

## **Gender inequality: Evidence from male/female staff interaction in selected universities in southeast, Nigeria**

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### ***Abstract***

*The struggle to improve the conditions of the female gender has continued to receive significant attention over the decades. Gender inequality has been a prevailing topic that has received a wide recognition from various scholars and writers. However, despite, these wide recognitions, female subjugation is evident in every stratum of human society. This study provides evidence of this by focusing on gender inequality in education at the tertiary level, considering features of male/female staff interaction. The following question has therefore driven this study: what type of utterances is used by male staff of higher institutions to show gender bias in male/female staff interaction? Participant observation is the major instrument of data collection. However, relevant library sources have been utilized. The theoretical thrust of this study is feminism, which advocates for equal rights between men and women. The contextualization cues theory of John Gumperz has been appropriated to discuss the type of utterances which feature in male/female staff interaction. The findings indicate that gender sensitive expressions still characterize male utterances and these are laced with paralinguistic features such as shaking the head, interruption, frowning etc to show disapproval against female responses.*

**Keywords:** gender inequality, verbal and non-verbal behaviours, discrimination, tertiary education, patriarchy

## **Introduction**

In Nigeria and many other countries of the world, gender relationships are changing and inequalities between men and women are questioned in virtually every field of life – at work, in the homes, in academics, in politics and in public affairs. However, despite all these changes, facts still show that gender gaps and inequalities persist in virtually all walks of life. The issue of gender inequality/bias has become one of the basic violations of human rights, denying particularly girls and women of their equality, dignity and self-worth. Gender inequality infringes upon the fundamental rights and freedom of women. As a result of these violations of human rights, various bodies have provided standards of legal equality between men and women. Such bodies includes: the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1976), the Beijing Platform for Action (1995), United Nations Charter on Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (1979) and the United Nations Decade for Women Equality Development and Peace among others.

The issue of gender inequality has lingered for long in the history of Nigeria. It is noticeable almost in every facet of the Nigerian economy. Gender inequality remains a major barrier to human development. Girls and women have made major strides to fight against gender inequality, but they are yet to attain gender equity. Gender inequality acknowledges that men and women are not equal. These unequal power relations weigh heavily on the female gender with men dominating in almost every field of life. These assumptions arise mainly from distinctions in cultural norms. These distinctions are usually socially constructed. Women and girls are discriminated against in the family, society, education, political representation, labour market and other areas.

These discriminations bring about negative consequences for development of their capabilities and their freedom of choice.

Gender inequality can therefore be defined as a situation whereby men and women do not enjoy equal rights; rather men are allotted more resources and opportunities than women. Gender equality is the state or condition that affords women and men equal enjoyment of human rights, opportunities and resources, allowing both sexes the same opportunities and potential to contribute to, and benefit from, all spheres of society (economic, political, social, and cultural). Gender equity refers to justice and fairness in the treatment of women and men in order to eventually achieve gender equality.

The problem of gender inequality is mostly recognized in developing countries of the world. Nigeria as one of the developing countries is equally faced with this challenge. In recent years, more attention have been paid to these gender inequalities particularly to the female gender, however, gaps still exist. In Nigeria, women play significant roles in the socio-economic development of the country and they form a major part of the population. Therefore, women have a lot to contribute towards nation building and women cannot make these positive contributions without proper education. Prohibiting women from actively engaging in the society hinders the development of the nation.

For centuries, the differences between the male and female gender has continued to exist, as men have continued to exert superiority over the female gender. This stems from the assumption that men should dominate women owing to the patriarchal system. Patriarchy is a social system in which men hold primary power and predominate in roles of political leadership, moral authority, social privilege and control of

property. Patriarchy is best defined as control by men. Patriarchy explains how our society functions and how men control women. Some patriarchal societies are also patrilineal, meaning that property and title are inherited by the male lineage. Patriarchy is one of the major obstacles to women's advancement and development.

