

TOWARDS IMPROVING GENDER RELATIONS IN NIGERIA: IMPLICATIONS FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Ali Arazeem Abdullahi¹, Shade D Adekeye¹ and Raheem Adaramoja Shehu²

¹Department of Sociology, University of Ilorin, Ilorin, Nigeria

²Department of Physical and Health Education, University of Ilorin, Nigeria

Abstract

In Nigeria, like in many other African countries, gender relation is always patriarchal in nature. It is within this context that this paper examines the issue of gender inequality in Nigeria. The paper describes the various dimensions of discrimination against women and the factors responsible. The paper concludes with plausible measures towards promoting gender equality in Nigeria, which of course, is necessary for sustainable national development.

Keywords: Gender, gender inequality, education, sustainable development, and Nigeria

BACKGROUND

The concept of development is a vague term. It is beclouded by controversies and difficulty given its different dimensions and manifestations. It is like “a beauty that lies on the eyes of the beholder”. For instance, Walter Rodney (1976) posits that development often takes place at micro (individual) and macro (society) levels. A macro level definition of development, according to Rodney, is when a State is able to harness its resources for the general well-being of the citizenry. In the most recent time, attention has been shifted to *sustainable development*; when development “meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of the future generations to meet their own needs” (Chinweze et al. 2009: 1168).

Over the past decades, the widespread ‘unequal’ power relation between men and women has attracted global concern and has turned out to be a crucial scholarly debate in developmental and academic discourses. This is further justified by the place and space occupied by women within the larger society. One of the major foci of the 1975 UN General Assembly conference was a critical examination of the problems and challenges that impede active participation of women in socio-political and economic development. At the Beijing conference also, intellectuals and policy makers brainstormed about the problems militating against active participation of women in development agenda. Recently, the Millennium Declaration overtly recognises the equal rights and opportunities for men and women. The third goal of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) specifically addresses the promotion of gender equality and women's empowerment.

Development experts and planners have conceptualised different developmental approaches aimed at institutionalising and achieving what can be termed as ‘global agreement’ on the status of women around the world. This is to facilitate an

equitable extension of moral and material benefits of development to individuals irrespective of their gender with a view to achieving sustainable development (Mbilizi, 1999). One of these approaches is Women in Development approach (WID). Quite a number of development planners and donor agencies have utilised this approach as strategy for providing welfare to historically disadvantaged groups in human society many of whom were women and children (Mbilizi, 1999). The approach aimed at increasing economic participation of women in development processes. The thinking behind this position was that such improvement is a prerequisite or a precondition for achieving gender equity that would usher in sustainable development.

Across developing societies like Nigeria, development approach using this paradigm became entrenched. Political elites and decision makers adopted and integrated this approach into sustainable development planning agenda for women. The establishment of the Federal Ministry of Women Affairs in 1995, the Better Life for Rural Women, the Family Support Programme (FSP) and the Family Economic Advancement Programme (FEAP) was aimed at strengthening women's role in development goals. Unfortunately, this form of approach to women development has been faulted for it fails to inculcate and achieve the actual development needs of women. Instead of achieving gender equity most development programmes using this approach have further deepened the crisis and even increased women subordination (see Ashfer, 1991; Charlton, 1984). Such was the case with development programmes in Nigeria many of which could not see the light of the day as they failed to achieve their stated objectives. In some cases, they were riddled with insurmountable corrupt practices that hampered their sustainability (Lewu, 2005).

