the north. Its coastal borders lie on the Gulf of Guinea in the south and Lake Chad in the north-east axis. Nigeria has an area of about 923,772 km² (Morgan 1983; Obot 1987). With an estimated population of 140,003,542, it is the most populated country in Africa with more than 250 ethnic groups. The population figure accounts for approximately one quarter of the people in West Africa. A common feature that cuts across all ethnic groups in the country is gender role differentiation. Nigeria in all its ethno-cultural characteristics has a sharp categorisation of its citizenry into sex and gender. In other words, the country is characterised with stratification system that is gendered.

Sex is the biological and anatomical characteristics that distinguish male and females consisting of primary and secondary characteristics (Golden 1992; Lips 1993; Lott 1994). Gender on the other hand, refers to socially or culturally constructed differences between males and females found in meanings, beliefs and practices associated with masculinity and femininity (Gailey 1999; Lorber 2004).

Although biological differences between males and females are very important, in reality, most sex differences are socially constructed gender differences. It is the socio-cultural processes and not biological attributes that are most fundamental in defining what males and

females are, what they should do and what sort of relations do or should exist between them. Gender difference, though, human invention in society, organises human social life in culturally patterned ways, shapes social relations in everyday life as well as in the major social structures in society and this forms the basis of gender role differentiation.

The Nigerian society like every other society in the world all over is stratified along gender classification. In other words, males and females are given unequal access to power, prestige and property on the basis of the sex of her citizens (Olabisi 1998). The role differentiation system translates into specification of roles along gender line. Males' role are generally more highly valued and even rewarded than that of the females and the females are made to be subordinate to the authority of the males.

The prevailing division of labour between sexes has led to men and women assuming unequal positions in terms of power, prestige and wealth. This gender arrangement and male dominance, no doubt, have some implications for the status and social mobility of the women folks. It is how gender role differentiation affects the pattern and trend of social mobility of the Nigerian women that constitutes the main thrust of this paper.

Origin of Gender Role Differentiation

Gender role differentiation perpetuated by patriarchy varies from one culture to another. As such, it may not have a universal origin. However,

two versions portray gender role differentiation as universal. Lerner (1999) maintains however, that historical records show that the horticultural hunting and gathering societies had less gender role differentiation and patriarchy was not pronounced. It was concluded that historical records may be available, but there is not a single society known where women as a group, have decision making power over men as a group (Miller and Hoffman 1995; Jessel 1990).

The first account of the origin of patriarchy and gender role differentiation is tied to myth and religions. For instance, in Christian religion, it was recorded thus:

... Then the Lord God took some soil from the ground and form a man out of it ... he placed man in the Garden of Eden to cultivate and guard it ... Then the Lord God said it is not good for a man to live alone. I will make him a suitable companion to help him ... He took out one of the ribs of Adam and formed a woman out of the rib ... For eating the forbidden fruit ... I will increase your trouble in pregnancy and your pain in giving birth ... and your desire shall be to your husband and he shall rule over you (Genesis 2:7-21, 3:16).

The above represents a mythological origin and justification for the inferior status and position of a woman in society. This is in line with the argument of Kate Millette. Millette (1997) argues that religion is used as a way of legitimising male dominance. As she puts it, *patriarchy has God on its side*. To illustrate her point, Millette notes that the Christian religion portrays Eve as an afterthought produced from the spare rib of Adam. The status of Eve was made inferior and subjected to the authority of the man. This is because the origin of human suffering is held to have its source in Eve (woman action). In a similar vein, Armstrong (1993), and Holms and Bowker (1994) argue that none of the major religions has been particularly good to women. They have usually relegated women to a marginal position thereby reinforcing and sustaining gender inequality in society.

The second account of the origin of patriarchy and gender inequalities is traced to the social consequences of the biology of human reproduction (Murdock 1949; Parsons 1959; Firestone 1972; Oakley 1974; Tiger and Fox 1992). In early human history, life was short due to malnutrition and ravaging diseases and conditions. The mortality rate was high mostly for children as about 50 percent of all children died before the age

of 5. As an adaptative mechanism, many children had to be born to make up for the dead ones and to reproduce human group (Friedil 1996). It is only the woman who gets pregnant, carries a baby or babies in her womb for nine months, give birth and nurse babies.

