



31

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Editorial Board</b>	- - - - -	<b>iii</b>
<b>Notes to Contributors</b>	- - - - -	<b>iv</b>
<b>Table of Contents</b>	- - - - -	<b>v</b>
Language, Culture and power politics: Lessons for the promotion of Nigerian		
Languages and Culture: A Realist analysis-----	- - - - -	1 – 14
Politeness in Nigerian English: Of A Lingua-Cultural Focus in English		
Language in Nigeria	- - - - -	15 – 22
The Symbiotic Relationship between Language and Culture: A powerful		
Force in the Nigerian State	- - - - -	23 – 30
The State of the Nigerian Economy under the Military: A Guide to Nigerian		
Democracy of the 21 <sup>st</sup> Century	- - - - -	31 – 44
Instructional Materials: The Language of Instruction	- - - - -	45 – 50
Language and power of Distribution: The Gender Perspective	- - - - -	51 – 60
Religion and Character formation of the Youth, the Nigerian Example	- - - - -	61 – 68
The Role of Language in the mass media-	- - - - -	69 – 78
Ethical Issues in the Culture of university education	- - - - -	79 – 88
Gender Equity in Nigeria: A critical Analysis of contexts and conditions	- - - - -	89 - 98
The effect of Advertising utilized by Soft Drink manufacturing industries to		
Influence consumption in Enugu and Anambra State	- - - - -	99 -110
The Nigerian Law of arbitration and its power in National peace Process	- - - - -	111 – 118
Music as an agent ofenculturation in Mbaise Traditional Society	- - - - -	119 – 132
Gender Mainstreaming and the Cultural Values of the 'Anioma' people of		
Delta State	- - - - -	153 – 144
Power politics and cultural Rights: A philosophical reflection	- - - - -	145 – 154
Translation and Igbo Cultural Values in an Era of Globalization	- - - - -	155 – 164
Impact of cultural variability on Students' classroom interaction in Lagos		
State Secondary Schools	- - - - -	165 – 172
Ntumaka: Obowo Cultural Heritage: The Management Implication	- - - - -	173 – 186
Derivation of Nouns from verbs in Okwudo Dialect of Igbo	- - - - -	187 - 196

However, over the last half of 20<sup>th</sup> century or so, there has been evidence of strong sentiments in support of gender equity and great interest in its social implication. In 1948, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations which declared a level play ground for males and females. Since that time gender bias has come under global attack. In the mean time, several international conferences have been held to inspire national governments to develop anti-gender inequality policies. Awareness about the role of women in development gained momentum in the late 1980s and was further enhanced in 1995 at the International Conference on Women in Beijing China. It is to understand the degree to which such intervention can succeed that is the focus of this paper.

In the pursuit of this, the systems theory is adopted (Bhola, 2003) Systems thinking enables one to come to terms with the complexity of the social reality by delineating it into appropriate systems, drawing connections among sub-systems in those systems and with other systems outside them, and explicating horizontal and vertical relationships. Systems thinking thereby helps to accommodate the multi-layered context, and all the interconnections among the processes and structures -historical, political, economic, technological and cultural from the local via the regional to the global. These provide us with the best approximations of realities on ground, which can give rise to 'mindstorms' and to mindful action.

If we do not recognize the power relationships within the society and indeed, reconstruct them as taken-for-granted cultural practices that go unchallenged, then we are responsible to some extent for maintaining the status quo. This process is explained in the subsequent sections.

### **Context and Frames of Gender Inequality**

The relationship between contemporary gender bias in the developed and developing nations is compelling and hard to ignore. Of course, while the developed nations have not been free of gender inequality, western inequality is relative with levels of deprivation that seem comfortable in comparison to the imbalance of the developing countries.

Developing countries especially African countries are culturally more male chauvinistic than the western countries. The context encompassing the forces of gender bias in both situations is an unequal contest. While the process of gender equity is carried out half-heartedly, if not dishonestly, with cunning and coercion and without moral compunction or compassion in Africa, it is pursued in the west with perseverance and vigor.