Following the apparent failure of the WID, the gender analysis approach came to the fore in the early 1980s whose agenda was to concentrate on the issue of gender rather than sex (We shall come back to this later). According to the proponents of this approach, social roles for men and women are socially and culturally constructed and not necessarily the product of psychological and biological attributes (Mbilizi, 1999). Thus, gender analysis approach "represents a framework for facilitating the awareness and utilisation of knowledge on men and women as separate social categories with similar or separate needs in the design and implementation of development programmes" (quoted from Mbilizi, 1999: 26). While the unequal relationship of power between men and women is recognised by this approach, little or nothing is done to address the fundamental causes of unequal power relations between men and women. This eventually resulted in the conceptualisation of 'gender planning tradition' by Caroline Moser (1993) to address the fundamental lapses in this approach and to strengthen the approach as well. The gender planning approach takes into account the "fundamental issues pertaining to the in-built structural bias against women participating in power allocation or exerting influence on the critical questions of resource distribution" (Mbilizi, 1999: 27). This approach argues for drastic social change in achieving gender equality and women emancipation. The question is: to what extent can the gender planning strategy be integrated and implemented in societies like Nigeria where some kind of negative attitudes and beliefs towards women are culturally and socially entrenched?

Indeed, discrimination against women in Nigeria is manifested within and outside home. For instance, a significant number of women in Nigeria, which might include the highly placed women, are exposed to violence at home (domestic violence). At social level, especially with regards to the on-going democratic dispensation, fewer women are nominated for political appointments; less of them are honourable members of the State and National Assemblies; very few are Deputy Governors and none is a state Governor. According to Women's International League for Peace and Freedom

(WILPF) (2011) only about 3% of the House of Representative members are women. The situation of women is worsened in the rural areas where negative attitude and beliefs about women's participation in socio-economic development are culturally entrenched. A recent study by Chukwuemeka and Eze (2011) revealed that apart from violence against women, culture and traditional ethos are important factors that prevent women from participating in politics in Imo and Abia States respectively. These include marriage, widowhood, child marriage, and unilateral rejection of wives by husbands because they could not have children at all or bear male children. Therefore, there is the need to critically examine gender divisions in Nigeria with a view to have an understanding of the genesis of the problem and promote gender "equality" that could facilitate social integration and sustainable development.

CONCEPTUAL ISSUES

Except in few exceptional cases, a baby is either born as a boy or a girl. This is known as sex. From religious point of view, sex is biologically determined, permanent, unchangeable and God-given (Awopegba, 2004). While sex is biological, gender is socially defined. This argument became a prominent issue in the gender analysis approach to women emancipation (Mbilizi, 1999). In this approach, development planners, scholars and practitioners have continuously recognized the limitations of focusing on women in isolation (the focus point in WID) and the need to focus more on the issue of gender. It became understood that gender is socially and culturally constructed, and that differences between men and women's roles are fundamentally created by society, and not necessarily by any physiological or biological disadvantages or advantages (Mbilizi, 1999). Each society is believed to spell out roles to be played by male and female within the context of the culture of the society in question. In fact, there is hardly any society where men and women occupy equal social status even in the most liberal societies like the United States. This is because each individual gender has specific roles to perform and there are varying ways of awarding merit to these roles (Oyekanmi, 2005).

Over time, the tendency has been to assume that the males are superior and that the females are inferior, subordinate and weak. In some societies, this discrimination against the female is exhibited even before the child is born through sex preference for the male child, which may be shown in the deliberate termination of female foetus by the expectant mothers. Sometimes, female babies are deliberately starved in order to provide adequate nourishment for baby boys in case of food scarcity. Discrimination against the females in access to education and labour force participation has also been documented in many societies (Oyekanmi, 2005). This assumption of inferiority of women has been predicated on the belief that men or husband, as the case may be, go out of the house in order to work and earn income with which to provide for their family needs, a status that automatically crowns them the "breadwinners" of the family. For women they do household chores in addition to bearing children. This kind of patriarchal attitudes and gender bias that underline women's insubordination represent hidden impediment to social and economic development.

TRACING THE ORIGIN OF GENDER INEQUALITY IN NIGERIA: A HISTORICAL APPROACH

A cursory look at gender relations in the Nigerian society has revealed some level of discriminations against women. Such discrimination usually starts from birth where baby girls are subjected to certain behavioural and food taboos in the family. Girls in some traditional Nigerian societies are denied the simple right of existence in the minds of their fathers who are the family heads (Annan-Yao, 1998). This is a clear indication of son preference, detrimental to girls in the family. The discrimination is not limited to the family setting alone; it pervades all aspects including labour market, politics, health and educational sector.