Consequently, women became limited to child care and home activities for a considerable part of their lives. In order to survive, an infant needs a nursing mother. With a child at her breast or in her hip or her back, women became physically encumbered and their activities restricted to the home and child care and this made women to be dependent on men. Firestone aptly captures this:

Women are disadvantaged by their biology; menstruation, childbirth and menopause are all physical burdens for women, but pregnancy and breast feeding have the most serious social consequences ... when women are pregnant or nursing babies, they are dependent on males whether husband, lover, brother, etc. for physical survival. Women's dependence on men is protracted by the long period during which human infants are dependent on their mothers compared to the infants of other species ... This dependence on men is universal and it produced unequal power relationship (Firestone 1972:29).

In the face of this dependence, men became dominant. Men go for hunting, build houses and meet other survival expectations of the women. Thus, the role men play became not only valued but also prestigious. In contrast, little prestige and values was given to ordinary routine, taken for granted activities of women. This marked the genesis of female minority status in society.

Gender Role Differentiation: A Theoretical Anchorage

Gender role differentiation in society can be appropriately understood within the framework of the gender socialisation model - a variant of the social learning theory. It is a widespread cultural assumption in most parts of the world that male children are preferable to female ones. Parents acquire this gender preference through gender socialisation. Gender socialisation is an aspect of socialisation that contains specific messages and practices concerning the nature of being a female or a male in a specific group or society (Steinbacher and Holmes 1987).

Gender socialisation is fundamental in determining what society thinks the preferred sex

of a child should be and in influencing our beliefs about acceptable behaviour for males and females within the framework of patriarchy. After birth, parents respond differently towards male and female infants. They often play more roughly with boys and more lovingly with girls (Eccles et al. 1990). Throughout childhood and adolescence, boys and girls are typically assigned different household chores and given different privileges. For instance, the male child is allowed to wander farther, gets involved in rough and tumble play, while the girl is highly restricted and closely monitored.

Gender and sex role socialisation according to Oakley (1974) emphasises that there are distinct gender roles for men and women which derive from culture rather than from biology. Gender role differentiation, though, varies from one society to another, they tend to maintain male dominance and female subservience. These roles are learnt through socialisation during childhood and shape the behaviour of adults. Oakley further argued that the manipulation of childrens' self image by parents and the canalisation of boys and girls towards different objects account for the differences in behaviour.

Gender role differentiation through socialisation always portrays the female and the role she plays as inferior compared to that of the male. During socialisation, these gender role differentiations are reinforced by sanctioning negatively gender inappropriate behaviour. Thus, most of the roles the female can or want to play, she is restricted from playing by defining them as gender inappropriate behaviour. This, no doubt affects negatively the social mobility pattern of the woman at various historical epochs.

Gender Role Differentiation and Social Mobility Pattern of Women in Nigeria

Gender role differentiation and social mobility in Nigeria is discussed in three historical epochs namely, pre-colonial, colonial and post colonial periods.

Pre-Colonial Era

Although, it could be argued that before the colonial incursion, there was no such expression as Nigeria. However, for the purpose of this discussion, one could assume a pre-colonial Nigeria by virtue of its geographical expression.

The Nigerian social structure as a whole could be said to be one made up of diverse sub-social structures as regards its numerous ethnic groups, hence different social and cultural backgrounds which involve the normative and value system. However, inspite of these differences, there are obvious similarities that cut across board. It is in this light that social structures in Nigeria are discussed particularly as it relates to the issue of gender role differentiation and gender mobility.

Gender role differentiation could be said to be a very apparent phenomenon in the Nigerian social structure as it is prevalent in the social institutions. For instance, within the family institution at present and in the past, it is obvious that the female members of the family constitute the second sex. The man is always the head of the household. He is regarded as the breadwinner and the ultimate decision maker, every other person is a subject. The man determines the social status of the other members of the family. That is, his relative class within the society determines the class position of his household members including that of his wife.

In the traditional period when social institutions were not segregated, the man was the one who owned and controlled the means of production which was basically land oriented. Even if he was a craftsman, blacksmith, weaver, fisherman or trader, he owned the business and the tools of production, hence, he controlled the forces of production which include the number of wives and children he had. As the Yorubas rightly put it: *It is the man who has the Oko (male reproductive organ) he has the Oko (farmland) and also owns the Oko (farming implement-hoe)* (Beier 1995).

