

## **GENDER STEREOTYPE AND WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN NIGERIA: THE NEED FOR A PARADIGM SHIFT IN ROLE OF COUNSELLORS AND SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGISTS.**

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### **Abstract**

*Gender inequality is one of the contemporary issues which have featured prominently in both national and international debates for quite some time now in both developed and developing countries of the world. This is as a result of the persisting cultural stereotype, misuse of religious and traditional practises in which educational, economic political and social power are dominated by men, and women have always been followers of men in the society and the men predominantly see themselves as leaders of women. This has obviously thwarted women status in socio-economic strata in Nigeria. This observation prompted the authors to examine gender stereotype and empowerment in Nigeria with implications for the critical role of counsellors and school psychologists. The attainment of gender equality and total empowerment of women is not only seen as an end itself but as a prerequisite for the achievement of sustainable development in Nigeria. It is recommended that there should be cultural re-orientation for better value of girls and women among Nigerians. It is also recommended that policies bothering on gender equality should be fully implemented by both the state and federal government of Nigeria. School psychologists and counsellors should fully assume the role of guidance and effective mentoring to ensure that females develop positive perception of themselves despite the persisting relegation and discrimination against women.*

### **Introduction**

The controversy over gender equity and equality has, over time become a recurrent and hydra-headed global discourse. It is a common knowledge that a gap continues to exist between the males and females in occupational, educational and general career aspirations as a result of socio-cultural stereotypes which imposes a serious limitation not only to the effort of women empowerment but also on their contribution to national development.

In Nigeria, the case is not different. Men continue to dominate at different levels of education, employment, career, entrepreneurship and other well-rewarding professions. A lacuna persistently exists in terms of rights, status, privileges, and advantages of men and women in Nigeria. It is also pathetic to remark that the female gender is discriminated against in many spheres of human activity and across nations

of the world owing to reasons that are very complex, ranging from cultural stereotype to some socio-economic reasons that have no basis in objective reality.

Gender stereotype explains the roles or a pattern of behaviour placed on a particular sex by the society, mostly beliefs, illogical ideas, and false phrases. It is referred as collection of commonly held beliefs or opinions about behaviours and activities considered by society as appropriate for males and females. It is an overgeneralization, a category concept that is learned, factually incorrect, rigid and persistent (Ashmore & Del Boca, 1981). According to (Perry and Pauletti, 2011), gender stereotypes are people's beliefs about how the sexes differ (descriptive stereotypes) or should differ (prescriptive stereotypes). For the purpose of the present review, gender stereotype refers to socio-cultural beliefs and practices, which tend to limit the women's rights to education and overall empowerment.

The fundamental human right is enshrined in the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. The stipulations of equality are clear and well spelt out. Generally, the issue of equality and adherence to the rule of law have become a global discourse. In consideration of this all important goal, the Beijing declaration of the United Nations (1995) issued some declarations in relation to the rights of women to focus on:

- a determination to advance the goals of equality, development, and peace for all women everywhere in the interest of all humanity.
- ensuring the full implementation of the human rights of women and the girl child as an inalienable, integral and indivisible part of all human rights and fundamental freedoms.
- the empowerment and advancement of women, including the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion, and belief, thus contributing to the moral, ethical, spiritual and intellectual needs of women and men, individually or in community with others and thereby guaranteeing them the possibility of realising their full potential in society and shaping their lives in accordance with their own aspirations.
- taking all necessary measures to eliminate all forms of discriminations against women and the girl child and remove all obstacles to gender equality and the advancement and empowerment of women (p.102).

Despite these efforts made by individuals, governments and civil societies, gender stereotypes, discriminations and gross inequality still continue to exist in the area of education, career and other sectors. The girl-child educational attainment is low, as records have shown that fewer girls go to school than boys. The gender gap is said to widen as girls move up to the formal educational ladder (Obanya, 2007). An estimated 50% of the population of Nigeria is made up of women and girls (Obanya, 2004). Unfortunately, the national literacy rate for females is only 56 %, compared to 72% for males, and in certain states in Nigeria, the female literacy, enrolment and achievement rates are much lower (UNICEF, 2015).