There are prolific writers and intellectuals who have been rigorously and indefatigably concerned about tracing the socio-economic conditions of African woman and in deed that of Nigerian during the pre-colonial days. Their main preoccupation is to compare women's socio-economic and political positions in those days with the present, modern and industrial societies with a view to identify where things actually went wrong for the African woman. This became pertinent against the backdrop that colonialism and imperialism were major historical landmarks that have overwhelmingly affected and altered the socio-economic and political terrains and structures of Africa especially Nigerian's including the roles of women in these processes. Some of these intellectuals gave their contributions in literary forms. Popular among the literary contributors are Chinua Achebe, Sofola and Wole Soyinka.

In his "Things Fall Apart" Chinua Achebe clearly demonstrates the roles played by colonialism and imperialism in the dehumanisation of the African women particularly that of Nigerian. Achebe's novel suggests that things have not been the same again since the centre can no longer hold as a result of colonialism and imperialism hence things fall apart. Many of these scholars argued that while women in pre-colonial Africa societies were subordinate to men in terms of status and influence, there existed certain institutional relationships and arrangements that provided them a certain degree of prestige, power, and autonomy (Mbilizi, 1999). In fact, the relationship between men and women was regarded as healthy relationship. The healthiness was largely due to the traditional African social system and the form of division of labour that was actually in existence (Ityavyar and Obiajunwa, 1992). Women in many of these societies used to (and even now) cultivate their own food, sold surplus food products, provided health care and generated income through enterprising activities (Mbilizi, 1999). Comparing the Nigerian women before colonial contact with her White counterparts, Qualls (n.d) asserts that Nigerian:

...women retained certain economic opportunities within the social system. In fact, before the middle of the twentieth century, Nigerian women traditionally played a more significant role in society than did western women. Traditional or tribal society in Nigeria expected women to be significant wage earners in the family. They laboured in farming, fishing, herding, and commerce... which were the major economic activities then, along side Nigerian men... Women traditionally had the right to profit from their work... This economic freedom was much different from many western societies where women had to fight for the right to work.

In some societies, then and now, the matrilineal social structure put women in advantageous positions (Kate, 2007). Tuareg society in Nigeria is based upon matrilineal structure where women claim dominance. According to Kato (2003: 3), in Tuareg's culture:

The aristocratic powers are passed on by maternal descent. [A Tuareg woman] plays the central role all the way from marriage, till children's education passing by the home management. Tuareg women are entitled to property. Everything that materialises the family unit belongs to her, starting by the tent and its content. In case of separation, the man is only entitled to his pomp, and that is in the strict sense of the term. It is he who goes away from home leaving it intact. Without any exaggeration, the Tuareg man is perceived here as a simple parent and a supplier of subsistence material means. He faces danger

by virtue of his physical shape and natural tendency. All the achievements gained through his wild fight against nature are entrusted to the subtle intelligence women in order to manage them and preserve them from loss.

However, with the coming of the colonialists, the political and economic fortunes of the Nigerian women took a nose-dive because of the newly created social order that accompanied colonialism and imperialism. This new social order became more entrenched and institutionalised given the “Victorian Conception of Womanhood” which encouraged the public invisibility of women saying that women should be seen and not be heard (Lewu, 2005). This conception and conceptualisation of womanhood further portrayed women as “mere exhibitions of their husbands’ wealth, as appendages, leading to systematic marginalisation of Nigerian women and eventually resulting in the minimising of their economic, political and social roles in traditional Nigerian society”. Following this, the Nigerian educational, legal, social and political systems were altered to favour Nigerian men. The socio-cultural practices such as bride services became commercialised and commoditized and automatically entrenched in the new capitalist social order (Ityavyar and Obiajunwa, 1992).

