

***Ka Kwase Ikyur Gaa?* (Is it Not a
Woman with a Vagina?): An Expression of
Sexism in Tiv Traditional Society**

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Abstract

Sexism is an unfair treatment or discrimination based on differences in sex or gender. The paper is motivated by the misconception in Tiv traditional and the African society generally that the male gender is superior to the female gender. The study adopts the descriptive and analytic methods. In its data collection procedure, the primary and secondary sources were employed. The primary source is principally drawn from the oral interview and observation methods; while the secondary source draws information from documented sources in journals, books, newspapers/magazines. The paper established that sexism is a sad reality in Tiv and the African society at large where the male folk in demonstration of its superiority lords over women in deeds and actions demonstrative of sexism. Utterances such as: *ka kwase ikyur gaa?* Literary “is it not a woman with a vagina?” condemns the womenfolk perpetually as they are dismissed with a wave of the hand and not taken seriously. The implication of this and similar utterances is that it dampens the spirit of the woman who is condemned to a state of nothingness and irrelevance. No society can develop with this attitude of sexism and derogatory and denigrating utterances against the womenfolk. The paper calls on the male-dominant Tiv society to have a rethink as women are also capable of impacting society positively.

Key words: *Kwase*, Sexism, Tiv traditional Society

Introduction

“In such state, where there is no standard to regulate man’s behaviour; the strong prey upon the weak; the strong prevail and the weak perish”.¹ Sexism is a global threat that has brought a lot of setbacks to the development of contemporary society and need to be tackled or confronted head-on. Suffice it to state the obvious fact that sexism and hate against women are phenomena occasioned by age-long socialisation that is romanced by the contemporary society, especially in Nigeria perpetrated with the instruments of culture, custom and religion.

Sibani shares the sentiment above when he wrote that gender inequality in our society today is among the most prevalent forms of social inequality which exists all over the world, with different effects in different religions. He maintains that these differences are primarily due to cultural legacies, historical development, geographical location and religious norms which predominates the society.²

The above scenario on the menace of sexism is true of the Tiv traditional society where sexist; derogatory speech and uncomplimentary utterances are directed at women and the girl child. It is therefore not uncommon to hear sexist remarks from the male-dominated Tiv society such as *ka kwase ikyur gaa?* Literally, *is it not a woman with a vagina?* This is a sexist and derogatory utterances meant to demean the woman and make her irrelevant.

The question that comes readily to mind is that at creation did *Aondo* (God) not create the woman with a vagina? These negative remarks and utterances directed at the female folk do not portray the Tiv as operating in a society which wants to develop with both the male and the female folk making complementary contributions. In contemporary Tiv society too, the story has not changed; thus, if a male child fails in mathematics in his results, the father is most likely to ask him,

1 Ayantayo, J.K. *21 Habits that Damage Life and Relationships*. (Samprints and Graphics, 2014) Pg.6.

2 Sibani, Clifford Meesua. “Gender Inequality and its Challenges to Women Development in Nigeria: The Religious” available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/ujah.v18i2.25>. accessed 21/03/2020.

are you a woman that you should fail mathematics? It was also said football is not a woman's game but the story has now changed.

The above episode clearly shows or gives the impression that women are not good at anything; especially in tasks perceived to be difficult. The paper thus is concerned with examining the expressions and manifestations of sexism in Tiv traditional society. The effect of these will be highlighted and viable suggestions made to mitigate the problem.

Conceptual Spadework

Sexism:

This is a belief which holds that people of the other sex or gender are inherently superior to people of the other gender. Sexism breeds the unfair treatment or discrimination based on a difference of sex or gender. Regarding Tiv traditional society, the male-dominant gender prizes itself as being inherently superior to the female gender. This attribute gives impetus to hate speech perpetrated against women and female wards.

