

FEMALE COMPLICITY IN GENDER INEQUALITY: A PHILOSOPHICAL ANALYSIS

Ejikemeuwa J. O. Ndubisi*

ABSTRACT

The reality of gender inequality is undeniable; it is what we observe each day. The fact is that gender inequality is made manifest in our society in different forms. It is generally believed that the female folk are at the receiving end in matters of gender inequality. This understanding has given rise to some feminist and allied movements that are focused on the liberation of the female folk from the clutches of the male-dominated world. However, some fundamental questions trouble the mind of the researcher in this regard: Is the problem of gender inequality caused only by men? Are the female folk involved in sustaining gender inequality? What role does the female folk play that sustains gender inequality? Consequently, employing the method of philosophical analysis, this study observed that despite the existence of feminist and allied movements as we have them today; the fight against gender inequality is still not a successful one. The paper argues that there are certain roles being played by the female folk that fan the flame of gender inequality in our society. It is the strong submission of this paper that the fight against gender inequality can only be won in its true sense when the female folk are fully and practically involved in the fight.

Keywords: Female Complicity, Gender, Gender Inequality, Gender role, Gender bias

Introduction

In recent times, there are conferences, workshops, seminars, etc. on the issue of gender. Series of arguments have arisen concerning the marginalization or discrimination of one gender or another. Gender bias or gender prejudice is the talk of the day. People suffer humiliations and rejections simply because they belong to a particular gender group. Both male and female suffer gender discrimination in one way or the other. But the truth that stares everyone in the face is that the female folk are always the most hit as far as the issue of gender discrimination is concerned.

History is replete with stories of ill treatment, discrimination, hatred and hardship suffered by women simply on the basis of being females. There is practically no traditional society that did not practice gender inequality. Some people (both male and female) view the practice of gender inequality, in its diverse forms, as normal. Gender discrimination has actually taken the centre stage in the social, political, religious, economic and cultural spheres of our societal life. The fact is that there is something that is actually sustaining this practice in our society. There are some social, political, cultural or religious structures ó formal and informal ó that promote gender inequality.

In this regard it is generally believed that the male folk are the ones responsible for the marginalization of the female folk. The veracity of this claim is not doubted. However, there are some pertinent questions that trouble the philosophical mind of the researcher: Are the male folk only responsible for the discrimination and marginalization of the female folk? Do the female folk play some roles to promote gender inequality in any form? This study, therefore, is set to investigate the involvement of the female folk in fostering gender inequality against the female folk. The study, first of all, presents a brief understanding of the concept of gender inequality and also highlights some forms of gender inequality. It also takes a look at feminism and the struggle for equal rights for women. This will be followed by a discussion on the female's roles that promote gender inequality; and finally, the paper will end with a concluding reflection.

Gender Inequality: A Brief Exposé

It is a fact of life that the human person is made up of male and female. So the discussion on gender has to do with the perception of the roles ascribed to either the male folk or the female folk. This is what is known as gender roles. Gender role has to do with the generally accepted ways of life in a given society with regard to the reality of being male or female. It has to do with the expected behaviours from the male folk or the female folk. One important thing to note is that gender roles are not natural or biological; they are those ways of life that are learnt or taught in a given society. Gender roles are basically taught and learnt in the family. This is because of the simple fact that the family is seen as the custodian of the thoughts, values and beliefs

of a given society. So as a result of gender roles we now have gender inequality. The fact is that gender inequality is a practical manifestation of gender roles.