Also connected with colonialism and imperialism is the widespread impact of urbanisation and globalisation phenomena on gender awareness. According to Ityavyar and Obiajunwa (1992) urbanisation has compelled the husbands to migrate to town and cities in the search of greener pastures and better living conditions. According to them this movement affected women in two ways. Those who stayed in the rural areas assumed an added responsibility of providing for the extended family left behind by men who had migrated to towns to be employed in the colonial bureaucracy and those that followed their husbands to towns had no choice than turning to petty trading who also had to fall back on their husbands for business money. A study by Ityavyar (1990) found that Tiv women had similar problems which were directly caused by forces of imperialism and urbanisation. These events, according to many scholars, marked the end of African and Nigerian women’s dignity and the beginning of gender crisis. Kato (2003:1) noted that:

The Tuareg woman is confronted almost every day with the harrowing problems inferred by globalization, by the insecure conditions of life and by the sociocultural transformations laid down by both. The objective being to well place its role in the sustainable development chain, especially in the fields of schooling and girls education, environmental protection, hygiene and purification, health and food, literacy teaching, and awareness raising on STDs and the HIV/AIDS.

MANIFESTATIONS OF GENDER INEQUALITY IN NIGERIA

Gender division or inequality permeates all aspects of Nigerian life. They manifest in the family institution, educational sector, labour market, politics and social service institutions. A close examination of girl’s and women’s situation in the family reveals a lot of discrimination. Girls in some traditional Nigerian societies are denied the simple right to existence in the minds of their fathers who are the family heads. This is clear indication of son preference, detrimental to girls in the family. In some Nigerian communities, particularly in the closed, patrilineal communities, girls are considered to be transitory members of their families because the ultimate aim of the parents is to marry them-out obligatorily into other families sooner or later. Male family members therefore try to take advantage of the transient nature of girls in their birth-homes to buttress the idea that they do not benefit their families and are therefore of no value to their birth families.

In the educational sector, inequality between men and women is obvious. Discrimination against women in education is a common practice in many parts of Nigeria, particularly in the northern parts. Many of those who attempt to go to school are usually given out for marriage sometimes before the end of their primary education, while their male counterparts may continue to attain higher levels of education. This attitude towards women education is most inimical to the development of the families and the basic social structure in the society. The result of this lopsidedness in education between men and women is that few women become empowered and participate in the labour force, especially in teaching. In 1990, a simple head count showed that there were about 27 female professors in the country compared to 1,500 male professors representing only 1.8 percent of professors in Nigeria (Akande, 1996). The main reason adduced to this is that the number of women who benefited from higher education is generally less than those of men. The trend has continued in the same direction in the 21st century. The table below clearly shows gender disparity in the academic staff profile in selected Nigerian Universities.

Table 1: Academic Staff Profile in Selected Universities Showing Disparity in Gender (2001/2002)

UNIVERSITY	PROFESSORS		OTHERS		TOTAL
	MALE	FEMALE	MALE	FEMALE	
Federal University of Technology, Owerri	50	2	307	30	389
Abubakar Tafabalewa University, Bauchi	28	0	248	27	303
University of Nigeria, Nsukka	205	21	827	209	1262
University of Lagos, Akoka	198	27	605	200	1027
Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria	131	6	1005	127	1269
University of Ibadan	253	38	725	247	1263
Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife	208	7	743	143	1101
University of Benin	173	11	525	130	839
University of Jos, Jos	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Nnamdi Azikwe University	46	4	305	118	473
Bayero University Kano, Kano	37	0	418	56	511
University of Ilorin, Ilorin	128	5	415	57	605
University of Maiduguri	141	3	1356	127	1627
University of Calabar	81	4	508	139	732
Usman Danfodio University, Sokoto	18	0	318	11	347
University of Port Harcourt	64	3	482	103	652
University of Uyo	38	0	656	133	827
University of Abuja	14	0	731	264	1009
University of Agriculture, Abeokuta	26	2	230	79	337
University of Agriculture, Umudike	15	3	14	36	158
Nigeria Defence Academy, Kaduna	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
University of Agriculture, Markudi	22	0	308	50	380
Federal University of Technology, Minna	16	0	206	33	255
Federal University of Technology, Akure	55	4	277	50	386
Federal University of Technology, Yola	11	0	266	23	300
Imo State University, Owerri	39	3	152	36	332
Ogun State University	35	7	447	103	592
University of Ado-Ekiti	24	1	271	36	332
Enugu State University	29	2	274	57	362
Abia State University, Uturu	20	2	292	45	369
Lagos State University	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Ladoke Akintola University, Ogbomosh	23	0	244	90	334
Benue State University Markudi	11	0	189	24	224
Delta State University	38	2	321	71	432
Ambrose Ali University, Ekpoma	29	0	331	58	418
Rivers State Uni. of Science and Technology	35	5	411	5	502
Madonna University Okija	13	2	72	20	107
Igbinedon University Okada	9	1	61	7	78
Babcock University Remo	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Bowen University Iwo	11	3	6	16	80
Ondo State University, Akungba	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA

SOURCE: NUC (2001/2002), Balogun, (2006)

In the labour force, men constitute the bulk of the industrial work force. The sustenance of the family is largely from the income from this sector while females supplement with earnings from petty trading and sales of farm products (Osunyikanmi, 2000). Females constitute little percent of the total labour force in Nigeria and are mostly found in small-scale enterprises including petty-trading and food production. They engage in craft-making, weaving of cloth, animal

husbandry and planting, transformation and commercialization of agricultural produce. Hence, Kankwenda et al., (2000) argues that between 70% and 75% of Sub-Saharan African food crops are produced by women.

In the formal sector of the Nigerian economy, women's access to employment is more difficult due to some ill-conceived societal biases. In fact, being a woman is a supplementary obstacle to finding objective jobs (African Development Report, 2000). The report graphically illustrated the adverse decline in Nigerian women labour-force, which stood at 29.7% in 1980, reduced to 28.0 in 1990 and 14.3 in 1994 (Osunyikanmi, 2000).

In governance, the problems of gender divisions are equally obvious. An examination of the political system in Nigeria shows great disparities in favour of men. Many reasons abound for low females' participation in active politics. Females who try to succeed in politics discover that the hurdles they have to face whether based on cultural factors such as tradition, state-imposed legal restriction and policies, which is further compounded by the obstacle of their birth. The natural physiological and biological differences between the sexes as well as religious beliefs have greatly hindered the effective participation of females in politics (Omede, 2002).

Historically, the representation of gender in the decision-making of the political parties has been well documented (Ogunsola, 1996). This was shown in the composition of the defunct National Republican Convention (NRC) and Social Democratic party (SDP) of the incomplete Third Republic. The composition revealed blatant gender disparities in the decision-making bodies of the parties. In NRC, at the local government level, females constituted 4.21% while male constituted 79%. The same trend was observed in SDP where females who occupied executive positions at the grass-root level constituted about 4.0% while that of men was 96.0% (Ogunsola, 1996).

The low participation of women in the executive bodies of political parties explains why fewer women have been nominated as candidates for elections. Under the second republic (1979-1983), in the senate elections, out of the 479 contestants only four were women. In the election into Federal House of Representatives, out of the 2,000 candidates presented for election by political parties, only ten were women. In the aborted third republic, out of 330 governorship aspirants only nine were women and none of them won their party nomination. Given the small number of women in decision-making organs of political parties, their views could be easily ignored (Olojede, 1999).

A cursory look at the country's political landscape during the first part of fourth republic (1999-2003) shows that there was only one woman as Deputy Governor (Mrs. Kofoworola Akerele Bucknor of Lagos State) among thirty six (36) Deputy Governors nation-wide. There were also only three female senators (Stella Omu, Florence Ita-Giwa and Khairat Abdul Rasaq-Gwadabe) in a senate of 109 members. In the Federal House of Representatives, of 360 members only 12 were female. Out of the 36 heads of the legislative houses in the country, only one, Mrs. Margaret Ishen was the speaker of Benue State House of Assembly. And out of the 774 local government party chairmen in the country, there was only one female (Mrs. Esther Nakhere Amadasun). More so, out of the 70 political (ministerial) appointees, less than 10 of them were women. In addition, out of more than 200 appointments into federal parastatals and government agencies, less than 20 women benefited from this largesse (Olojede, 2002). The same trend continued in the second part of the fourth republic (2003-2007) hence, the need for tracing the genesis of gender disparity in Nigeria.