Linda Napikoski states that Sexism means discrimination based on sex or gender or the belief that men are superior to women and thus, discrimination is justified. Such a belief can be conscious or unconscious.³ In sexism, as in racism, the differences between two (or more) groups are viewed as an indication that one group is superior or inferior. Sexist discrimination against girls and women is a means of maintaining male domination and power. Oppression or discrimination can be economic, political, social, or cultural. Thus, included in sexism are:

- Sexist attitudes or ideology, including beliefs, theories, and ideas that hold one group (usually male) as deservedly superior to the other (usually female), and that justify oppressing members of the other group based on their sex or gender.

³ Linda Napikoski. "Sexism". Available at: <https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-sexism-3529186>. accessed 21/03/2020.

- Sexist practices and institutions, how oppression is carried out. These need not be done with a conscious sexist attitude but may be unconscious cooperation in a system which has been in place already in which one sex (usually female) has less power and goods in the society.

Sexism is a form of oppression and domination. Thus, simple peck-order bullying is only the beginning of the kind of hierarchical behaviour that can lead to racism, sexism, ethnocentrism, classism, and all the other 'isms' that cause so much suffering in the world. Some feminists have argued that sexism is the primal, or first, a form of oppression in humanity and that other oppression are built on the foundation of oppression of women. Sexism is the foundation on which all tyranny is built. Every social form of hierarchy and abuse is modeled on male-over-female domination.⁴

Sexism is prejudice or discrimination based on a person's sex or gender. Sexism can affect anyone, but it primarily affects women and girls. It has been linked to stereotypes and gender roles and may include the belief that one sex or gender is intrinsically superior to another. Extreme sexism may foster sexual harassment, rape, and other forms of sexual violence. Gender discrimination may encompass sexism and is discrimination toward people based on their gender identity or their gender or sex differences. Gender discrimination is especially defined in terms of workplace inequality.

Sociology has examined sexism as manifesting at both the individual and the institutional level. Sexism is perpetuated by all major social institutions. Sociologists describe parallels among other ideological systems of oppression such as racism, which also operates at both the individual and institutional level. Early female sociologists Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Ida B. Wells, and Harriet Martineau described systems of gender inequality but did not use the term *sexism*, which was coined later.

⁴ Linda Napikoski. "Sexism". Available at: <https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-sexism-3529186>. Accessed 21/03/2020.

On her perspective of the origin of the word sexism, Linda Napikoski explained that sexism became widely known during the Women's Liberation Movement of the 1960s. At that time, feminist theorists explained that the oppression of women was widespread in nearly all human society, and they began to speak of sexism instead of male chauvinism. Whereas male chauvinists were usually individual men who expressed the belief that they were superior to women, sexism referred to collective behaviour that reflected society as a whole.⁵

It was not until the feminist writers of the 1970s made them up, and used them publicly and defined their meanings – an opportunity that men had enjoyed for centuries – that women could name these experiences of their daily life.” Many women in the feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s (the so-called Second Wave of feminism) came to their consciousness of sexism via their work in social justice movements. Individual heterosexual women came to the movement from relationships where men were cruel, unkind, violent and unfaithful. Many of these men were radical thinkers who participated in movements for social justice, speaking out on behalf of the workers, the poor, speaking out on behalf of racial justice. However, when it came to the issue of the gender they were as sexist as their conservative cohorts.⁶

Theoretical Perspective

This paper is premised on the Reference Group Theory. The Reference Group Theory propounded by Cooley Charles Horton in 1902, is a general conceptual framework that assumes that individuals' attitudes, values, and self-appraisals are shaped, in part, by their identification with, and comparison to, reference groups. A reference group theory of self-concept, for example, assumes that individuals compare their economic, intellectual, social, and cultural achievements to those attained by members of their reference group. Similarly, a reference

5 Linda Napikoski. "Sexism". Available at: <https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-sexism-3529186>. Accessed 21/03/2020.

