

PRIORITIZING FEMALE EDUCATION, THE VIEW OF FRANCOIS POULAIN DE LA BARRE.

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Abstract

This study examined critically Francois Poulain's concept of gender equality to have a skewed view of the existence of women's education, in addition to show the position of women in society. Gender equality has become one of the oldest issues throughout society. There is no doubt that inequality is still present in 21st century and remains a perennial problem. The fundamental reason why gender equality is yet to be achieved in every realm is because women and girls' voice are too often excluded from global and national legislation. The work adopted the method of analysis in order to expose the various ways of women's discrimination together with Francois Poulain's view on gender equality, which is the denial of the right to true and quality education. Findings show that although, the world is making progress in achieving gender equality in education, girls and women still make up a higher percentage of out of school. Families with limited means who cannot afford costs of school fees and supplies for all their children will prioritize education for their sons at the expense of girls. Findings also show that the role of women across the globe in the creation of sustainable development is undeniable. Hence the fact that women constitute half of the entire world population would be ironical to relegate them from being part of the development initiatives in their respective countries and the world at large. I therefore recommend that unless women are empowered and gender equality achieved, in order to give women the opportunity to display their potentials and talents either in economies, institution, social, political and environmental areas; the country will not achieve sustainable development.

Keywords: Gender Equality, Education, Prejudice and Patriarchy.

Introduction

Francois Poulain de la Barre sometimes spelled as Poullain was a notable figure in the history of philosophy. Little was known about the life of Francois Puolain. Account of Poulain's life was based on archival research carried out by Marie Louis Stock (1961) and Siep Stuurman (2004). He was born in July 1648 in Paris, a third child to the wealthy Catholic parents which enabled him to attain the level of education he attained. He studied theology at Sorbonne and was ordained a Catholic priest in 1679 to 1688 which was what his parents wanted him to become though he was not comfortable with the idea. He led two parishes, Versigny and La Flamengrie in Picardy which was in Northern France.¹ He graduated with a Master of Arts in Philosophy in 1663 and that led to his growing interest to defending the right and entrenched patriarchal system of women. Poulain became interested in Cartesian philosophy while still a student which was connected with attending public lecture on physiology in 1667 invited by one of his friends. After leaving

University, Poulain taught and translated Latin into French. He earned a secure living through his career as a priest but he did not find freedom in religion as he hoped for. The introduction of Cartesian method by a friend at a Cartesian conference on physiology impacted and changed his intellectual life.² In 1673, Poulain wrote his first treatises, *On the Equality of the Two Sexes*. This was his prominent and widely known treatises among his three treatises. A year after, Poulain wrote his second treatise, *On Education of Ladies* (1674), he presented a group of intellectual discussing on the status of women, and finally *On the Excellence of Men* (1675) where he displayed argument for male supremacy. Despite being the third treatise, *On the Excellence of Men* continues to be Poulain's defense of equality between sexes. Here, Poulain argues that men and women are equal and that their intellectual abilities are equal and also the unequal treatments of men and women have contributed to the deprivation of women from contributing to society. He rejected the idea that the minds of men and women differ, he proclaimed that the mind has no sex.³ He also proclaimed that it is important to get rid of *prejudice*⁴ which he argued that the difference between men and women goes beyond the body but it is in the constitution of the body. Poulain got married to Marie Ravier with whom he had two children. In 1693 and 1696 respectively, Poulain was accused for being Socinian, this accusation was related to his rationalistic approach to theology which drew a demarcation between theology and philosophy. This caused Poulain extra years until 1708 to be converted to a permanent teaching job at the College de Geneva until his death in 1723. The purpose of this research work is to evaluate Francois Poulain's work *On the Equality of the Two Sexes* with a view to understanding its influences on women liberation.

Women liberation has been a perennial issue, not only in the Western world but also in Africa. The oppression of women by men on the basis of gender is truly illegitimate and unjustified. Poulain was the first thinker in modern Europe to build his entire social philosophy on a universalist concept of equality. Women's lack of education had traditionally entrenched them in a position of dependency upon men. Poulain did not perpetuate that trend instead he recognized the wrong in continuing female dependency and ignorance and endeavoured to alter the traditional approach of women's education. The many claims of faults levied against women were attributed to lack of education. The causes of discrimination against women identified include the physical force between men and women based on an inferior capacity women have in patriarchal gender regime along with gender stereotypes and prejudices.