Gender inequality is simply the discrimination meted out to a person for the simple fact that the person is a male or female. It has to do with unequal treatment given to a person simply because the person belongs to a particular sex group. According to Ndubisi and Udoh (2015) gender inequality is an outright discrimination because of the simple fact that one is a male or female. Gender inequality has to do with denial of an opportunity to a person because the person belongs to a particular gender (p. 150). The point being made here is that gender inequality has to do with any form of treatment given to a person, not because of the fact that the person is a human being but because the person is a male or female. One basic thing to note is that gender inequality is a social construct. The implication of this claim is that gender discrimination is not coeval with human nature. It is something we learn from our society. Gender inequality portrays the way a particular society understands gender roles. It can further be seen as the way a society understands the reality of being male or female. Kimmel (2008) is of the view that there is no society that does not entertain the politics of gender inequality (p. 2). What this implies is that the practice of gender inequality is found in every society. It is good to note that gender inequality as we witness it our society today affect both male and female. This notwithstanding, there is a general notion that the female folk are the most marginalized in matters of gender. This is premised on the fact that we are in a male-dominated world. And as such, the male folk are seen as the first class citizens while the female folk are the second class citizens. Fox-Genovese (1999, as cited in Lauer and Lauer, 2002) is of the opinion that there are more advantages of being a man than of being a woman (p. 256). These advantages are the ones ascribed to the male folk by the male-chauvinistic society. It is important to note that gender is made manifest in different forms. So, the next sub-topic that follows shall focus on the diverse forms of gender inequality.

Forms of Gender Inequality

The reality of gender inequality is made manifest in different forms. It is something we witness daily in our society. Among all the forms of gender inequality, the one that is at the heart of all is male-chauvinism. Male-chauvinism has to do with the dominance of the male folk over the female folk. It is a known historical fact that there is hardly any traditional society where male-chauvinism never existed. Male-chauvinism summarizes the different forms of discrimination against women. This is the belief that men are superior while women are inferior. As a major form of gender inequality, it has made the male folk to see themselves as subjects while the female folk are seen as mere objects. The male folk believe that they are not equal with the female folk. For the men, there is no rationale for gender equality: men and women are not equal and cannot be equal. This is a serious claim that is premised on a misconception of reality.

Male-chauvinism rears its ugly head in the family, political sphere, religious sphere, economic sphere, etc. It is generally believed (by men) that a man must be the head of the family; a man must see to the day-to-day running of the family. In short, he should dictate everything that goes on in the family; the women's role is simply to obey and not to question the decision of the man even if the decision is against reason or not. Male-chauvinism in the family is made manifest in domestic violence against women. In the political sphere, we see the practical manifestation of male dominance over women. Most cultures of the world believe that a woman should not be a political head. Some are of the view that a woman should not take up political positions. This view is premised on the wrong notion that a woman's place is in the kitchen. More so, the tune of the music is not different in the religious sphere. Most religions of the world do not regard men and women as equals. In religious sphere certain offices and functions are solely meant for the male-folk not because of the fact that women cannot be in the offices or perform the required functions, but simply to showcase the dominance of women by men. The point here is that male-chauvinism is a form of gender inequality and it is made manifest in different aspects of our societal life.

Another major form of gender inequality is in the area of job discrimination. Most people are denied job opportunities not because of their incompetence but simply because they are female or male.

Even though that job discrimination is being experienced by both male and female, it has been observed that the female folk are the most hit. Macionis and Gerber (1999) reports that "although increasing number of women, both married and single, are working, women remain highly segregated in the labour force because our society continues to link work to gender" (p. 306). There are certain jobs that are thought to be for men alone. The male folk dominate in certain jobs that are said to be very hard while the female folk dominate the less hard jobs. This is what we witness daily. Ndubisi and Udoh (2015) observed that the female folk are generally discriminated against in matters of job opportunities. They argued:

Statistics have it that men dominate many prominent positions in sciences and humanities. Even in a situation where men and women possess the same qualifications, men are often preferred to women. In some cases, where women are given some positions, the demand made of them are usually higher than that made of men (Ndubisi and Udoh, 2015, p. 151).

The point this study wishes to establish here is that the female folk are often relegated to the lower level in matters of job opportunities. Another sad thing to note is that even when men and women do the same job, the remuneration for men is always higher. This is the apex of discrimination in this regard.

Gender discrimination is witnessed in our different cultural practices. There are certain cultural practices that are very unfriendly to the female folk. In some cultures, certain privileges and rights are denied the female folk simply on the basis of gender. We have cases of harsh and inhuman widowhood practices, female gender mutilation, and forced marriage, virginity testing, denial of female folk of family inheritance and many others. The detailed discussion on all the forms of gender inequality is beyond the limit of this study. This notwithstanding, gender inequality is made manifest in different aspects of our societal life.