6 Linda Napikoski. "Sexism". Available at: <https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-sexism-3529186>. Accessed 21/03/2020.

group theory of values suggests that individuals adopt the values expressed by the majority of the members of their reference group. Cooley offered discussions relating closely to the concepts of reference group theory.⁷ Cooley discussed how individuals took on various mental or psychological interpretations of themselves based on how individuals thought others perceived them. Cooley stated:

In a large and interesting class of cases the social reference takes the form of a somewhat definite imagination of how one's self - that is any idea he appropriates - appears in a particular mind, and the kind of self-feeling one has is determined by the attitude towards this attributed to that other mind. A social self of this sort might be called the reflected or looking-glass self... as we see our face, figure, and dress in the glass, and are interested in them because they are ours, and pleased or otherwise with them according as they do or do not answer to what we should like them to be; so in imagination we perceive in another's mind some thought of our appearance, manners, aims, deeds, character, friends, and so on, are variously affected by it.⁸

Hence came Cooley's famous quote: 'Each to each a looking-glass reflects the other that doth pass'.⁹ He argued that a self-idea of this sort seems to have three principle elements: the imagination of our appearance to the other person; the imagination of his judgment of that appearance; and some sort of self-feeling, such as pride or mortification. The comparison with a looking glass hardly suggests the second element, the imagined judgment, which is quite essential.

7 Cooley, Charles Horton. *Human nature and the social order*. (New York: Schocken Books, 1964), Pg.183

8 Cooley, Charles Horton. *Human nature and the social order*, Pg.183-184

9 Cooley, Charles Horton. *Human nature and the social order*, Pg. 184

By implication, Cooley is saying that an individual's perception of what he or she thinks other people think about them affects in some manner the way that individual perceives or feels about him or herself. In this example, another person, or group of people, influence the individual's perception, and consequently his or her attitudes, behaviours, and norms. In this wise, sexist speeches among the Tiv aim to deprive women of human qualities, personality, or dignity: such as to subject them to conditions or treatment that are inhuman or degrading. Hence, women's perception of what they think other people think about them affects in some manner, the way that they perceive or feel themselves. Hate speeches like *ka kwase kyur gaa* dehumanises women and reduces them to an object. Meanwhile, behaviourally, dehumanisation describes a disposition towards others that debases the others' individuality as either an individual species or an individual object, e.g. someone who acts inhumanely and is not capable of proper reasoning.

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The Tiv traditional society is male chauvinistic dominant. Given this sexist expression, use of foul language, discrimination, expression of insult and the like which are manifestations of sexism abound and are openly perpetrated by men against women and by extension, female children. For instance the expression *ka kwase ikyur gaa?* (Is it not a woman with a vagina?) is a sexist expression employed by Tiv men to demean the woman.

Apart from the expression being vulgar, it seeks to dismiss the woman with a wave of the hand; making her look irrelevant next to nothing. This expression in Tiv also finds its way in the pidgin *abeg no be woman?... wetin she sabi?* (Sorry, is it not a woman...what does she know?). Lamenting this trend of event Ayantayo averred that: "Many men treat women

contemptuously because of gender difference".¹⁰ According to him, such men believe that women are inferior to men and therefore should not be treated with much respect.

This outlook makes the woman an encumbrance, a liability, bad debt and a group that does not contribute to wealth creation but mismanages it as soon as the man brings same. Sibani notices this phenomenon where he averred that:

The position of women in the Nigerian culture (the Tiv inclusive) was dependence oriented hence a common address to women as *oriaku* - the consumer of wealth. This is to say that women do not play a significant role in the production of wealth in the family. They depend on their husbands for their economic welfare that is why a majority of the women still value the wealth given to them by men as against the backdrop of feeding themselves.¹¹

Kwase shi sha ime mnger er ka jime tso yo; (literary meaning, women depends on water like the back of a canoe), the Tiv would say, thus, depicting the women as mere consumers, but not a producer. Even when eating food, the Tiv claim that the men eat better than women hence; the expression, "*ka nyi u ye kwagh veembee - veembee er ka kwase nahana?* (Why are you eating sluggishly like a woman?). A person (man) should by implication eat with the agility of a warrior and await anything that may crop up.