Effect of L <sub>1</sub> -L <sub>2</sub> Transfer on Students Achievement in essay writing -	-	197 - 206
An Assessment of the Nexus between Bilingualism and the indigenous		
Language in Nigeria -	-	207 - 218
Beyond Defeatism: Response to Dictatorship in Helon Habila's waiting		
For an Angel -	--	219 - 238
Resource Control: An overview in Education -	-	239 - 246
The Psychological effect of crowd and personality of the audience on		
stage actors -	-	247 - 256
Rules of Concord in English Language	-	257 - 266
Aladimma Institution: A Legal/Social power in Igbo Philosophy: An		
Anumara perspective -	--	267 - 274
Nigerian Usages in Literary works of English: The case of Ossie Enekwe's		
Come Thunder-	-	275 - 284
Natural Language and Compositionality: The philosophical scope--		285 - 292

other words we absorb the ideologies and practices that are part of our culture and these become habitual, shaping our future choices.

### **The Cradle of Inequality**

There are things we already know about gender inequality with reasonable certainty and clarity. First and foremost is that gender inequality is simultaneously an individual experience and a socio-cultural construction. In individual experience on the platform of marriage, gender inequality can appear as an unbearable mental or material deprivation of inner peace, fulfillment, joy, food, clothing and general care bound up with an unacceptable lack of access to health, education and livelihood. Personal despair may lead to mental derailment, a tearing of the moral fibre and in many cases to crimes of stealing, drug pushing and prostitution. While gender inequality is located in individual marriages, societies/cultures determine what relative levels of deprivation will constitute conditions of acceptability. Understandably, women's 'marital abuse' indexes vary considerably between and among societies as dictated by their cultures (Okebukola, 2002).

Gender inequality is not limited to individual lives. It is confounded and correlated with the political (lack of empowerment and political voice), the social (allocation of low status by others, resulting in a lack of self-esteem), the cultural (exclusion from the mainstream) and the educational (lack of access to relevant basic education for the girl child and forceful early marriage).

Together, these factors may make the plight of the women even more unbearable since as illiterates they are denied access to income and assets, credit or for investments meant to increase production and special educational and health services the state should provide to its citizens as part of the social contract. Under current political and cultural conditions there will be no way for women to cross the old and stable phenomenon of male chauvinism. The rhetoric of women empowerment is not enough, platonic encouragement will not generate the necessary drive, political offices created will not be for the poor, unskilled women and social injustice will not be able to lead women out of poverty and obscurity.

## GENDER EQUITY IN NIGERIA: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF CONTEXTS AND CONDITIONS

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### Abstract

*The paper sketches the context of gender inequality in Africa. Essentially, the questions addressed relate to the extent to which policies founded on gender equity offer a route to economic and social improvement and more fundamentally whether inequality and its related political and social silences can ever be overcome within the current political and economic order. It argues that irrespective of the particular political ideology of a nation and of specific strategy of mobilization, education can and must play a significant role in empowering women. It also maintains that African women must be re-socialized in terms of their potential roles as intellectual activists.*

### Introduction

Once upon a time, there lived a man in Israel whose name was Zelophehad. He had no sons but only daughters. When he died his daughters were denied his inheritance because women did not traditionally inherit property in the society. These five women demanded for their rights. Moses the high priest put justice ahead of tradition and gave them the land they deserved (Joshua 17:3-4). This story depicts gender inequality- a phenomenon that is basically peculiar to the human race.

Gender imbalance, gender inequality, gender bias, gender discrimination - these are all labels given to the practice of favouring and giving preferential treatment to males at the expense of their female counterparts. Gender inequality is no myth and its social geography has striking contours.

With societies, over the course of history, governing classes dominated by men have used combinations of symbolic culture and coercive (politics) power to develop structures of inclusion and exclusion and thereby accumulate power, status and wealth for themselves, while condemning the excluded group (women) to powerlessness and poverty.

In addition to socio-economic background, parents as part of cultural practices, employ direct and indirect strategies which impact the educational outcomes of their children. For instance an intelligent girl would be excluded from school simply because her parents do not have enough funds to send all the children to school and therefore prefer to educate only the boys. The preference of the boys hinges on the dependence of the family on them as future flag bearers.

In many African countries, policies aimed at the reduction of inequalities in access and attainment has generally begun with increasing access to education at all levels. For example the Universal Basic Education (UBE) was established by the Nigerian Government in 1999. However, one doubts the potential of such programmes to respond to issues of inequality. Many in fact serve to privilege the privileged and leave those less privileged behind. Besides, there is enough evidence that parents have the choice to select the schools and practices for their children. Thus while there is a need to create policies that go beyond the system level and definitely outside of the schools themselves, it is the responsibility of government first and foremost to ensure that schools provide students with equal opportunities for equal outcomes.