In the family system, it is the male who has access to the land and inherit property. It is his relative access to the means of production that determines the mobility pattern of the household. If he had access to the royal title or chiefship, it determines the status of his wives and children. Social mobility was mainly closed and used as ascriptive processes in the pre-colonial period such that it is only when one was a prince that he could aspire to be king or only when one was a first born male that he could aspire to be the head of the household.

The man's relative position in the society determines his wife or wives ability to improve her or their social status. Thus, the basis for up-

ward social mobility for females was very tight and closed. But she could, however, move down the social mobility ladder. For instance, if a woman on the day of her marriage is not found *Vagino-Intacta* (virginity intact) by her husband, she is treated with disdain – more of an outcast (Fadipe 1944). Similarly, a male child in the pre-colonial family structure had more chances of being upwardly mobile than his female counterpart as he has access to land and property and upwardly mobile compared to the female counterpart who has a very slim chance of upward mobility. The only chance of upward social mobility for the girl child that can be perceived is to be married out to a wealthy man.

In the economic institution, women's occupation, be it trading, craft, etc. was subjected to their husbands as in most cases, the wares they traded in belonged to their husbands and the money paid back to him. Social mobility was still subjected to husbands' class or status. In northern Nigeria, for instance, women, especially the ones married to moslems are usually incapacitated economically. They are made to be *matan kulle* (women in purdah). In this secluded lifestyle, there are limited opportunities for such women to be upwardly mobile (Kalib 2005). Similarly, in most cases, women could not assume the esteemed position of religious priests or custodian of the oracle as this was regarded as the exclusive preserve of men.

Exceptional cases, however, exists whereby women having been discovered to have spiritual powers that are revered, could hold certain religious positions as the custodian of the shrine or oracle, they could also perform some religious rituals. These were chances by which they could be upwardly mobile. However, in most societies that allow women to play religious roles, the roles are regarded as less important and marginal to the central religious role of men (Kidamah 2007; Ogege 2010). A woman could however, be down-trodden easily as more women are accused of witchcraft than men. Confirmed witches were sent to exile or executed in some societies in pre-colonial era.

Also, in the pre-colonial social structure only fragments of women had political influence as no woman could assume the position of a head of a town. Women were also perceived as gossips who could not keep top political secrets, hence they are excluded from vital political matters. In

fact, in most cases, women could only be seen and not be heard. For example, in traditional Yoruba political system, the only chieftaincy title given to women was the Iyalode out of a host of other male titles. Hence, little chances of upward mobility for women compared to men.

Generally, the pre-colonial Nigerian social class structure in terms of gender relations could be described as that of a male dominant upper class because the males were the owners or future owners of the means of production. Thus, they are also controllers of the forces of production as against the females who were non- owners. Women were perceived in some situations as unclean hence excluded from certain religious practices. Similarly, women were equally considered not to be spiritually strong enough to behold some masquerades hence they were kept indoors whenever such masquerades were being paraded.

Colonial Period

During the colonial period, there was a transformation within the Nigerian social structure. There was a slight improvement as regards gender role differentiation and social mobility for women. The introduction of western education and Christianity by the missionaries opened up access for some women to acquire western education and were able to read and write, which was the basis for social status and class within the newly established structure. This gave some women opportunity to improve their status and be upwardly mobile. Women who could read and write as well as the men were employed by the colonial administrators and some of them became clerks, teachers, etc. and they earned income which also relatively improved their status.

Many women, however were debarred from getting educated as a result of the stereotypic perception that females are *soft and delicate* and incapable of being exposed to dangerous risks of going outside the family. Even when education began to gain more appreciation, it was considered not a business of females as they were believed to be incapable of abstraction or regarded as not intelligent. This notion to an extent still holds sway till today. We can therefore not say that the colonial period improved significantly the lot of women, as mobility patterns of women still remained very much closed and limited.

Post- Colonial Period

Gender relations and social mobility patterns still largely reflect its traditional characteristics existing during the pre-colonial and the colonial periods. This is because most spatial territories of the Nigerian social structure still maintained their traditional status quo. Although, there has been increasingly marked changes and improvements in some quarters which could be said mainly to be as a result of the influence of westernization. It is, therefore, pertinent to mention and discuss factors that have influenced gender relations and social mobility patterns of women within the Nigerian social structure in this historic epoch. Some of these factors are:

- Marriage
- Deliberate socialization/status borrowing
- Education and length of training
- Occupation
- Income
- Membership to associations/affiliations to religious associations
- Ownership of property and wealth
- Contraceptive technology

Marriage is a very important issue within the African traditional system. For instance, among the Yorubas, if a man who is of a marriageable age refuses to get married, he is perceived as irresponsible and such a person is relegated to the background. This is same with the woman. Among the Urhobo of southern Nigeria, a woman who does not get married is perceived not to have an identity and such a woman with time, loses her social recognition. Such a woman may even be perceived as a prostitute (Otitte 2006). So, the institution of marriage was and is still a very significant means through which men and women improve their social status. However, within a gender relation, the institution of marriage is seen much more important to the female gender.

