

THE NEXUS BETWEEN GENDER BIAS AND GENDER SOCIALIZATION OF THE GIRL CHILD IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

At birth, nature has made it that boys and girls present differences in terms of their physiology. By virtue of nurture, they are socialized differently with boys being brought up to see themselves as above the girls. This scenario has manifested in educational attainment and choices of work, with the female gender also on the losing end. The chapter examined the nexus between gender bias and gender socialization of the girl child in Nigeria. Symbolic interactional theory was used in the study. The paper adopted secondary sources of information for data collection. It was found that gender bias manifests in terms of child preferences, unequal access to food, health, and education. It was stated that the girl as a human being has the fundamental right to live, grow and to bloom; this can only be possible if she is given an enabling environment. The premium placed on the girl and her value as passed on to the young of every society will determine whether the conception and birth of a girl child would be celebrated and if she gets to be nurtured socially, physically, psychologically and of course given the chance to be well nourished, educated and consequently work a career of choice; or if she will continue to be seen as a second-class citizen. Ultimately if gender bias against the girl child is to be stopped then a lot needs to be done. When the girl-child is given an opportunity to develop her potentials and have choices, there are benefits to the society at large and the girl-child, including good health and quality of life. The work suggested for strengthening the role of the family in improving the status of the girl; where this is provided, gender socialization of children would be done away with by parents and caregivers. It should be noted that what differentiates the girl-child from the boy-child is biological and not social.

Key words: Nexus, Girl Child, Gender Bias, Gender Socialization

Introduction

Throughout the world, right from birth, boys and girls present with physiological differences that define their sexes; these clearly spell the differences in their sex organs, reproductive functions, and nothing more. That is to say that all other differences that exist between the boy and the girl in society are socially created and are gendered by various cultures. These gendered differences indicate to a large extent what the aspiration of the boy and the girl should be; how they are to eat, talk, walk and to a greater extent what educational and economic endeavours they would venture into as they grow (Kar, Ananya & Sing, 2015). The biological differences that exist between boys and girls with regards to their physiological formation, therefore, affect their upbringing.

Consequently, the socialization of children in the society is in such a manner that gender norms, assign specific roles, responsibilities, tasks, and privileges to both the female and male. Gender socialization occurs through four major agents of socialization: family, education, peer groups, and mass media. Each agent reinforces gender roles by creating and maintaining normative expectations for gender-specific behaviour. Exposure also occurs through secondary agents such as religion and the workplace. In most cases, especially in countries like Asia, Latin America, and Africa the mode of socialization turns out to be a problem if there is a primitive allocation of the roles and responsibilities and dichotomized distribution favours the individual(s) involved. It becomes a concern when such allocations consider gender instead of sex.

The dominant trend has over the years assumed male superiority while women are seen as weak, subordinate and inferior, and this has led to the emergence of specific initiatives such as the creation of the Family Support Programme, the Family Economic Advancement Programme, the Better Life for Rural Women Programme and the formation of the Federal Ministry of Women Affairs in 1995 (Olonade, Oyibode, Idowu, George, Iwelumore, Ozoya, Egharevba & Adetunde 2021).

Understandably, both boys and girls suffer several forms of gender bias; so, discussions about gender and all that comes with it is not in any way girls or women talk but borders on both sexes. However, given the patriarchal nature of most societies, in Nigeria, girls/women get to face more forms as well as the adverse effects of gender bias. Gender biases as present in the form of son preference (prenatal sex selection and female infanticide) as practiced mostly in some Asian countries; female genital mutilation, child marriage, rape, honour killing, unequal access to food as well as health and unequal access to education, do not only consciously or unconsciously place the girl at a point where she is seen by others as inferior but it predisposes her to seeing

herself as second fiddle thereby not aspiring much and naturally seeing the boy as being ahead of her (Makama, 2013).

In traditional Nigerian society, women were denied many opportunities, including education with a belief that “women's education ends in the kitchen” also, the culture of the people has made it such that, the roles of women are usually seen as inferior. In fact, women usually occupy less influential statuses, even if they have equal qualifications with their male counterparts. The social realities regarding gender bias coincide with George Orwell's statement that “all animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others” (1945:52). This assertion goes a long way to supporting the issue of gender bias in Nigeria, which has created gender inequality which some people say is embedded in nature, while others say that it is a social creation (Etobe, Ikpi, Ezikeudu & Etobe, 2019).

The implication is that, whether in the private or public sphere, the girl/woman is seen as a perpetual minor who should be overseen by the boy/man thus limiting her ability to grow and attain maximal heights. This is determined by culture and it continues to pattern the way girls/women will function in society as gender bias permeates every aspect of society, beginning from the family to religion, media, education, workplace and beyond and is enforced daily by gender socialization (Olonade, et al, 2021).