Feminism and Equal Rights for Women

The central point, as stated above, is that the female folk are generally marginalized on the basis of gender. It is against this backdrop that some feminist groups emerged. Feminism, as we know, is a range of movements that are geared towards the liberation of the female folk from the clutches of the male folk. It is that movements that share the same ideologies and common goal with respect to the emancipation of the female folk. One basic thing among feminist movements is their interest towards establishing equal political, economic, cultural and social rights for women (Beasley, 1999, Pp. 3 ó 11; Hawkesworth, 2006, Pp. 25 ó 27). The major interest of the feminists is the emancipation of the female folk. It has been observed that feminist movements have worked tirelessly for the recognition and respect of women's rights.

Feminist movements have campaigned and continue to campaign for women's rights, including the right to vote, to hold public office, to work, to earn fair wages or equal pay, to own property, to education, to enter contracts, to have equal rights within marriage, and to have maternity leave. Feminists have also worked to promote bodily autonomy and integrity, and to protect women and girls from rape, sexual harassment, and domestic violence (Ecoles, 1989, as cited in Wikipedia, 2016, Para. 2).

The main point here is that there are many feminist movements that have worked for the equal rights of women. This is what has been established above. However, this study observes that despite the fight for equal rights for women by the feminists, gender discrimination continues to persist. This experience has provoked the critical mind of the researcher to inquire deeply into females' involvement in gender inequality.

Females' Role in Gender Inequality

The main thesis of this study is that the problems and ills of gender inequality should not be blamed only on the male folk; the female folk also contribute to their being marginalized. This may sound paradoxical or ironical but it is a simple fact. In the discussion that

follows, this study makes attempt to briefly highlight few areas where the female folk help to foster gender inequality in our society.

(i) Attitude in Family Matters

Despite the fight for equal rights for men and women in the family, there are still certain behaviours that are exhibited by the female folk that promote gender inequality. The other day I had a discussion with a colleague on how she managed to repair her car. She told me that she was not the one that took the car to the mechanic workshop. "That is man's job" was her answer. "My husband did that for me" she further concluded. The implication here is that for her, it is a man's job to take the car to the mechanic workshop while her job is to take the pleasure of driving the car. This kind of attitude, in the view of this paper, promotes gender inequality. This is what we observe in different aspects of family life. For women, it is the man that should provide for the day-to-day running of the family. Some women believe that their work is to stay at home as home caretakers while the man has the task of struggling for the upkeep of the family. This kind of attitude gives the male folk the opportunity to marginalize and lord it over the female folk. Also, this attitude presents the male folk as the superior sex while the female folk are seen as the weak sex; thereby providing a favorable ground for gender inequality.

(ii) Not-born-to-suffer Mentality

Many women entertain the mentality that they are not meant to suffer. Some argue that suffering is not for the female folk. This kind of mentality is made manifest in our social, religious, economic, political and cultural aspects of our societal life. In most friendship relationship, the female folk erroneously believe that their partner (the male folk) has to struggle to provide for her need while she sits back to enjoy. This attitude is premised on the belief that women are not born to suffer. Generally, the female folk tend to disassociate themselves from certain hard jobs in the society. Some would say: "How can I do this kind of hard job when a man is here?" This mentality presupposes that male folk are the stronger sex while the female folk are the weaker sex. So it is the man, the strong, that is born to suffer; while the woman, the weak, is born to enjoy. This

attitude simply gives the male folk the opportunity to look down of the female folk thereby promoting gender inequality.

(iii) **Choice of Career**

Experience has shown that there are certain jobs that are preferred by the female folk. Most of these jobs being preferred by the female folk are said to be less tasking or less stressful. We discover in our society that majority of the female folk are clerks, nurses, midwives, etc. These professions are generally seen as feminine jobs. But the question is: Is there any particular career that is solely meant for a particular sex? The answer, in the view of this paper, is no. The point is that this is just one of the ways the female folk tend to give credence to the practice of gender inequality.