Other utterances and expressions which are manifestations of sexism and hate speech used by Tiv men to show the superiority of the male over the female gender abound. For instance, the Tiv men will tell a woman that "*kwase nyanden ken ikpe ga*" or *kwase nyanden gbanger angahar* (a woman can never urinate in a bottle or that a woman urinates with her legs spread apart). These are expressions meant to show the

10 Ayantayo, J.K. *21 Habits that Damage Life and Relationships*. (Samprints and Graphics, 2014)

11 Sibani, Clifford Meesua. "Gender Inequality and its Challenges to Women Development in Nigeria: The Religious", Pg. 437

woman her limitations; hence, she is incapable of doing that which the man can do.

Also, Tiv men use uncomplimentary language which is direct expressions of sexism on the woman especially in trying moments when the couples are experiencing difficulty in bearing children especially, what Apenda and Adegga refer to as the male child syndrome. They observe that cultural permissiveness considers infertility a serious threat to the continuation of the family line, such that even violence can be visited on the woman without apology.¹²

Similarly, Jooji correctly observed that the absence of a male child accounts for the reason why most African men are never at peace with their spouse until she has given birth to a child (especially a boy).¹³ In such every difficult situation when the woman is both confused, concerned, afraid and uncertain of her fate and future; rather than be consoled by her husband; the man goes hey wire with hateful utterances such as *u marem wan u nomso ga u yem* (if you don't give me a male child, you will leave my house); as if the woman determines the sexes of babies or even makes babies herself. Most of the domestic conflicts and violence perpetrated on the women by men are so carried out simply because they are women; perceived to be of the weaker sex. O'Sullivan puts this in a better perspective where she observed that unequal power relationships and differences in social standing between men and women are the main reason for Sexual and Gender Based Violence (SGBV).¹⁴

Similarly, some Tiv men make denigrating utterances which are meant to hurt, criticize, besmirch, traduce, disparage, defame, degrade and belittle the woman making her appear worthless with such careless statements as "*kwase ka iwa gaa?*" Literally meaning "is the woman not a bitch?" which is a manifestation of sexism and hate speech directed at the womenfolk in traditional Tiv society. It would seem that

12 Apenda, Anthony Zaayem and Andrew Philips Adegga. "Domestic Violence: An Analysis of Wife Battering and the Conspiracy of African Culture". *ATE: Journal of African Religion and Culture*, vol.1. (Enugu: Hosanna, 2010), Pg. 45.

13 Jooji, Innocent. *Mending the Cracked Pot*. (Ibadan: Daily Graphics, 2003), Pg.39

14 O'Sullivan Veena. "Sexual and Gender-Based Violence: What Can Be Done?". *Footsteps Magazine*, Issue 106, 2018, Pg.3.

women have also tacitly succumbed to their fate and accepted these denigrating treatments as being right. A point to this assertion can be seen when a man/men visit a homestead in the absence of the man/husband and enquire: *Ka uno ve lu hen ya?* (Who is around in the compound?). The women would answer: *ka kasev tseghe, or ngu ga* (There is nobody (man), only the women are present). As odd as this may sound; Sibani has an explanation to this behaviour of the Tiv women. He posits that:

The resultant weakness of gender inequality has deprived women of the strength to rise and insist on a change in their environment for the sake of their families and children. Women fear the difficulties of living without a male companion in a man's world.¹⁵

The drama of sexism openly perpetrated by male gender against the female gender in Tiv traditional society continues with no signs yet for abatement. Akanni observes that it would appear that our generation normally blames women on almost every problem. According to him; if the child is wayward, he is said to be the child of his mother ¹⁶ It does not matter if the problem for which the woman is blamed is real, perceived or imagined.

The Implications of Sexism on Tiv Traditional Society

Sexism has varying and diverse implications on Tiv society, especially on the women who are at the receiving end of the gender supremacist struggle. First and foremost, and not restricted to the Tiv society, sexism has the consequences of fuelling the ambers of conflict.