Understanding gender bias and how it functions to undermine the physical, emotional, psychological and educational growth of the girl/woman as well as her career and strategizing towards gender equity and or justice cannot be overemphasized and it goes without telling, since ameliorating this situation will ultimately not benefit the girl/woman alone but the society at large, thus its overly importance.

Aim and Objectives

The general aim of the study is to examine the nexus between gender bias and gender socialization of the girl child in Nigeria. The specific objectives are to:

- i. examine the nature and forms of gender biases in Nigeria;
- ii. assess the nature and extent of gender socialization in Nigeria;
- iii. examine the impact of gender bias on the girl child in Nigeria.

Conceptual Clarifications

Girl Child

Offorma (2009) sees the girl-child as a biological female offspring from birth to eighteen (18) years of age. The girl-child is seen as a female person who grows from infancy through childhood (0-5 years) to early (6-12 years) and late adolescence (12-18 years). This growth period as a matter of fact marks a period where ideally the child should be getting nursery, primary,

secondary education and in some instances begin tertiary education. Therefore, looking at the definition by Offorma one would notice that the difference between the girl-child and the boy-child draws from their physiology and nothing more; so, she deserves to be nurtured via education in the same way that a boy-child would, if not better.

Besides John Locke argued that children at birth are blank slate (tabula rasa); their minds and personalities begin to form through what they are taught and what they learn from others within the environment; thus it goes well to say that for today's girls to grow into functional women tomorrow they need to be educated in such a manner that their intellectual, physical, mental, social, spiritual and emotional faculties will develop rather than be seen as people who should grow up and marry while their male counterparts are being educated. Besides if the girl-child is to be properly educated, then the double standards used in the training of children in most Nigerian societies will have to change. Thus ensuring that the girl-child will not always have to wait for the educational needs of her brothers to be attended to before hers or be the one who will run errands for the family instead of being in school.

Gender

This refers to the widely shared expectations and norms within a society about appropriate male and female behaviour, characteristics, and roles. It is a social and cultural construct that differentiates women from men and defines the ways in which women and men interact in society (Gupta, 2000). Understandably, girls/women and boys/men are expected to act in certain ways and engage in certain activities be they simple activities of play or serious ones of work. However, any roles as performed by girls/women and boys/men that are not necessitated by their biological endowment are referred to as gender roles. For example, carrying pregnancy, breast feeding and impregnating a woman are sex roles; while fetching of water, wood, sweeping, cooking are gender roles as their performance is not based on acquiring special reproductive organs.

Gender Bias

This entails making decisions based on gender that result in favouring one gender over the other which often results in contexts that favour men and/or boys over women and/or girls. In most societies of the world gender bias or discrimination has been reinforced by patriarchy: an ideology that upholds the superiority of men over women thereby treating them unjustly.

Symbolic Interaction Theory and Gender socialization.

This study adopts the Symbolic Interaction Theory as conceived by George Herbert Mead and Charles Horton Cooley. It is a fundamental approach in micro sociology, and it takes face to face interactions as the emergence point for social theory (Ritzer, 2012). The theory sees gender as a factor which provides us with impetus to form relationships in daily life. On the other hand, gender places men in the control centre of society and makes males the people who shape behaviour in society. Females display more coherent behaviour patterns in typical situations, while on the other side males' behaviour has a tendency to initiate interaction (Olutayo & Afolayan, 2013).

Symbolic Interaction Theory claims that concepts such as – race, ethnicity, or gender – do not naturally and objectively exist, but they occur through the formulation of societal forces. Social frames such as “females” or “males” are endowed with distinct characteristic features defined as feminine or masculine. Gender does not exist by itself, but with the interaction among people in society. So, the formulators claim that, society is “doing” gender, and they show as an example Erving Goffman's “Dramaturgy” study (Lindsey, 2011).

According to Goffman's explanation, we have some roles inside of us and when their time comes, we climb up the stage and front them. Thus, gender is one of our roles and we present them as male and female in society. To sum up, Symbolic Interaction Theory posits that individuals create their social reality via daily interactions, therefore, gender is seen as a component of personal performance.

Gender plays a role to shape all relationships of people in daily life (Macionis, 2010). Based on the arguments of symbolic interactionism, bias and socialization exist in Nigeria based on the social construction of the society. Gender roles are also socially constructed, and people are socialized in a way that they understand; such as placing men above women while the later remains submissive no matter their socio-economic status.