Feminist theorists believe that patriarchy is an unjust social system that is harmful to both men and women. It often includes any social, political, or economic mechanism that evokes male dominance over women. However, patriarchy can be overcome by exposing its manifestations in different forms in societies. Some societies are more patriarchal than others, but virtually all are characterized by the phenomenon in one form or another. In classic patriarchy, Moghadam states that, "the senior man has authority over everyone else in the family, including younger men, and women are subject to distinct forms of control and subordination" (141). This reveals another form of patriarchy that favours males starting from the oldest male to the younger ones, excluding women.

This study identifies patriarchy as a prevalent problem in Nigerian societies. For centuries, the differences between the male and female gender has continued to exist, as men have continued to exert superiority over the female gender owing to the patriarchal nature of the Nigerian society. However, patriarchy can be overcome by exposing its manifestations in different forms in societies. In Nigeria, patriarchy is witnessed in its utmost form as males' exhibit power and authority within any social structure - family, society, school and others. Women have often been historically associated with reduced power and freedom, restriction of mobility outside the home, prohibition from holding high political offices and exclusion from leadership

positions in education. These restrictions affect the development and advancement of girls and women in the family, society and nation.

This study aims at proving the continued existence of gender inequality despite all the attention given to it in selected universities in southeast Nigeria. It demonstrates this situation by attention to male/female staff interactions in the universities. The question that therefore drives this study is: ‘What are the linguistic features of utterances used by male staff of higher institutions to show gender bias in male/female staff interaction?’

### **Theoretical framework**

This study is supported by the feminist theory. However, for the reason of handling the utterances involved male/female staff interaction, the Contextualization Cues theory of John Gumperz is utilized.

The feminist movement stretched far back into the nineteenth century but its development started in the 1960s. However, in the later part of the eighteenth century, Mary Wollstonecraft, as a result of the negative perception the male folk have about women which made women to hide their creativity, published in 1792, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* where she depicts women as the oppressed class with no right to themselves whatsoever (Dobie, 103-104). As a feminist, Wollstonecraft challenged the exclusion of women thus, “If women are to be excluded without having a voice from a participation of the natural rights of mankind, prove first, to ward off the charge of injustice and inconsistency, that they want reason?” (11). This introduces feminism as a historical movement which still plays a major role in the history of today. Feminism is a theory or movement which aims at empowering women. It is a movement through which

women have made their voice known in history. It advocates for the equality of humankind.

The Feminism movement in Nigeria arose as women started to fight, to break away from the clutches of oppression and subjugation meted out on them resulting from the traditional beliefs of the patriarchy system. Umoren asserted that “colonialism and independence encouraged the feminist movement in a country like Nigeria to a very large extent” (9). From Umoren’s assertion, colonialism and independence are identified as some of the factors that gave rise to the feminist movement in Nigeria. When Nigeria gained her independence in 1960, it brought its citizens into an age of enlightenment when people began to have a sense of individual existence and therefore, they started fighting for their rights. Therefore, along with the independence of Nigeria, came individual independence. It is through this age of enlightenment that women also gained insight to what freedom and emancipation is, and began fighting to be heard, defying the earlier traditions and norms that have confined women to the stereotypical belief of “women are meant to be seen not heard”. The proverb “seen, not heard” has its origins in the 15th century, where children, particularly young women, were meant to stay silent unless spoken to or asked to speak.

This stereotypical belief has forced girls and women into a culture of silence. Now, how do we expect girls and women to be creative when confined to a culture of silence? It is as a result of all these beliefs that the feminist theory emerged. Feminism therefore seeks to examine women’s oppression and subjugation by men and expose male domination through history.

Chukwukere observes that, “not much attention has been offered the female folk since the growth of African imaginative

literature and the critical excitement surrounding it (1)". He states that "as a result of strong traditional beliefs and cultural practices, women has been given a definite role and as well, education of women has been highly discouraged" (2-5). The feminist movement emerged to correct these strong traditional beliefs and cultural practices. Feminism is an organ, a conscious political movement through which women have made their voice known in history. It advocates that women be fully incorporated into humanity thereby seeking for equality as the goal of mankind.