Discrimination against women has serious implications on health matters among the women folk. Some Nigerian communities tend to differentiate between girls and boys in health matters because of socio-cultural beliefs. This generally happens in communities where son preference is prevalent and where girls are not considered as members of their birth-family because they are usually married off and have to leave home (Annan-Yao, 1998). In some parts of Nigeria, girls tend to be more under-nourished than boys of the same age and are taken for medical treatment and vaccinations less frequently-especially if there is a fee for the services (Economic Centre for Africa [ECA], 1997).

The situation is worse in most rural societies where girls are generally faced with the obligation to help their mothers in the household chores of fetching wood and water, cooking, cleaning-up, attending to family members etc. This implies heavy and long working hours for the girls. Hard-work and inappropriate diet tell on girls' health and place them at disadvantage compared to boys. Unfortunately, when girls become teenagers, they are exposed to gender specific reproductive health problems like early pregnancy due to early marriages and premature sex, unwanted pregnancy, abortion, sexual exploitation and commercial sex and consequences of STD and HIV/AIDS. This explains why pregnancy, childbirth and abortion related mortality and morbidity are high in Nigeria and adolescent girls form a great part of these figures. For instance, of the over 500 000 women known to die from complications associated with pregnancy and child birth world wide annually, over 55,000 deaths occur in Nigeria. Of the two million women affected by fistulas in the developing countries more than 40% are Nigerians (Okonofua, 2007).

TOWARDS IMPROVING GENDER RELATIONS: IMPLICATIONS FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

In the past decade, there have been unprecedented socio-political commitments to sustainable development policies in national and international domains. The World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in Johannesburg, South Africa in 2002 marked a significant turning point in the world's efforts towards the goal of sustainable development. One of the cardinal objectives of the summit was to sensitise international governments in the formulation and implementation of policies that better conserve natural resources, improve health conditions and services, and generally enhance peoples' lives worldwide (Robinson, 2004). The summit assumes a collective responsibility to advancing and strengthening the "interdependence and mutually reinforcing pillars" of sustainable development that include socio-economic development and environmental protection (Aluko, 2011; Chinweze et al. 2009). Thus, sustainable development at the local levels is believed to hinge upon improving the quality of life of the local populace with a transition towards meeting their basic needs, reducing hunger and poverty (Chinweze et al. 2009). The summit brought to the fore the need to involve women in achieving this objective through active participation in the economy, politics, and the overall economic growth. Indeed, through their involvement in agricultural and food production, and unique role in social reproduction, women are continuously seen as assets to achieving sustainable development anywhere in the world.

Retrospectively, previous governments in Nigeria have made consistent efforts towards empowering one of the most disadvantaged groups in Nigeria: the women particularly the rural women. However, the chunk of this effort was at the Federal level of governance. Little effort is being made at the Local and State levels to empower the women folk. The establishment of the Directorate for Food, Roads and Rural Infrastructure (DFRRI), the Better Life Programme (BLP), the People's Bank of Nigeria (PBN), the Community Banks Programmes, the Family Support Programme (FSP), the Family Economic Advancement Programme (FEAP) and the National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP) is an important step towards poverty alleviation and women empowerment. However, the programmes have achieved very

little in empowering the women folk for reasons that ranged from ill-defined policy framework, insufficient infrastructural facilities, deterioration on fiscal disciplines, lack of political will to corruption, nepotism and mismanagement (Anger, 2010). The question then is what sustainable measures can be taken by the government and policy makers in Nigeria to empower and encourage the Nigerian women to actively participate in development process?