A woman gains her social class or social status from the relative class position of her husband. Thus, a woman who belonged to the working class but is married to a man in the upper class is perceived to have assumed the class position of her husband. For instance, Turai Yar'adua is perceived to have assumed her relative status or class by virtue of her husband's honourable and esteemed position as the President of Nigeria. This view corroborates Goldthrope's (1984) 'conventional model' that woman's class location is defined as that of the equivalent of her

husband. Goldthrope stated further that family class location is better determined by the position of the head of the household who is defined as the family member with full commitment to the labour market.

In the Nigerian social structure, the usual practice is that women are upon marriage believed to have adopted their husband's state of origin. For instance, that was why Mrs. Tokunbo Awolowo Dosunmu could be appointed on Lagos State ticket as Nigeria's Ambassador to the Netherlands. This was also why some years back, Justice Mrs. Atinuke Ige was not appointed as the Chief Judge of Oyo State. This also accounted for why some aggrieved quarters in Bayelsa State of Nigeria vehemently condemned the appointment of Mrs. Ruth Benemisia Opia as Commissioner for Information and Culture in Bayelsa State. Although, recently, the Federal Character Commission spelt out guidelines that married women could only lay claim to their own state of origin and not that of their husbands.

It has also been found out that mobility patterns can greatly be influenced by what Davis and Robinson (1988) referred to as a *status maximisation strategy*. This is a situation whereby an individual identifies with the highest class possible as a means of achieving higher status. Hence, in the Nigerian society, there are instances where a man with the underlying goal of increasing his chances of mobility there by improving his status and class location makes deliberate efforts in marrying the daughter of a wealthy man or wealthy woman as the case may be. This could also occur verse-versa where a woman makes deliberate effort at marrying a wealthy man's son or a wealthy man in order to improve her social status or class location. Such individual because of the desire to maximise his status is said to have *borrowed* his or her status from the husband's or wife's social background.

Education is also found to be a significant key determinant of a woman's subjective class identification. Jackman and Jackman (1983) in a study of 430 households in the United States, reported that although husband's status characteristics with the exception of education are the main determinants of women class identification, a woman's level of education was more an important predictor of her class identification. Similarly, they discovered that high levels of education and long hours in paid

employment appear to reduce the importance of husband social class. This finding can be said to be quite similar to some of the situations existing among men and women in Nigeria.

Education, sometimes in conjunction with some other factors has shown to be an important determinant of social class and social mobility. It has helped individuals to improve their life chances, secure better occupation and income, hence increased status within the society. It has, in fact, significantly helped women to loosen themselves from the apron strings of their husband's class position. A woman who has attained a high level of formal education is perceived as a scholar in her own right. She is perceived from her own social class position and not from her husband's especially when she has acquired more educational laurels than her husband. For instance, former Vice Chancellor, University of Benin, Prof. Grace Alele Williams, former Deputy Vice Chancellor, University of Calabar, Prof. Ebele Eko, the current Nigerian Information and Communication Minister Prof. Dora Akunyili, current Managing Director, World Bank, Prof. Ngozi Okonji-Iweala to mention but a few, fit into this category. Situations like these are however, rare to come by. A situation that is observed to be prevalent is that women because of their desire to perform the role of marriage and give birth to children (Parson 1955) tend to opt out of education earlier than their male counterpart. Even when they have the desire to take up an academic career later, they already fall behind their male counterparts, thus hindering upward social mobility and increasing the gap of gender role differentiation.

Similarly, just as Davis and Moore (1967) pointed out, the longer the level of training, the more valued the occupation. Hence, women found in highly skilled job like medicine and law are highly valued and accorded higher social recognition in the Nigerian society. However, the ability of women to move into certain positions or be upwardly mobile in them is rather difficult. For instance, the military service is regarded as exclusive occupation for males because of the rigorous training involved and the nature of the job which is to defend the nation's territorial integrity. It is, therefore, considered an aberration for a woman to belong to the military service. Similarly, the nursing profession is considered strictly a woman's occupation and thus seeing a man in a nurse's uniform is considered by some persons as an aberration.