It was believed that drafted documents at various times would have a profound impact on the lives of all human beings, but the feminine gender obviously

continues to agitate for emancipation, empowerment, and repositioning in their respective countries. Ogbaji (2010) reported that the Population Reference Bureau of year 2002 data sheet shows that gender inequality is highly pronounced in the poorest regions and countries of the world. Even for over 60 years ago after the Universal Declaration of Human Right (UDHR) in documentary records, women still suffer discrimination in all its ramifications. Likewise, the gender statistics in leadership positions in favour of men continue to generate violence talks, and subordination against women. In a democratic system, the issue of marginalization and erroneous notion about women's rights, empowerment and position are expected to have been a foregone conclusion. Still, efforts at making relevant reforms including constitutional, judicial, administrative policies and programmes as measures to eliminate and redress discrimination against women have not actually convinced the feminine folk of gender equality. It is argued that women are supportive, nurturers, growth-oriented, agent of change and future builders. Educational institutions cannot afford to ignore the strengths of female managers (Adadevoh, 2001).

In spite of crucial effort about women empowerment, emancipation, and placement in leadership positions in Nigeria society, it is obvious that the feminine group is still struggling for better recognition (Alade, 2012). It therefore becomes imperative in this paper to further draw the attention including human rights crusaders to the need for giving more opportunities to the female folk in education, decision making, public life, politics, and policy formulation. It is against this backdrop that this paper examines gender stereotype and women empowerment in Nigeria with implications for the critical role of counsellors and school psychologist in re-orienting the girls and women who have been over shadowed by stereotypic beliefs in the contemporary societies in which they found themselves.

### **Gender Role development and Gender Stereotyping in Nigeria**

According to Nnachi (2010) the term gender is socio-cultural and is built based on the societal expectations of the individuals on the basis of being a male or female. According to Taylor (1994) gender refers to a set of assumptions about the nature and character of the differences between males and females, assumptions that manifests on a number of ideas and practices that have a determined influence on identity, social opportunities, and life experiences of human actors. These assumptions are developed and are defined in the context as it relates to males and females. Furthermore, the assumption tends to assign the task and roles of a particular sex, thereby enhancing role and behaviour identity for the individual. This could influence the person's belief in respect of being a male or female. It is a culturally determined concept based on beliefs and traditions of a given society or community. It refers to the rules, behaviours and qualities ascribed to male and female folks. Gender can best be understood when sex is mentioned. Sex is the biologically determined characteristics or functions of male and female. Gender refers to those characteristics and functions society ascribes to male and female (Alade, 2006). As a child grows, he is socialized to fit into those societal expectations. This results into the categorization of roles, activities, responsibilities, and careers suitable for female

or male. Thus, gender permeates every human endeavour. Indeed, it has led to what is described as stereotyping.

The concept of gender stereotype could be viewed as relating to the general way people often devalue the performance of women who take on tasks supposedly reserved for men. In such instances, people appear unimpressed about women's achievement; success of women at work is often given to luck or chance rather than to women's hard work and ability. This is a proven fact of men intimidation of women at workplace in order to frustrate and keep them low. This seems to be a common phenomenon in many societies of the world, Nigerian not been an exception. Women career empowerment could thus be viewed as having much to do with their ability to prepare, enter into their chosen career fields, thrive and advance in such careers alongside with their men counterparts, without any stereotypical bias.

Unfortunately, in Africa and Nigeria in particular, a girl is conditioned to believe that women are inferior to men, that her place is in the home and that she is therefore there to be seen and not to be heard (Ofoha, 2013). These stereotypical beliefs against feminine gender have become entrenched in the minds of girls and women as they internalize these faulty messages from authority figures. As a result, the girl-child suffers emotional disorientation, which at times results to feeling of insecurity and poor self-esteem (Hiuzer cited in Ezeliora and Ezeokana., 2011). Several studies maintain that negative stereotypes often cause negative responses, which can manifest themselves in the stereotyped individual's reactions, performance on a task, motivation, and low self-esteem. Negative stereotypes hinder peoples' ability to fulfil their potential by limiting choices and opportunities (Santrock, 2001). A 1999 Survey of Harmful Traditional Practices against Women and Girls in Nigeria (Federal Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development 1999) found that proverbs and local sayings act as psychological constraints against transforming societal attitudes and behaviour. This practice has further helped to undermine girls' self-esteem.