Also, sexism renders the Tiv women ineffective and unproductive as a result of psychological trauma they go through. This is considered an economic disempowerment obstacle on the part of the women. This is because the "not good at" posture portrayed by men dampens the spirit of

¹⁵ Sibani, Clifford Meesua. "Gender Inequality and its Challenges to Women Development in Nigeria: The Religious", Pg. 437

¹⁶ Akanni, Gbile. *The Dignity of Manhood*. (Gboko: Peace House, 2007), pg. 7

women and draws them back from attaining their full potentials as individuals in the society. Furthermore, Sexism infringes on the fundamental rights of Tiv women. The repeated use of these denigrating expressions causes and reinforces the subjugation and subordination of women and other minorities.¹⁷

In recognition of the implication of sexism on the overall good and development of society, certain provisions have been made internationally and locally to curtail the menace. For instance, Article 20 of the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) states that *any advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence shall be prohibited by law.*

Again, the convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) prohibits all incitement of racism. In Nigeria, Section 45 of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 (as amended) provides for the suspension or restriction of the right of freedom of expression in appropriate situations... (a) in the interest of defence, public safety, public order, public morality or public health; or (b) for the purpose of protecting the rights and freedom of other persons.¹⁸

The provision of Article 20 of the ICCPR which Nigeria has ratified through accession in 1993 specifically requires member states to enact laws to prohibit hate speech; any advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence shall be prohibited by law.¹⁹ As relates to the sphere of politics, the Electoral Act, the Political Party Code of Conduct contains provisions that prohibit foul or abusive language and expressions of hate by political parties in Nigeria.²⁰

17 https://www.google.com/search?source=hp&ei=3WHDw_yHN825

18 Alkali, Terfa T., Faga Hemen Philip and Mbursa Jinatu. "Audience Perception of Hate Speech", Pg.171

19 Alkali, Terfa T., Faga Hemen Philip and Mbursa Jinatu. "Audience Perception of Hate Speech", Pg. 171-172

20 Alkali, Terfa T., Faga Hemen Philip and Mbursa Jinatu. "Audience Perception of Hate Speech", Pg.172.

Despite the above legal frameworks at both the local and international levels, it is pertinent to note that laws on sexism are a relatively new phenomenon that appeared in Europe for instance in the wake of the Second World War. The idea behind such laws was the intent of curbing the kinds of anti-Semitic and racist propaganda that gave rise to the holocaust. Many other countries have since followed suit in passing these laws.²¹ Not only that in some jurisdiction; sexism is not a legal term. In some other countries such as the United States sexism and denigrating speech is constitutionally protected.²²

It is to be noted that, laws against sexism can be classified into two viz: (1) Those intended to preserve public order and (2) Those intended to protect human dignity. Those designed to protect public order often require a higher threshold to be violated and are not frequently enforced. On the other hand, those meant to protect human dignity have a much lower threshold for violation and thus, tend to be more frequently enforced.²³

Kwase kpa ka or uma che (A woman is also a human being): De-emphasizing Sexism in Tiv Traditional Society

This section offers a leeway or way forward out of the phenomenon of sexism in Tiv society. In this perspective, Tiv men should note that no gender is superior over the other. This implies that if Tiv women exhibit some form of inadequacies, it is not peculiar to the female gender as men also have their limitations and inadequacies. This is boldly stating the obvious that there is no perfect man or woman.

This trend of viewing women negatively has also drifted into a contemporary society where any person that does anything wrong is equated with a woman for instance; a boy who makes crooked heaps of yams is reprimanded by his father as having made such heaps as if he was a woman. In politics, only men are capable, women are to be given 35% affirmative action to enable them to fill their quota.

21 www.rog-agency/publications/workshopmaterials/defyhatenow2016, 1

22 <https://guardian.ng/opinion/whose-hate-speech-threatens-national-unity>

23 <https://www.google.com/search?source...hate+speech>

Also, in admitting students into higher institutions in contemporary times, the girl child is offered admission into university with low cut off marks because she is a woman and thus, incapable achieving the cut off marks on her own. It is the woman who drives wrongly and teaches her pupils/students without enthusiasm. All these sexist utterances geared towards women are to be put in check if Tiv society wishes to make a mark on the ladder of development. Thus, the Tiv and all other male-dominated societies who have misogyny for women should put their contempt in check for the overall development of their societies.