Generally, it can also be observed that what is perceived as a woman's occupation tends to attract less income than those jobs considered as male's job. Majority of women in paid employment also fall within the working class, while just only about 6% of the women population in the manufacturing industrial sub-sector for instance, fall within the managerial class (Fapounda 1985). However, it is observed even as Baxter (1994) asserted that as a woman's income increases in absolute terms in relation to her husband's income, she may rely on her situation to define her class identity.

Similarly, Wright (1985) stated that class location is dependent on the ownership of assets, that is in terms of property, skill or organised assets. Accordingly, the ownership of assets may determine the extent to which a woman relies on their husband's class location for their class identity. Wright also reported however, that men are not usually affected by their wives' class locations. The reason for this may be as a result of the patriarchal nature of the society. In Nigeria, some women have been able to improve their status by virtue of their being able to acquire wealth and property. However, acquisition of wealth and property is very difficult for a woman except she was able to use her income and savings to acquire property.

A woman is also seen to be able to improve her social status if she is able to acquire for herself a form of social recognition or the other. For instance, taking an award of a chieftaincy title. However, a woman's ability to take a chieftaincy title is also dependent on the husband. In other words, no woman obtains a chieftaincy title unless the woman is single or with the express permission from her husband. In most communities in Nigeria, chieftaincy title are not conferred on a woman if she is not married at the time of the conferment.

Membership of New Religious Movement has helped women to attain positions which ordinarily they would not have been able to attain in orthodox churches (Amstrong 1993). For example, where it is difficult for a woman to attain the position of priest let alone being a bishop within the Catholic Church, the Pentecostal churches give opportunity for upward social mobility for women thereby bridging the role differentiation gap between men and women. Nowadays, there is the resurgence of leadership role for women in Christianity. Women assume the status of

founders, seers, prophetesses, pastors and even bishops. For instance, Lady Evangelist Eunice Osagede, Damilola Ashin are founders of Jesus Women Fellowship and Body in Christ respectively, Rev. (Mrs) Idahosa is the bishop of Christ's Faith Mission. Many women are ordained priests and they grow through the rank as their male counterparts. This explains the prevalence of the prefix-Rev. and Rev. (Mrs), Pastor and Pastor (Mrs) in most Christian societies dominated societies in Nigeria (Jaja 2007; Nororuga 2009).

The use of the contraceptive technology as rightly speculated by the Firestone (1972) has greatly helped women to foreclose the incidence of unintended pregnancy, thereby offering them the opportunity to pursue more desirable goals such as education and occupation which would help them improve their class and relative social position within the social ladder in society. Very few women, however, have been able to have access to or utilise these contraceptives. This is because their usage is in most times with the consent and approval of their husbands.

CONCLUSION

Sharp beliefs and practices inherent in the largely stereotypic value system still exist in Nigeria. As at present, only limited success has been achieved in eradicating them. This, however, has adverse implications on the life chances of females as individuals and as a group. The implications border on their chances of upward mobility. Since women are also stakeholders within the Nigerian social system, their continued marginalisation will continue to have a negative influence on the Nigerian social structure. In other words, all social substructures, for example, family, education, political, health, economic etc. will not function adequately and might in the long run have adverse effects on growth and development. For instance, there will be an increase in poverty rates, family disintegration, child abuse and children trafficking, prostitution, corruption and crime. All these social problems hinder the socio-economic development of a nation.

There is therefore a need for a change in the value system in order to improve the outlook of the female gender as not a 'weak sex' and the 'second sex' but a significant and major contributor to growth and development. Deliberate

efforts must be made to empower the woman and the girl child by granting her equal access to education, occupational and employment opportunities, equal income, right in politics and access to the public sphere. If possible, policies that will reverse discrimination could be explored for the benefit of the females. This will enable the wide gap in role differentiation between male and female to be bridged. This will enhance their life chances and guarantee them opportunity for upward mobility. There is also a need to give the females health care services. Above all, the woman needs to have a right over her health, especially her reproductive health and contraceptive use. It is believed that this would help both females and males to utilise their potentials and contribute their quota towards achieving stability, growth and development in the society.

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