Understanding Gender Equality

Gender equality refers to the equal participation of women and men in different life domains (e.g., the economy, social life, politics, and education). Gender equality is the issue of all women and men and society as a whole. The best way to prevent inequality against women is to promote gender equality. Embracing gender equality will not only prevent violence against women and girls in the countries but it will foster a nation's economy thereby reducing poverty. In achieving the above, it is important to involve men and women in addressing gender discrimination issues rather than women only, because gender biases are embedded in culture, it is very difficult to eliminate them without having a holistic view and involving men as a part of the solution.

Gender equality is not a luxury; rather it is a necessity for any society seeking long-term sustainability and hope for peace. The ultimate goal is to achieve a world where women, girls, men and boys stand side by side together and such a world can live in peace, prosper and look to the future with nothing but hope. When girls are forced to marry at extremely young ages, they are denied any form of education that could have helped them to enter labour force and labour market, making them not only personal handicap but also a national one. He encouraged women to become conscious of their roles in society which had been subjugation and men who, by not challenging the patriarchal ideology of oppression had authentically collaborated with it.

Poulain's Reason for Gender Equality

Globally, more women than men live in poverty. This is so because women are less likely to receive proper education and to be appointed to political position nationally and internationally. Understanding that men and women, boys and girls face different barriers in accessing services, and both also experience poverty differently, economic resources and political opportunities help to target interventions. Gender equality is important because evidence shows that a higher level of gender inequality is associated with higher risks of internal conflict. The number of illiterate women in low countries was actually increasing. The minimal education women receive which Poulain was advocating for caused some of the barriers preventing progress in low income countries. This shows that Poulain highlights the freedom of the intellectual in all human beings in order to establish that women are intellectually equal to men. Women make up two thirds of the illiterate adults in Africa. Poulain believed that society's assumption had been influenced by ignorance, tradition and prejudice and not reason.⁵ For Poulain an equal education for both sexes in the classical tradition enjoyed by men would bring about a free and egalitarian society. The question of sexes is within reason's grasp to invoke the authority to decide what essentially a secular matter was not necessary. Poulain reasoned on the ground that the ancients were human beings like us who even with their great wisdom are subject to error, so is with some our ancestors who are endowed with superior reason or knowledge simply because they came before us.

According to Poulain, women significantly face barriers which stem from economic, social and cultural issues as well as from negative stereotypes about women and entrenched gender roles. Cultural beliefs can constitute direct, indirect and structural discrimination against women. Indeed, withholding education and opportunity from anyone, female, peasant would mean withholding indirectly human resources. Everyone who contributes to society is useful and useful contributions are equally valuable. Women still outnumber men in low wage jobs. This reinforces gender stereotypes that assign nurturing to the powerless. Poulain predicts that if women are given the proper training, they could be as good as men in law, government, the clergy, or even medicine and might even surpass men especially in medicine because women understand bodies.

Poulain saw no reason women could not occupy high positions or be given equal educational opportunities like their men counterparts. Everyone who contributes to society is useful and useful contributions are equally valuable. Women still outnumber men in low wage jobs. This reinforces gender stereotypes that assign nurturing to the

powerless. Poulain predicts that if women are given the proper training, they could be as good as men in law, government, the clergy, or even medicine and might even surpass men especially in medicine because women understand bodies. Poulain maintained that the mind has no sex. It is God who unites the mind with the body of a woman as with that of a man and he unites them by means of the same laws. This union is established and maintained by sensations, passions and act of the will, and since the mind acts in the same way in both sexes, it is equally capable of the same thing in both of them.⁶

Poulain's reason for an equal right to knowledge is in effect a demand for an equal right to proper education. When Poulain refers to education, it is mostly in order to lament the minimal education that women receive as against their male counterparts. In Poulain's treatise *On the Equality of Two Sexes*; he argues that if we conceive a lack of cognitive ability in women, that should also be attributed uniquely to the conditions in which they live and the education they receive which include the ignorance in which they are left. Poulain wanted to re-educate the populace to force his contemporaries to recognize that their treatment of women had evolved through his ethical notions of inferiority. One reason for this continuous inadequacy was the lack of financial support. The most available funds were set aside for boy's education.