Methods

The study utilised secondary data from published and unpublished literature. Google search engine was used to find various websites that present data in the form of reports, books, policy documents and guidelines collected from websites of various institutes. For published articles in peer reviewed journals, Google Scholar and PubMed were used.

The Nature and Forms of Gender Biases in Nigeria

Son Preference: This is a situation where parents have a penchant for

male children as they are reckoned to be heir apparent and perpetuators of the family line. El-Gilany and Shady (2007) observed that the preference for sons by culture and custom is a widely known phenomenon in several developing nations where the status of women is low and subordinate to their male counterparts. This affects the girl child as she does not receive the same treatment compared with that offered the boy child. For instance, the girl child is involved with more house chores than the boy thereby leaving no room for leisure compared to the boy; she may not get the needed nutrition and care in comparison with the boy; also, where resources are scarce, the girl child is not likely to be sent to school while the boy will be sent to school and catered for appropriately. Son preference in extreme cases results to feticide and infanticide: a form of killing of the foetus and apparent murder of the girl child at infancy (Nnadi, 2013). In Nigeria, feticide and or infanticide may not occur in the full glare of society however the air of disdain that follows the news of the birth of the girl child (especially where previous siblings were also girls) builds up thereby leaving the girl/women with the feeling of rejection and or inferiority.

Child Marriage: Most societies in Nigeria and elsewhere have stipulated ages for marriage; this is meant to ensure that only those who are matured physiologically can face pregnancy and its attendant implications. However, many young girls forcefully enter marriage biologically immature for pregnancy thus they end up with protracted labour (Idyorough, 2005) and where they do not lose their lives, the tendency of ending up with vesicovaginal fistula (VVF) or rectovaginal fistula (RVF) is inevitable. Ultimately the early marriage infringes on the rights of the girl to be educated as most, if not all girls who are forced into early marriage would have to leave school.

Marrying at a young age thwarts a girls' chances at education, endangers her health and cuts short her personal growth and development. The effect is directly at her, community and the society at large as she remains unskilled and unproductive and most often resorts to hawking with its attendant problems of exposure to accidents, crime, pedophilia and even ritual killing, kidnap and divorce. Furthermore, child marriage leads to the loss of 'manpower' as most girls that marry at that age do not complete education and do not work but depend solely on the men and their families. This ultimately affects women empowerment and the economic development of the nation at large. When a girl is given out in marriage at a tender age, her right to education is likely to be contravened.

Unequal Access to Food, Health, and Education: In most cultures in developing countries the serving of food is skewed in favour of men/boys

thus in situations of lack, it is girls and women who will have the least access just in the same way as food taboos point more towards girls/women than boys/men. Where that happens, girls are left under-nourished and more prone to ill health. United Nations statistics, national reports and studies initiated by non-governmental organizations repeatedly show that girls, as a group, have lower literacy rates, receive less healthcare, and are often more impoverished than boys (UNICEF. n.d.). Girls are less likely to receive attention in times of illness even as boys receive more attention and care as they are seen as heir apparent of their families. In the same vein, male children are granted access to education than the female children, where resources are scarce, the priority is for the boy to be educated and not the girl.

Economically, girls are often deemed to have a lower earning potential than boys, as boys are more likely to find work and receive higher pay (as patterned by most societies). This is significant in poor communities where each family member is expected to add to the household income thus where a girl can no longer contribute to her family's income after marriage when she must turn all her wages over to her husband, educating a girl child is seen as having little or no return on investment.

Gender Socialization

Socialization is the process of learning one's culture and how to live within it. To socialize one is to give her the skills required to successfully live in a particular society. Thus, others look at it as the process of humanisation since it is through socialisation that individuals become human. Socialization takes place early in life, through childhood to adulthood and as one encounters new groups that require additional socialization (university environment, work environment, etc).

Consequently, **Gender socialization** is the tendency for boys and girls to be socialized differently. Boys are raised to conform to male gender roles, and girls are raised to conform to female gender roles. For example, as gift items boys are given chemistry sets; this way they are encouraged to become analytical and learn how to fix things, be bold and even experiment with premarital sex. Girls are given dolls; they are believed to be more nurturing and patient than boys, be shy and remain virgins. The question therefore is, who are the boys expected to experiment with? Gender socialisation therefore presents a difference between the boy and the girl, the male and the female to the detriment of the girl or female. Gender socialization though not necessarily correct is reinforced by gender stereotypes that overly simplify the place of the female and what she stands for. Below are some female gender stereotypes as indicated by Brewer (n.d.)