Many scholars have argued that sustainable development and women empowerment can not be achieved without improving women's access to good and sound education (Ojobo, 2008; Stella, 2007). The United Nations Decade on Education for Sustainable Development (UNDESD) 2005 to 2014 has urged societies to re-orient their educational systems towards sustainability. The overall goal is to integrate the principles, values and practices of sustainable development into all aspects of learning which will encourage change in behaviour to create a more sustainable future in terms of environmental integrity, economic viability and a just society for the present and future generations (UNESCO, 2005).

The Federal Republic of Nigeria through the Nigerian National Policy on Education (Ojobo, 2008: 93) recognises education as an important “instrument per-excellence for effective national development” and “a dynamic instrument of change”. Indeed, it is a cornerstone for sustainable development and a catalyst for women empowerment and sustainable development in Nigeria (Ojobo, 2008). Eniayeju (n.d) has specifically argued that empowering girl-child mathematically is an important measure to acquire the intellectual capacity that would allow her to contribute very meaningfully to sustainable socio-political, technological development. UNESCO (2005: 1) explains the connection between sound and good education and sustainable development:

Education is a fundamental human right and the most powerful lever for the promotion of welfare, civic and social advancement, the progress of democracy and respect for human rights, the building of peace and the promotion of an environment that allows pluralism, knowledge – including scientific and technological knowledge – and cultural diversity to prosper. As such, it is a precondition for sustainable development, economic growth and poverty reduction.

However, studies have indicated sharp differences in university enrollment between male and female students. In a recent study Omoike (2009) examined the admission rates of females from the South-South Nigeria into Nigerian universities. Although the rate of female enrollment into the Universities from the South-South Nigeria has increased, the study found a relatively low enrollment when compared to their male counterparts. For instance, the study shows that there has been a steady increase in admissions into universities from the south-south geopolitical zone of Nigeria between 2000 and 2004; from 12 335 in 2000 to 34 518 in 2004. However, the males dominated the admission from 2001 to 2004. The dominance was prominent in all the six states with the only exception being in 2002 admission for Akwa-Ibom with 50.2% for females as against 49.8% for males (Omoike, 2009). Of all the states in the zone, only Delta and Rivers States consistently had female enrolment rate of slightly above 40% for the five year period of the study (2000-2004). In 2004 admission, all the states with the exception of Bayelsa had above 40% female enrollment. Edo State had slightly above 40% enrolment in 2003 (Omoike, 2009).

As argued earlier, in some part of Nigeria women education is culturally prohibited. In some, constraints to the realisation of the girls' rights to education are persistent erroneous beliefs and ideologies about girl's education and financial predicament. Government, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and policy makers need to work out modalities that would attempt to educate the parents of young girls in order to try to change the mentalities that promote or harbour negative ideologies about the Western education. The Nigerian government at all levels particularly at Local Government level must set aside special budgets for female education in terms of bursaries and scholarships. Good and sustainable education can allow women to take active part in development process while still retaining the essential cultural values of their society.

Women are the principal custodians of the environmental and natural resources including the land. Women represents about 49% of the Nigerian population with their productive and reproductive functions cutting across such activities as performing household chores, income earning activities, community participation and community management roles (Aina, 2003).

Through their participation in agricultural production, women particularly in the Niger Delta region, provide the basic needs of their households that include food and shelter (Chinweze et al. 2009). However, for cultural reasons, most of these women have limited access to land especially where land is inherited patrilineally, which means that "women obtain usufructuary rights to land from their husbands' lineage group... [and that their] land use rights are less secure than men's, because they apply only as long as they [, the women,] remain married" (Robinson, 2003: 592-593). The United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (Southern African region) (2003), has indicated that providing security of land tenure is a precondition for intensifying agricultural production and it is increasingly being stressed as a prerequisite for better natural resource management and sustainable development (Economic Commission for Africa, 2003). It is, therefore, imperative for a sustainable land reform in Nigeria that takes cognisance of the economic contributions of women to socio-economic development.