The vast majority of those girls married early are out of school. However, the lack of gender perspective in national laws in many countries hampers progress made in implementing CEDAW and addressing violations of women's rights.⁷ Despite the progress so far in improving and strengthening the legal environment for women's rights, the reality for women and girls remains one of the inequality. Getting more women onto the boards of corporations with regard to leadership in firms, women continue to face major challenges including family responsibilities, lack of enabling family leave policy and access to childcare, necessary skills and training, unequal pay and the minimal education women are given. Poulain thinks that since men are stronger, they favour their sex and women accept this dependence out of custom. They never had their chances in either freedom or education. Therefore, they cannot be judged by what they did in the past. Nothing indicates their inferiority to men as anatomy did not reveal differences. For Poulain, give women the same equal capacity, education and opportunity as their male counterparts they will accomplish much. Poulain asked, "Can we seriously give them an advantage that they did not give themselves? He decided that he must. Women had to be convinced, just as men did, that custom and prejudice prevented them from attaining all that men could. Poulain wrote:

I can discover no greater differences between the spirit of a dull and ignorant man, and one who is delicate and ingenious, than between the spirit of the same man considered at the age of ten years, and at the age of forty years: and since there appears no more between that of the two sexes, we may affirm, that their differences is not on that side, the constitution of the body; but particularly the education, exercise, and the impressions that come from all that does surround us.⁸

Thus, Poulain undertook to lead men and women away from their erroneous beliefs about themselves and their society. He did this by exposing the assumptions of such influential authorities as the Bible and the ancients as completely contrary to reason. The methods that Poulain used to destroy the validity of prejudicial attitudes speak for themselves about the revolutionary character of this man. He advocated the first truly progressive education for women in the history of seventeen-century theory. Francois Poulain considers gender equality a necessary good but he appeals to reason rather than emotion. He believed that gender equality is a human right for achieving a healthier nation. He is motivated by compassion to make the world a better place.

He rejected scholastic philosophy and attempted to ground most of his arguments on Descartes philosophy. Following Descartes dualism, Poulain holds that when the mind is considered in itself, it is found to be equal and have the same nature in all human beings. When we analyze his discussion of the equality of the sexes, we can distinguish four main arguments. Firstly, Poulain argues that there is no evidence in favour of inequality, that is, the entire allegation against women as inferior being was a false assumption

Poulain's Arguments for Gender Equality

Departing from his conventional wisdom as a priest, he argued that men and women are equal and as (both been equals) should pursue any position of individual choice without interference. The effects of prejudices are heightened when it benefits a particular party at the expense of another. Poulain believed that the status quo benefitted men at the expense of women. For him, the gendered hierarchy of 17th century France was anything but natural; rather it was the product of generations of prohibition practices and lack of access to education and opportunity.

Here, Poulain argues that there is no evidence in favour of inequality. Here also, Poulain used Descartes method to argue that inequality is a mere false belief. He argues that beliefs about women are not based on women's essence or nature but by historically constructed prejudices. He unearths some traditional prejudices held about women, which once exposed, allow him to argue that the real reason for women's social subordination is not in any way natural weakness but instead the result of established custom. His analysis predates Simone de Beauvoir's similar critique nearly three hundred years later. On de Beauvoir view, oppression occurs when men forcibly confine women, denying them the freedom to choose a path in life⁹ because of a desire to assert and maintain power. Poulain has the same insight; servitude and oppressions are not the natural condition of human being but imposed by force. He asserts;

Is a pleasure to hear a woman pleading
a legal case. No matter how complicated
a case may be, she unravels it and explains
it clearly. One finds throughout women's
conduct of legal cases a certain competence
that men lack.¹⁰

Though, the generalization is invalid, but allows for a generous interpretation which was his basic aim to show the nature of women of inferiority as a false belief.