(iv) **Prostitution**

Down through the ages, it is discovered that women, irrespective of colour and culture, have been found to perpetrate this ignoble act: prostitution. This is a situation whereby a woman uses her body as a means of making money. Many women, both married and single, are found in this act either publicly or secretly. This kind of act reduces the human person to the level of an object. We must recall that it was Kant, a German philosopher, who said that human beings are ends in themselves and not a means to an end (Kant in Omoregbe, 2001, p. 116). This means that human beings are subjects, not objects. But the act of prostitution degrades the humanity of the female folk and renders them to the level of mere objects to be used and dropped at any time. The glaring fact is that prostitution in all its ramifications, degrades the dignity of the humanity of the female folk and goes a long way to promote marginalization and maltreatment by the male folk. Prostitution promotes the practice of gender inequality.

(v) **Females' Involvement in Harsh Widowhood Practices**

There are numerous harsh treatments of widows as observed in some African cultures. Among the Igbo people of southeastern Nigeria, it is often believed that when a husband dies, that the wife is the first suspect. The wife is always accused of killing the husband. Following the accusation, she has to exonerate herself. And one of the ways to

be exonerated from the accusation is by drinking the water used to bathe the body of her late husband. What an inhuman act! In some instances, the widow's hair is scrapped with a very blunt razor. There are instances when the widow is stripped naked and forced to take her bath in the public. The fact is that there are series of harsh treatment given to a widow. The worst part of it all is that the principal actors in the execution of these inhuman acts are women. They are called in Igbo language *ũmuada* (daughters' union or the sisters of the husband). Ojigho (2011) observes that *umuada* play a significant role in the harsh widowhood practices as they ensure that the widow complies with the demands of the so-called culture (para. 7). This is a case of women marginalizing women. We have to quickly note that the widower does not receive the type of treatment given to a widow. This practice is quite ridiculous, especially when the female folk are the perpetrators of the irrational act. This type of harsh widowhood practice goes to amplify the fact that women are involved in the fanning the embers of gender inequality.

(vi) **Embracing Gender Ideology**

The principal aspect of the involvement of the female folk in gender inequality is their (females') acceptance of gender ideology. Gender ideology simply has to do with the understanding that the men and women are not equal and should not be treated equally. Most men believe strongly in this gender ideology. Also, there are some women that believe that gender ideology cannot be questioned or changed. Such women believe strongly that women must be submissive to men in everything irrespective of the rationality of the subject matter. This attitude is made manifest in a situation whereby a woman would be suffering in a family and would not say anything simply because she has to be submissive to a man. Even when the suffering woman complains, she would be attacked by her fellow women on the basis that she is simply a woman.

In the religious circle, it is generally believed that a man is the reflection of God while the woman is the reflection of man (St. Augustine as cited in Schaff, 1958, p. 159). This is a typical example of gender ideology. The other day, I had a discussion with some women concerning women's ordination in the Catholic Church. I asked: Why should a woman not be ordained a Roman catholic priest?

The answer I got was that a woman **MUST** not be ordained. The simple reason is that she is a woman. Some of the women vehemently argue that such topics are no-go-areas and should not even be mentioned. The experience I had with the women in question portrays the position of many women in this regard. This kind of attitude helps to boost the spirits of the male folk towards the discrimination of the female folk. The gender ideology is seen as part of culture ó a way of life of a people. This could account for the reasons some women find it very difficult to purge it out from their mindset.

The main point this subsection is trying to establish is that there is involvement of the female folk in gender inequality. This is evident from our analysis above. We must also note that the discussion above is not exhaustive; they are presented to amplify the claim of the participation of the female folk in gender inequality.

Conclusion

From our analysis so far, it is quite clear that the female folk can be seen as accomplices in matters of gender inequality. The ways and manners they carry out certain actions and behaviours promote gender inequality. One thing we must note is that this study is not arguing that there are no sex differences between male and female. Actually there are some differences as we have come to know through our study of biology. It is pretty clear that at birth both females and males are quite distinct with respect to the primary sex characteristics such as the genitals. Also, there are some secondary sex characteristics such as bodily development (Macionis and Gerber, 1999, p. 296). However, studies have shown that the inequality inherent in gender is not a matter of biological differences but simply social and cultural (Ferree and Hall, 1996; Riley, 1997). The point here is that the issue of gender is simply a social construct. It is dependent on the perception of a particular cultural society. Macionis and Gerber (1999) noted that there is no difference in intelligence between females and males (p. 296). The report of Macionis and Gerber is quite true because of the simple fact that both females and males share equally in the humanity of the human person. The humanity of the male folk is neither superior nor inferior to the humanity of the female folk.