### **Gender Equity as the New Development Paradigm**

The title of this essay draws on the observation by the author that the issue of gender inequality at both individual and national levels exists in what appear in diverse communities- the developed and developing nations. For example Nigeria which provided the material for this paper is considered a male chauvinistic nation and displays wide disparities of both wealth and opportunity. Since the 1980's, government has attempted to address gender inequality and to enable previously excluded groups to enter the mainstream of a meritocratic order. Thus, two female ministers and one permanent secretary were appointed. The introduction of the quota system compelled state governments to have female members in their cabinet. The 1990 election into the 3rd republic produced female councilors, two female deputy governors and one chairperson of a bank.

The 1993 transitional council and interim government of Earnest Shonekan had two women in the cabinet. The successive government of General Abdusalam Abubakar June 9, 1998 - May 29 1999 also maintained the two women statuesquo in his regime.

The European countries have successfully launched an equality war. Through the human rights laws women regained their freedom and their dignity was restored. The women found their way out of abuse and social inequalities were drastically reduced. This was possible not only because of the matricidal system but also and even mainly because European countries required and developed highly skilled workers among males and females. Thus, the emphasis has been on the employment of qualified and competent people regardless of gender through massive investments.

In women, Europe regained its economic footing. Her wealth booms and she finds her way out of poverty. The same has not occurred in African countries where traditionally, and culturally the women's place was considered as primarily the home. She was not expected to venture into areas that reduce her chances of being involved with home keeping, child rearing and caring. Her status and effectiveness were well appreciated within this stereotyped situation. (*Science Teachers Association of Nigeria (1992)*). The society's culture frowned at anything outside the role as not dignifying for a woman and therefore is discouraged.

Thus in the developing African countries where the unsettled patriarchal system persists, the girl-child and indeed the women are subjugated to play subordinate roles that often impede their access to equal opportunities for development. Consequently, the countries lack a skilled and educated workforce; they lack knowledge and investments in the basic education of the majority of their population. Such countries have not been unable to take full advantage of the resources invested nor were they able to distribute the fruits of these investments for development.

Development is the line that separates the first and third world countries (currently categorized as developing countries). It has resulted especially over the past decades in the similarity of the wealthy internationally. The rich throughout the world have access to the same products, preferences and information. At the same time, development has kept the poor in nearly stagnate social conditions.

Positive action on behalf of gender equity has been lacking in African countries because culturally women are hardly ever part of the power elite who engage in real politics. Culture, as we know is a set of dispositions created within a society over time and shaped by structural elements in society, such as the family or schools. These dispositions, in turn, influence the subsequent attitudes and behaviour of individuals and thus perpetuate long-standing practices. In



Various studies show that women are becoming increasingly conscious of their rights and capabilities (STAN 1992). However the demographic features of female population like excessive mortality in female children resulting in persistent decline in sex ratio; low rate of literacy and low economic status stress the need for greater attention to the economic emancipation of women. The low status of women in large segments of the Nigerian society cannot be raised without opening up of opportunities of independent employment and income for them. But the process of change to raise the status of women under various spheres of socio-economic activities would require sustained effort over a period of time.

Another factor to contend with is the discriminatory and humiliating attitude of most men in the society. This group still sees women as the weaker sex that should not be taken seriously. They still see every woman as the women in their household who should be bossed and subdued. This unfortunate attitude may deny women the opportunity for challenging work.

### **Recommendations**

From the foregoing, it is necessary to go beyond mere propaganda and rhetoric to achieve gender equality. We must devise solutions that are deep rooted in the social imagination of a nation's leaders and that aim at all of a society's relevant existing structures- the political, the economic, the social, the cultural and the technological. This will require the following:

- Strengthening and improvement of educational structures in favour of women.
- Under the National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS) more specialized programmes should be established for the welfare of women and also to cater for their special requirements.
- A wide network of maternity and child health centres and family welfare centers should be established.
- Special nutrition programmes for providing nutritional supplements to the most vulnerable group of pregnant and nursing mothers should be mounted.
- Emphasis should be laid on increasing the enrolment of girls in schools by providing various incentives.
- Any committed country to planned social change on behalf of women must declare adult literacy campaigns as ways of mobilizing the women and encouraging their participation in the new political order.