Also, Tiv society and the Nigerian state, in general, must be conscientious through citizenship education by the National Orientation Agency (NOA) to stand up to shun and confront sexism and any use of vulgar or foul language against women. The constitutional rights of women must be protected to enable them to contribute their quota to nation-building and national development. This cannot be actualized with a feeling of uncertainty on the part of the women. The media also has a role to play in this matter. It should regulate media user's online behaviour especially on the social media that is not regulated. Individuals must be made to understand that sexism is a breeze that blows no one any good.

The various agencies of government saddled with the responsibility of enforcing the law on sexism and hateful behaviour should discharge their duties effectively and efficiently to deter other would-be violators. It is worthy to note that hence, the media is not the problem as regards sexism and hate speech in traditional Tiv society; the onus lies on the Tiv themselves who need to have a re-think concerning their behaviour towards, and treatment of women in their society generally. Towards this end, the role of the Tiv Traditional Council (TTC) led by the Tor Tiv V, His Royal Majesty Professor James Iorzua Ortese Ayatse is imperative. The traditional institution is called upon to vigorously campaign against the subjugation of women in Tivland. This will make the issue become a thing of the past.

The importance of women and the viable roles which they play in Tiv society cannot be overemphasised. For instance, at funerals in contemporary Tiv society; it is the women who through the levies on their husbands (in-laws) provide the bulk of the things or items needed for befitting burials. The women through their husbands (in-laws) provide mortuary bills, ambulance, coffins and caskets; pay grave diggers, *atoon a taav* (strands of tobacco), burial cloth, food and drinks, entertainment and chairs, etc.²⁴ The men do nothing other than use the avenue of death to impose heavy and frivolous levies meant to exploit their in-laws in the name of actualising a befitting burial for a deceased relation.²⁵ This is clearly what Jesus said in the synoptic of the scribes and Pharisees laying heavy loads on the people without supporting to lift such loads not even with a finger.

Conclusion

The paper has examined sexism in Tiv traditional society. It did not just establish that the phenomenon operates in Tiv society; but that it is rife. This is because of the male-dominated Tiv society in a bid to show that the women are of inferior gender, utter uncomplimentary and seemingly hurtful words against the womenfolk. Therefore, sexism and denigrating speech which render the women incompetent and irrelevant does not acknowledge the role of women towards the development of Tiv society in particular and Nigeria at large.

Tiv men must discontinue the chauvinistic attitude which depicts them as loathing, debasing, abhorring or detesting the woman in a bid to maintain their superiority over women through certain actions, they may be interpreted differently by other ethnic nationalities in Nigeria. It is no exaggeration that some women are more focused, more resilient, more reasonable and more determined by some so-called men who would jitter

24 Adeg, Andrew Philips. *The Ritual Symbolism of Death, Burial and Ku oron (inquest) in Tiv Religious Culture*. (Enugu: Hosanna Books, 2018), Pg.128-143

25 Adeg, Andrew Philips. "Death and Burial Ceremonies in Tivland and the Emerging Culture of Extortion". In Alana, E.O. et'al (eds). *The Making of a Man: Essays in Honour of Very Revd. Dr. Chris I. Utov*. (Nsukka: Obeta Printing and Publishing, 2013), Pg.296-298.

and fumble and fizzle out when confronted with the slightest of problems. Women deserve some level of respect which must be accorded them.

It is no fault of the woman that God created them male and female in His divine image (cf. Gen. 1:27); but God's plan that it be so. Thus, the Tiv men must change their negative attitude, behaviour and derogatory utterances to the womenfolk which show clear signs and manifestations of sexism for the better. In this respect, instead of such utterances as "*hii nan u gbe ichan er ka kwase nahana?*" (Why are you as lazy as a woman?) can be replaced with *hii nan u gbe ichan er ka or umache nahana?* (Why are you as lazy as a human being?). There may be some form of justification in this new rhetoric.

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