Secondly on his argument for the similarity of sexes, Poulain states to show that the sexes are equal because they are in all relevant respects similar. In his book; *On the Equality of Two sexes*, this argument is placed under the subtitle women here, the perspective of the principles of the sound philosophy are as capable as men of every kind of knowledge and begins with the above claim that the mind has no sex. Poulain argues;

It is easy to see that sexual difference apply only to the body since strictly speaking, the body alone is involved in the reproduction of human beings and the mind merely gives its assent and does so in the same manner in everyone, it follows that mind has no sex.¹¹

Here, Poulain is basically concerned with the nature of the mind, but the way he connects reproduction and assent is also worthy of note as it corresponds to his emphasis in one of his books, *The Excellency of Men* which stipulates that when a woman and a man agree to live together, it is purely voluntary. From his claim, Poulain draws the conclusion that if the mind is considered in itself, it is found to be equal and to have the same nature in all human beings and to be capable of every kind of thought. The equality of independent mind is not enough though, since human beings are compounds of minds and bodies.

In Poulain's second argument which is a demand for equal right to knowledge, Poulain's demand for equal right to knowledge is in effect a demand for an equal and proper education. When we refer to education, it is often in order to lament the minimal education that women are given. *In Women as Good as Men*, Poulain argues that if we conceive lack of cognitive ability in women that should be attributed uniquely to the conditions in which they are left. The argument from nature is Poulain's third argument.

On his argument from natural equality, some of the opponents of this argument from natural equality stated that the individual natures of women are defective and misbegotten. According to Thomas Aquinas, the subordination of women to men was for their own good, another Catholic Church father by name Tertullian described women as the devils gateway. It is worthy of note that Poulain studied theology at Sorbonne a University that adhere to the doctrines of church father including Tertullian and Aquinas. Poulain attacked the two opponents using Descartes's skepticism. According to Poulain, argument from authority and nature is not solid for any argument. He refuted the authority argument by saying that almost all of us have enough reason and good sense to seek the truth. For Poulain, Bible contain truths that human reason cannot grasp without divine assistance.

He writes:

In effect, when we sincerely consider all things human, in the past as well as the present, we find that all things are the same in one regards, which is that reason has always been the weakest of human faculties. It seems that all the histories were written solely in order to show what each one can easily see in their own time, since there have been men, force has always prevailed.¹²

According to Poulain, the question of sexes is within reason's grasp; to invoke the bible or authority to decide what was essentially a secular matter was not necessary.

Poulain argued on the ground that the ancients were human beings like us who even with their great wisdom are subject to error. Citing Aristotle who believed that the earth was at the centre of the universe, yet Copernicus proved that this was not the case, so is with some our ancestors who are endowed with superior reason or knowledge simply because they came before us. Poulain used concept of equality to argue against many authors that natural equality must be applied to men and women.

God wanted rational man, made to his image to have no dominion except over irrational nature. He meant no man, therefore, to have dominion over man but only man over beast. Os it fell out that those who were holy in primitive times become shepherds over sheep rather than monarchs over men.¹³

The fourth argument, which is on demand for equal goods, Poulain and other seventeenth century feminist authors, claimed that all persons should enjoy equal access to human goods. At a passage in Poulain's *De L'Egalite*, his demand for equal right is clearly stated that all of us, men and women have an equal right to truth since the minds of both are equally able to understand it. Poulain claimed that there is no relevant difference between the mind of women and men rather it provided a basis for demanding the equal right to exercise one's mind.

This Poulain's demand for equal right to knowledge is in effect a demand for an equal proper education. When we refer to education, it is often in order to lament the minimal education that women are given. In *Women as Good as Men*, Poulain argues that if we conceive lack of cognitive ability in women that should be attributed uniquely to the conditions in which they are left. The topic of education is the topic Poulain evidently shares with many of his predecessors as well as successors. A question was raised by Christine de Pizan in *Le Livre dela C'te'* where she argues that;

If it were the custom to send little girls to school
and to teach them all sorts of different subjects

there, as one does with little boys, they would grasp and learn the difficulties of all the arts and sciences just as easily as the boys do.¹⁴

This is an essential theme in Mary Wollstonecraft's work; *A Vindication of the Right of Women in 1792*. To examine each of these claims: women's presumed inferiority is a prejudice of custom not a fact of nature; the mind has no sex, the idea of what constitutes women's education, virtue, happiness and freedom must be revised. There is a point worth nothing at the outset concerning the writing style that Poulain adopts. The tone, style and structure of his work were simple, unadorned and methodical. These characters are deliberately chosen with a view to readdressing the lack of serious attention devoted to the problem of women's social subordination.