Contextualization Cues is taken from Interactional Sociolinguistics founded by John Gumperz. Interactional Sociolinguistics (IS) is an aspect of sociolinguistic study that deals with the clues people use to interpret conversational interaction within its ethnographic context. IS focuses primarily on talk-in-interaction and face-to-face encounter between interactants and how certain signals in the context index certain meanings.

### **Gender inequality in education**

Education is a veritable tool for economic development. Since the advent of education, it has been a major resource used by both men and women to break the barriers of social oppression and gain freedom. However, there have been issues associated with gender inequality in higher institutions despite the fact that the Universal Human Rights Article 26 paragraph 1 advocate that education is for all including higher education. Thus, as education is meant for all, there is need to do away with disparities in gender in higher institutions as the existence of gender inequality affect female academic and career development, reduces human resources and affects national development. Education for all in Nigeria started in 1948 when the Universal Declaration of Human

Rights stated the policy of everyone having access to education. This is yet to be actualized in Nigeria as she still faces political, social and economic instability.

In a time of globalization and rapidly changing technology, a high quality education gives youth a competitive advantage. However, equality in education is still a vision, not a reality. This problem is capable of affecting the development of a nation; thus to avoid this, there is need to provide same education offered the males to the females. According to the national policy on education (2004), every Nigerian child has the right to equal educational chance. Women have been proven to contribute meaningfully to national development, but a closer look at the educational system of Nigeria shows that female education is relegated. This problem has not only affected females' access to education, but their performance towards national development. There is clear disparity in the field of education between the two sexes. There are a lot of barriers the girl-child faces and these bring about problems in education. They include: Early or forced marriage, household responsibilities, preference of male children to female, cultural norms and practices (boys are allowed to go to school while girls learn how to cook, how to care for children and how to be a good wife, girls and women are expected to do household chores. Boys and men are raised to be strong and dominating while girls and women are raised to be submissive). Other school-related gender-based violence and other related issues are barriers that inhibit girls from access to school and completing school.

The impact of sexual abuse and violence on girls influence their ability to complete schooling. Violence against women is a question of inequality and a denial of human rights. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) states, " Everyone

has the right to life, liberty, and security of Person“ (Article, 3) - The world conference on human rights (1993) confirmed women's rights as human rights and gender based violence as being incompatible with the dignity and worth of the human person.

It is rather disheartening that despite all these efforts made by these bodies and organisations, gender inequalities still exist in education in Nigeria and many other countries of the world.

### **Gender inequality in tertiary education**

The University education is one of the major sectors playing a vital role in the nation's economy. Gender inequality has long been recognized as a serious problem. The problem of gender inequality in tertiary education is multifaceted. Gender inequality is obvious in some tertiary institutions in Nigeria. Gender inequality in Nigerian universities is noticeable in areas like student-student relationship, student-lecturer relationship, staff employment and promotions and other areas. Gender inequalities in tertiary education have implications on both students and lecturers. There has been a significant increase in media reporting on gender-based violence including sexual harassment in educational institutions. Female students are in constant fear of being harassed by cultists and hooligans. Some female students also, find it difficult to work with male lecturers whereas male students appear to have a better and friendlier relationship with either male or female lecturers as their supervisors. This feeling of insecurity among the female students maybe as a result of fear of being sexually harassed or being looked down on by their lecturers. Often, harassment can come in several forms; it may be psychological, physical, sexual or verbal and non-verbal behaviours. Unfortunately, some respected members of the

academic community engage in different forms of harassment and some do not even realise they are making women around them feel uncomfortable.

Hence, there is tendency for the female students to feel left out of their lecturers and supervisors' circle whereas male students feel more welcome. Given such experiences of feeling isolated, male students tend to receive a friendlier attitude from their lecturers and supervisors. As a result, this gives the male students better opportunities for academic grooming to enhance their skills and professional advantage while studying.