Nigeria is one of the richest countries in Africa endowed with abundant natural and human resources. Nigeria is the largest oil producing country in Africa and the 6th in the world. Unfortunately, the poverty situation in the country is pathologically and ridiculously high. Reports have indicated that more than 70% of the Nigerian population still lives in abject poverty of less than a dollar per day (Duggan, 2009) where the most affected being women and children. Aluko (2011) has strongly argued for a connection between gender inequalities and widespread poverty in the Nigerian households. Therefore, poverty eradication remains a priority to the emancipation and empowerment of the Nigerian women and sustainable development. But the question is how?

Some scholars have advocated for women entrepreneurship as a tool for economic development through the sponsorship of micro credit programmes (Adepelumi, n.d). The belief is that micro credit programmes are capable of improving agricultural produces and seeds which shall enhance the overall level of agricultural output for consumption and foreign trade. Based on this, microfinance has become to be seen as a central component of many donor agencies' and national governments' gender, poverty alleviation, and community development strategies. However, numerous studies and experiences have indicated that simply putting financial resources in the hands of poor women is not enough to bringing about empowerment, improved welfare and sustainable development. Besides, a number of micro-finance institutions [MFIs] have been accused of providing decreasing parentages of loans for the women folk simply because men still

dominate the system. Yet, studies have persistently indicated that when properly designed and implemented microfinance can make an important contribution to women empowerment and a sustainable development (Zdpojewki, 2001; Zafar, 2001).

The Nigerian political terrain is conspicuously dominated by men. Women occupy a very small portion of the political landscape in Nigeria. Hassan-Liman (2005) has called for a full utilization of women in the development of human resources that would bring about their acceptance in every phase of national development with equal rights and corresponding obligations. She further pointed out that women should be encouraged to participate in national and local political activities by removing all socio-cultural and economic barriers militating against their effective involvement in the developmental process. This shall require an expansion and flexibility of the Nigerian political landscape to accommodate the women folk (Osunyikanmi, 2000). This became important against the report of the World Bank (2001) that indicated that societies that discriminate on the basis of gender pay by greater poverty, slower economic growth, weaker governance and a lower living standard of the people.

Furthermore, Nigerian government should take every appropriate step to ensure that national legislation provides an adequate framework for effective legal measures against cultural and social factors that promote gender divisions in the country. Therefore, there is the need for the enactment of legislation and the need to follow it to the latter to make it a heinous offence to discriminate against women, to practice abusive early marriage and other harmful practices. Ojie (2002) called for legislations that prohibit discrimination against women as well as enactment of appropriate mechanisms for effective enforcement.

As a corollary of the above is the promotion of cultural re-orientation towards equality of person, irrespective of sex. Advocacy by government and non-governmental organizations should include sensitizing people that men and women are vital to development process. Hassan-Liman (2005) recommends the need for appropriate fora, conferences, symposium, round-tables to enlighten and sensitize the general public to those practices, which are repugnant to equity, good conscience and natural justice such as customary law relating to widowhood as well as violence against women etc. Besides, development activities must be gender-sensitive i.e. government functionaries should conduct gender analysis of development programmes and projects to ensure that they do not render women powerless.

Conclusively, this paper has traced the history of gender inequality and argues that colonialism and imperialism marked the end of African woman dignity and indeed that of Nigerian woman. While the paper believes that the sharp gender division in Nigeria is not palatable for national integration and development it opposes the view that gender division can be completely eradicated given the patriarchal structures and religious values, beliefs and norms that support male dominance. Nevertheless, the adoption and implementation of recommended policy measures will go along way in improving gender relation in the Nigerian society thereby enhancing the task of national development in the 21st century and the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals and sustainable development.

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- ABOUT THE AUTHORS:**
 Ali Arazeem Abdullahi and Shade D Adekeye: Department of Sociology, University of Ilorin, Ilorin, Nigeria.
 Raheem Adaramoja Shehu: Department of Physical and Health Education, University of Ilorin, Nigeria