Pouain's Implementation of Gender Equality To Public Life

The implementation of gender equality on the basis of gender bias is first of all educating the populace to know and be aware of gender bias and how to avoid it in public sphere. With better and clear education and definition, they can be better prepared to identify bias when it occurs and avoid it. Again, the patriarchal society sets parameters for women's equal position in families, markets and society. The culture of the patriarchy is so strong that it tends to favour men as against women.

On the part of custom, Poulain exposed some traditional prejudices held about women which allows arguing that the real reason for women's social subordination is not any natural weakness but instead the result of established customs. His analysis predates Simone De Beauvoir's similar critique. On de Beauvoir's view, oppression occurs when men forcibly confine women, denying them the freedom to choose a path in life because of a desire to assert and maintain power. Poulain has the same insight; Servitude and oppression are not the natural condition of human being but imposed by force. De Beauvoir explains the unnaturalness of oppression in *The Equality of Ambiguity*; she argues that unless a person is a naïve child;

Who hits stones or a mad prince who orders the sea be thrashed, he does not rebel against things, but only against other men. The resistance of the thing sustains the action of man as it sustain the flight of the dove; and by projecting himself through it man accepts its being an obstacle; he assumes the risk of a setback in which he does a denial of his freedom.¹⁵

She continues: only man can be an enemy for man; only he can rob him of the meaning of his acts and his life because it also belongs to him alone to confirm it in its existence, to recognize it in actual fact as a freedom. According to Poulain, we all have unconscious gender biases which are often internalized as a result of what society expect and how men and women behave, dress and even carry themselves and in some cases the kind of job they should do. Bias comes in many forms which can cause us to produce prejudices

against one another which allow inequalities to form different demographics.

Poulain thinks that since men are stronger, they favour their sex and women accept this dependence out of custom. They never had their chances: in either freedom or education. Thus they cannot be judged by what they did in the past. Nothing indicates their inferiority to men. Anatomy reveals differences, but none of them constitutes a privilege for the male.¹⁶

In our society, gender bias is used to refer to the preferential treatment, to reduce gender bias, we should make use of gender decoder to identify biased language in our job descriptions. Again, it is important to note that artificial intelligence is a type of machine learning, so from time to time, artificial intelligence can learn and perpetuate those biases, apply precautionary measures when using such technology to reduce bias on time. More so, it is clear that in order to reach equality, the pay gap has to be filled, companies need to proactively provide women with leadership and professional development opportunities.

Another great way to implementing gender equality according to Poulain is to focus on the result that is, merit and not on the person's status quo. This is a reality that happens a lot without us knowing, consciously putting more focus on target achieved and not the identity of who achieved it. Women according to Poulain should be most respected because women especially African women, not only work while pregnant but deliver and resume work the next day as the case may be, the help and assistance of their husband becomes absolutely essential to them. Poulain continues; husband did not assume that women should be treated and respected as lords in return. The women's attention to their family is not counted. The physical strength of the men are all that matters. Husbands began to dominate and assume superiority in all respect. This is in contrast to Thomas Hobbes's notion of life as short, brutish, solitary and nasty as men were judges and litigants.¹⁷ Poulain predicts that if women were given the proper training and education they could be as good as men in whatever profession given to practice. Women understand bodies, take care of the sick, children and the elderly. In an organization, we have the power and control to eliminate this by providing the same opportunity and compensation for the same job to everyone that is, by holding everyone on the same standard. By this, fair organizational culture can be cultivated.

The international day for girl child marked by the United Nations on 11th October every year, the theme of this year is; *Digital generation, our generation*, the chairman of the occasion emphasized on prioritizing the education of women and girl child regardless of where they come from in order to achieve their potentials and for nation's development. Poulain is among the leading thinkers who maintained that being a human is enough to confer any rights.

Poulain concept of the word conveyed his support for bestowing upon women the same educational and vocational opportunities as men of comparable rank received. Men and women demonstrate equal capacities for error and truth, virtue and vice. God made both

of them and consequently both were equally responsible spiritual beings. The lack of women's education as their men counterparts denied them the right to attain prominent roles in society. Society could only combat these customs by examining the validity of their attitudes and by allowing women the same educational opportunities as men. If society could perceive women without the hindrance of prejudice or custom, Poulain believed then the education he advocated could never be considered outrageous.