At this point one question is seriously calling for answer: Why female complicity in the discrimination and marginalization against their female folk? The answer could be traced to the long centuries of male-chauvinism and ignorance. A story was told of an ant that was put inside a bottle that was well cocked. The ant was there for months. Later, when the cover of the bottle was removed the ant refused to come out. This is because of the fact that the ant has taken the abnormal to be normal. The long stay inside the bottle has made it to think that the bottle is its natural habitat. This analogy can be likened to the major factor for female complicity in gender inequality. The female folk have been marginalized for centuries and as such, maltreatment of women is now taken to be the norm. This explains the reason the fight against gender inequality has not yielded much result. This study is of the view that the corollary of the aforementioned is ignorance. And as such, there is need for the removal of the scale of ignorance from the ðrational eyesð of the female folk in general. The female folk have to be fully involved in this fight against gender inequality. There is need for proper education on gender equality for all women in both rural and urban areas. Both the government and the private sectors should intensify effort in this regard. ðWomenð and girlsð access to education, training and capacity development,ð according to the Commission on the Status of Women (2011), ðholds the key to their empowerment and improved livelihoodð (p. 2).

The female folk should rise up to the challenges of gender inequality. They should not see themselves as mere objects; rather they should know that all human beings (male and female) are kingdoms of ends (Kant as cited in Omoregbe 2001, p. 116). They are to see themselves as subjects; as active participants and not passive participants in the affairs of life. The female folk should rise up to the challenges of gender inequality in all its ramifications. This kind of attitudinal change will go a long way to eliminate female involvement in prostitution, harmful widowhood practices, embracing gender ideology, etc. We all have to uphold gender equality. This is the only position, in this matter, that is rationally permissible. Gender inequality, whether by the male folk or the female folk cannot stand before the ðCourt of Reasonð We all (male and female) are human beings. We share the same equality of the human person. We should

be treated equally. We must note that what is good for the goose is also good for the gander.

**Ejikemuwa J. O. Ndubisi, PhD. Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, Tansian University, Umunya, P. M B 0006, Umunya, Anambra State, Nigeria. E-mail: ejikon4u@yahoo.com*

References

- Beasley, C. (1999). *What is Feminism?* New York: Sage.
- Commission on the Status of Women (2011). "Gender Equality and Sustainable Development" retrieved from: www.un.org/womenwatch/dew/csw/cswss/panels4-E.pdf (Accessed: 20/01/16).
- Ferree, M. M. and Hall, E. J. (1996). "Rethinking Stratification from a Feminist Perspective: Gender, Race and Class in Mainstream Textbooks" *American Sociological Review* vol. 61, No. 6, Pp. 929 - 950.
- Hawkesworth, M. E. (2006). *Globalization and Feminist Activism*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Kimmel, C. S. (2008). *The Gendered Society 3rd ed.* New York: Oxford University Press.
- Lauer, R. H. & Lauer, J. C. (2002). *Social Problems and the Quality of Life*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Macionis, J. J. & Gerber, L. M. (1999). *Sociology: Third Canadian Edition*. Canada: Prentice-Hall Canada Inc.
- Ndubisi, E. J. O. and Udoh V. C. (2015). "Gender Inequality: A Challenge to Sustainable Development" *International Journal of Gender and Development Issues*, vol. 1, No. 4, Pp. 147 - 154).
- Ojigho, O. (2011). "Scrape her Head and Lay her Bare: Widowhood practices and culture" retrieved from: www.genderacrossborders.com/2011/10/28/scrape-her-head-and-lay-her-bare-widowhood-practices-and-culture/ (Accessed: 22/01/16)
- Omeregbe, J. I. (2001). *A Simplified History of Western Philosophy*, vol. 2. Lagos: Joja Educational Research and Publishers Ltd.
- Riley, N. E. (1997). "Gender, Power and Population Change" *Population Bulletin*, vol. 52, No. 1
- Schaff, P. (ed.) (1958). *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*. Edinburgh: T & T Clark.
- Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia (2016). "Feminism" retrieved from: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Feminism> (Accessed: 10/01/16)