Culture in Nigeria is vital to women career development. This is based on the fact that Nigerian culture tends to believe in the inferiority of women relative to men. For this reason, career differential is often seen at play when it is time for the selection of courses in school, or it's attending careers that follow after graduating from school. On this, Denga (1983) identified occupations such as; Engineering, Medicine, Law, Computer Science, and Skilled trades, as being adjudged as more befitting for boys. On the contrast, occupations considered as being more suitable for girls are Nursing; Secretarial work, and catering services. The resultant effects of the stereotypical choice of career on girls and women is their avoidance of science-based courses particularly, mathematics. This might be one of the major reasons why women are overwhelmingly found in traditional female oriented occupations, in contrast to male-dominated ones in Nigeria.

However, if Nigerian women must fulfil their career expectations, they cannot afford to remain trapped in the traditionally female oriented occupations for long. This is because, unlike in the recent past, the context of the woman in the family is fast changing. Specifically, the present economic recession makes it more

imperative for women to have viable careers. For example, apart from the fact that women involvement in meaningful careers would enable them take good care of themselves without depending on their spouses, they would also be better equipped financially, to lend a hand to spouses in meeting the demands of the home. Furthermore, viable careers would offer women more opportunities to imagine better options for their self-actualization or achievement outside the home. Nevertheless, Chipman and Wilson (1985) stated that, for girls and woman to enter into male dominated careers, it demands that they have very good knowledge in mathematics. Regrettably however, it was noted at the same time too, that for girls and women to meet this condition seems to be an uphill task. This is because there seems not to be enough support given to them by significant others in society.

### **Educational Implications of Gender Stereotype for Women empowerment**

This paper review has shown that there is gender discrimination against women in education, employment, politics, and generally in the society. They remain discriminated against mostly because of the societal beliefs and attitudes about them. In spite of the social and economic inequalities manifest in gender stereotyping in Nigeria, education has been found to still be capable of preparing women to respond positively to more opportunities to challenge traditional values, perpetuating their subordination in various sectors, education inclusive.

The principal role of school counsellors and Psychologist otherwise taken to be guiding and directing adolescents in school needs be re-positioned to focus on harnessing their innate potentials rather than being persistently immersed in stereotypes that seem to have no end.

Also by implication, the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) needs reinforcement to carry out its duties more effectively so as to enhance the enforcement, promotion, and protection of Human Rights all the time; women themselves need to improve in their networking and integration into all avenues in education and other sectors where opportunities exist so as to help one another move up the ladder and carve a place for themselves in the domains where they are competitively qualified; women need to be given due opportunities to participate in policy making instead of being passive beneficiaries of these policies; women in both administrative and academic positions need to be given adequate support by their male counterparts to harness their strengths.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has examined the issue of gender stereotype and the empowerment of women and girls in Nigeria highlighting the critical aspects of the role of counsellors and school psychologists. Some issues that need continued conversation for women empowerment and sustainable development include high rate of poverty, illiteracy, culture, religious belief, and gender stereotype. All these constitute a major source of limiting factors against the development of women in Nigeria. It is quite glaring that gender equity requires unfettered rights, opportunities, and rewards for women and men, girls and boys in all spheres of life. If women are

well empowered and have proper orientation about life and what it takes to become whatever they want to be irrespective of their gender, religion and culture, then it will be difficult for any girl-child or woman to suffer any artificial or societal limitation as a result of gender stereotype.

### **Recommendations**

Women like men need meaningful employment to provide additional source of social support to increase their well being. For this reason, the following recommendations are made:

- There should be cultural re-orientation towards the value of girls and women. Gender typing in girls in particular is not good for their career development and general wellness.
- Parents are invited to encourage their children particularly girls, to develop interest in mathematics so that there would be no limitation to the choices of their career.
- Men, who are looked up to as mentors at workplace, should use their positions to help women advance in their career.
- Career women are encouraged to develop effective coping strategies for good adjustment at workplace.
- Finally, all existing policies bothering on gender equality should be fully implemented by both the state and federal government of Nigeria. Government at all levels should endeavour to review all gender discriminatory laws that still exist in the pages of the statute books in order to demonstrate total commitment to eradicate gender inequality in Nigeria.
- The Nigerian government should collaborate with traditional rulers in Nigeria and other stakeholders to ensure that all harmful and traditional practices which minimize women, are uprooted.
- It is high time Nigerian government increased women's presence as entrepreneurs by granting women more loan to start up businesses to reduce poverty level in Nigeria
- Compulsory girl-child education which Nigeria has already adopted should be enforced and sustained.

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