Evaluation

The concept of women's right and its advocacy is what seems to have engrossed the attention of social activists, development agencies and the civil society. The need to empower women is of great importance and in demand, so as to restructure human societies, and establish a humanistic confederation of people without the disregarding of sex, characteristics, racial qualities and religious orientations. According to Mary Wollstonecraft's work *A Vindication of the Right of Women*, she asserted that equality should be gender-neutral and not gender biased.¹⁸ she further argues that in matters of political activities, education, work and employment, women should not be discriminated against. She opts for equal status of women in relation to their male counterpart in social arrangements. Also, for John Stuart Mill in his work, *The Subjection of Women*, women should not be treated as men's equal but that women are indeed equal to men.¹⁹ He argued that society should respect women's right to equality in all ramification, both in political decision and participation. The philosophical import of women movement was given much force when Simone de Beauvoir wrote her challenging and thought provoking book, *The Second Sex* in 1949. She argued that from the purely psychological phenomenological point of view, societies have inbuilt structures that tend to limit woman's affirmation of herself as an authentic, essential, autonomous human being. According to Francois Poulain, when women are deprived access to proper and quality education, society as a whole is being deprived and denied a great thinker as women form half of the world population. Paulain claimed that the inequality of women was as a result of prejudice from the past which might be right but when examined properly had no place in the modern world. For Poulain's theory, physical strength should not be used to distinguish between human beings but brain, otherwise the brute animal would be superior to human and among men, and those who are more robust would be superior. Poulain maintained that men and women brain do not differ; he wrote, *The Mind has no Sex*, both men and women have the same intellectual potential if only there were allowed to implement their abilities. The current status of women according to Poulain are not natural in the real sense of the word instead, it was the result of chance, violence or custom. Throughout his work, Poulain argued against the habit that what is universally received and practiced is taken as fact. Violence against women and girls in particular remains widespread with early marriage, harmful cultural practices or inheritance rights, denial of proper right to education. The reality for women and girls in many countries remains one of the inequalities with their rights compromised particularly when formal laws and more informal social norms, customs and cultural practices on women's right collide. Those negative and harmful traditions and cultural practices that dehumanize people women in particular without future, should as a matter of urgency be discarded since culture is an adaptive system together with values that play a central role in giving

the society its uniqueness.

Conclusion

This paper conclude that attainable development is impossible without gender equality, thus, this work suggests that government needs to work hard to change the existing position of women and achieve gender equality which will have a positive effect on the sustainable development of the country. There is need for the consideration of all human creatures, granting them legal equality, economic equality, education equality, social equality, political equality in all ramifications. Consequently, it maintains that wages be given to any human for the services provided in the nation building. It demands for primary needs of life like education, employment and reasonable wages and so on for human especially women who are been relegated. It is also of great importance to involve men and women in addressing gender discrimination issues rather than women only, because gender biases are embedded in culture, it is very difficult to eliminate them without having a holistic view and involving men as a part of the solution.

Furthermore, the content of the mind is determined by among other things, education and the effect of the external environment on the individual. It is time women started to make men realize that progress for women is progress for all. There is also need for government to imbibe gender sensitive budgeting that will significantly increase allocation of resources for the Ministry of Women Affairs to ensure access to finance, since lack of finance will incapacitate it. Poulain de la Barre advocated for female education,²⁰ emphasizing that women should receive a true and quality education and asserted also that all careers including scientific ones, should be open to women.²¹ Unfortunately, Poulain did not convince the populace because most scholars of the French Revolution agreed that his declarations did not achieve its aims but that does not in any way mean that his attempt was a philosophical failure.

The value of women cannot be overemphasized. Education emancipates and aids development. No law stops a woman from contesting, yet the law is written in the words and actions against women. Thus, if a man is indispensable, I contend that women should also be recognized as such, and value must be placed on the human person, not sex. The cultural practices that are harmful to women should be discarded if culture is a way of life and is dynamic, it should not be destructive. In this regard, the study is significant as a moral appeal to the society to aid the struggle for women's equality. The greater demand of human resources in industries and different public sphere justifies the need for more effective life changing programme for women. It also inculcates into women certain positive value that will help them actualize their existence in the world.

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