### **The Gap between Theory and Practice in Gender Equity**

The role of government as a model of the practice of gender equality ties extremely with one of its most important responsibilities- the eradication of poverty through mass economic empowerment. As a model to private organizations, the government has to generate enough funds that inform the transformation process in the society. The government also has to generate knowledge which challenges, on the one hand, cultural norms such as discrimination and inequalities between men and women.

However, the paradox of the African societies is that while governments have been prolific in generating ideas, they have generally failed to get both themselves and society to apply and use this knowledge as part of their culture. One of the root causes of this disparity is that governments have only vaguely articulated the fact that all knowledge is directly or indirectly of social and economic development value regardless of discipline and gender. The disparity between theory and practice is for example well illustrated in the way in which governments have traditionally treated research evidence and information regarding benefits of educating men and women. Research and policy -analytic work on the social and economic value of education to national development has emphasized the considerable benefits of education to males and females (Namuddu, 1995).

### **Gender Equity and Education**

Equality of opportunity for boys and girls should be a fundamental goal of educators world wide. This means that all members of a society should have an equal chance through their educational preparation to compete for positions. It follows then that any educational reform or transformation that involves the whole society should of necessity have a gender balance in participation at all levels. This unfortunately is rarely a reality especially in Africa.

Many factors create social inequality both inside and outside the school environment. Students' socio-economic backgrounds function to limit or ensure equality of access and or attainment. In a study conducted by Duru – Bellat (2004:16), she found that students beginning school at a social disadvantage continue to become more disadvantaged over time. She concluded by saying that "*social inequalities established among one level will exert persistent influence via the level of attainment they have achieved by the time they begin the following school year*".

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In the 4th Republic, few women as usual were elected councillors and chairpersons, only Lagos state produced a female deputy governor. A few women emerged in the Senate and State national assembly. It is worthy of note that President Obasanjo's regime is the first regime in the history of Nigeria that Nigeria women enjoyed high level of recognition in public appointments at the federal level. From May 29, 1999 till date, more women have been at the head of ministries and Federal government institutions.

The constitution of Nigeria not only provides for equal rights and privileges for women and men but also for making special provision for women. A series of social legislations have been enacted from time to time for raising the status of women in the country. The National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS) have consistently placed special emphasis on providing minimum health facilities integrated with family welfare and nutrition for women and children, acceleration of women's education, their increase in the labour force and welfare services for women in need.

Various welfare and development schemes like the 'Better life for rural women' have been introduced to improve the living conditions of women and to increase their access to and control over material and social resources. Some Non-governmental and charity organizations have taken special steps to remove legal, social and other constraints to enable them to make use of the rights and new opportunities becoming available to them.

It seems clear therefore that we are entering 'new times'. The creation of the National Commission for Women Affairs provides the institutional mechanism and additional avenues for the promotion of women related issues and the enhancement of the role of Nigerian women in national development. For progress in our quest for national development to be achieved and sustained, women's role must continue to change for the better.

The economic reality of our time world wide- is full of competition and uncertainties have helped in changing the role of women from just child bearing /kitchen management to being productive and managing various sectors of the national economy. It has become a truism that recent moves towards the empowerment of women have impacted positively on the economy of Nigeria. Women are now involved in economic activities outside their home, more and more women have become breadwinners of their homes (no thanks to the looming unemployment across the country) successful entrepreneurs and chief executives of industries.

- Labour laws should be made to provide for material benefits and creches in units employing women.
- There must be a stated and well documented desire to enable all people to receive equal opportunities to achieve their potential. To this end, young girls must be given grants to stay in education. Federal and state governments must widen their access to women. They must also be encouraged to develop new forms of learning delivery - work -based provision. Particular groups such as single parents and women seeking to enter or return to the labour force should be singled out for special treatment.

### Conclusion

Contradictions should be expected to arise from the dialectal relationships between gender equity and sexist stereotypes when policies fail to translate to actions and protective laws are frequently violated. Gender equality efforts will require public information and sensitization activities, the eradication of all sexist attitudes, both at home and at school, creating the necessary conditions enabling women to be wives, mothers and workers at the same time, setting up institutional frameworks in each state to help ensure that laws in favour of women are respected; encouraging women associations in order to empower them to express their needs without reservations and participate in decision making in the society.

It is believe the men in government can move beyond the 'us against them' and the propaganda that has characterized the mass media coverage of this topic. It is also believed that energies can be put where they need to be: on women who are seriously at risk. But let's enrich all women and not leave anyone behind for any reason- political, cultural or otherwise.