- Women do not need to go to the university or have an education at all.
- Women are supposed to have “clean jobs” such as being Secretaries, Teachers, and librarians.
- Women are nurses, not doctors.
- Women do not have technical skills and are not good at “hands on” projects such as car repairs.
- Women are meant to be the damsels in distress, never the heroes.
- Women are not as strong as men.
- Women are never in charge.
- Women are supposed to make less money than men.
- The best women are stay-at-home mothers.
- Women are not politicians.
- Women are quieter than men and not meant to speak out in public.
- Women are supposed to be submissive and do as they are told.
- Women are supposed to cook and do housework.
- Women are responsible for raising children.

Stereotypically, the **female** is to marry and have children. She is also to put her family's welfare before her own; be loving, compassionate, caring, nurturing, and sympathetic; and find time to be sexy and feel beautiful. Now compare the above with some male gender stereotypes illustrated below. Though stereotypes, they are still preferred.

- Men are good at mathematics, and it is always men who work in science, engineering, and other technical fields.
 - All men enjoy working on cars.
 - Men are not nurses, they are doctors.
 - Men do “dirty jobs” such as construction and mechanics; they are not secretaries or cooks.
 - Men are in charge; they are always at the top.
 - As husbands, men tell their wives what to do.
 - Men are not meant to do housework and they are not responsible for taking care of children.
 - Men enjoy outdoor activities such as camping, fishing, and hiking.
 - Men do not cook, do the dishes, sweep the floor, sew, or do crafts.
- The **male** is to be the financial provider. He is also to be assertive,

competitive, independent, courageous, and career-focused and hold his emotions in check. These sorts of stereotypes prove harmful; and can suffocate individual expression and creativity, as well as hinder personal and professional growth especially for the female as it limits her self-realisation, educational and career pursuits.

Stereotypes though not always true, a critical look at the above indicates a situation where stereotypes against the male gender are more positive than those against the female gender, and at the same time in most instances have nothing whatsoever to do with the physiological formation of either gender.

Impact of Gender Biases on Girls

- Hinders girls' personal, educational, and professional growth.
- Leaves girls poor: and most often they remain poor through life.
- Renders them perpetual minors.
- Leaves them vulnerable and sick.
- Hides their intellect in order not to be seen as bossy rather than homely.

Conclusion/Recommendations

The girl as a human being has the fundamental right to live, grow and to bloom; this can only be possible if she is given an enabling atmosphere. The premium placed on the girl and her value judgements as passed on to the young of every society will determine whether the conception and birth of a girl child would be celebrated and if she gets to be nurtured socially, physically, psychologically and of course given the chance to be well nourished, educated and consequently work a career of choice or if she will continue to be seen as a second-class citizen.

Ultimately if gender bias against the girl child in Nigeria is to be stopped, then a lot needs to be done. When the girl-child is given an opportunity to develop her potentials and have choices, there are benefits to the society at large and the girl-child, including good health and quality of life. So, for the girl to grow and have a voice, a number of actions need to be taken as are presented here in form of recommendations:

- Strengthening the role of the family in improving the status of the girl; where this is provided, gender socialization of children would be done away with by parents and caregivers. It should be noted that what differentiates the girl-child from

the boy-child is biological and not social. It is therefore important that the girl-child is socialized to that level where she sees herself as a force to reckon with and not as a second fiddle or someone that should live off a man that may be the father, brother, uncle or husband.

- Humanitarian, corporate and private organizations as well as lobbyist groups must work in sensitizing people on the need to eliminate all forms of gender bias against the girl. Some practical ways of ensuring this: **i)** use inclusive language in addressing girls; **ii)** have same expectations for girls and for boys whether at home or in school/office; **iii)** avoid stereotyping jobs, i.e., making girls do the dishes while the boys fix things; **iv)** place girls and boys in nontraditional situations where the girl comes before the boy.
- Government should not only set laws that make girl-child education compulsory but as well implement same.
- Government at the federal, state and local levels should make available incentives to the girl-children especially those who may be from indigent backgrounds, to enable them get the basic education they may need to function maximally. Where there are incentives even those who would rather not send the girl to school may decide against such notions as they stand to really lose nothing.
- Government should work to eliminate negative cultural attitudes and practices against girls and so promote and protect the rights of the girl child and increase awareness of her needs and potentials.
- Society should promote the girl child's awareness of and participation in social, economic and political life.
- More schools and educational institutions should work towards awareness creation on issues of gender bias via seminars, symposiums, etc.
- Women at their individual levels must be in the fore front of the campaign against gender bias. A good starting point will be to change the way they train their own children, if one woman per household works towards that change far greater results will be achieved.

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