### **Methodology**

Three universities from southeast Nigeria are selected for this study - two Federal Universities and a state university: Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, and Ebonyi State University, Abakiliki. Participant observation is adopted. Real time interactions between male and female staff are observed and utterances made by male participants are recorded.

### **A sample of male utterances in male/female staff interaction/analysis**

1. Is that how you address your husband at home?
2. When next you talk to me like that I'd show you I'm a man.
3. Dare you compare yourself with me; you who bend to urinate?
4. You think like a woman and that's your limit.
5. You don't walk out on a man.
6. Do you expect a man to greet you? Have you lost your mind?
7. You take instructions from a man; you don't give him instructions. He usually knows what to do.
8. No nagging in this office. Keep it for your husband's house.

9. You could hardly get your work right. It's only in gossiping you score above average.
10. I refuse to be another Adam in your hands.
11. I'll handle you like a woman.
12. You can only be on top in this office when you start going on top of your husband.
13. You will succeed in this place when you stop taking maternity leave.
14. Madam, we can talk when you are ready to see reasons with my offer.
15. I'll none feminine idiosyncrasies.

The linguistic context of each of 1-15 is evident of a male utterance: 'your husband', 'I'd show you I'm a man', 'bend to urinate', 'you think like a woman', 'you don't walk out on a man', 'do you expect a man to greet you', 'you take instructions from a man', 'keep it for your husband's house', '... gossiping ...', 'I refuse to be another Adam ...', 'I'll handle you like a woman', '... start going on top of your husband', 'when you stop taking maternity leave', 'Madam ...when are ready to reasons with my offer', and 'I'll none feminine idiosyncrasies'. Each of these reinforces the constructs of intimidation, humiliation, derogation, subjugation, embarrassment, and coercion, which are unquestionably implicit of paralinguistic expressions such as frowning, shaking of the head and gesticulations of pointing, waving, and clenching angrily.

It is worthy of note that the constructs are patriarchally created, promoted and sustained. They have been built into the male consciousness and over the years have been found to be repulsive, leading to the emergence of feminism. How much feminism has achieved negligible. The sample of male utterances

here is a pointer to this. For this reason, more work needs to be done and a re-strategizing imminent to drive equality into the consciousness of the existing patriarchal society.

One would expect that universities should, in the present dispensation, be a place at the forefront of ensuring and promoting gender equality. With what is evident in the male utterances, this is not the case and this sends a strong signal that the situation is worse in other places, institutions and organizations.

### **Conclusion**

Male/Female interaction is veritable tool for investigating gender inequality. This paper has relied on it in confirming gender inequality in selected universities in southeast Nigeria. A sample of male utterances in such interaction in the universities reveals the constructs of intimidation, humiliation, derogation, subjugation, embarrassment, and coercion. With these negative constructs, feminism is justified. It is the only way to save the female gender from male oppression and suppression, which over the years have denied women opportunities in politics, administration of institutions, departments and units of organizations and establishments.

As evident in the literature on gender, there is gender inequality in education at all of its levels and shift in this situation, which has been achieved by the feminist movement, is negatively affected by the constructs identified here. One would not expect women in the institutions to be at their best to contribute positively to the growth of the institutions and even when they do the patriarchal powers would deny them of the glory due to them.

Considering the situation in the foregoing, it is recommended that courses on gender studies be introduced as a one of the general studies in the universities with the purpose of creating gender equality awareness towards destroying patriarchal constructs, which feminism is contending against and which, there is no doubt about it, limit the female gender from maximizing their potentials.

Also, in the General Studies use of English in the universities, the topic, 'politeness principles' should be included and emphasized. This will contribute to a change the order of use of gender sensitive and impolite expressions.

Workshops and seminars should be organized for male administrators and males in the workforce of universities on gender sensitive expressions and measures put in place to punish anyone who uses them.

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