

Gender Issues, Social Change and Sustainable Development

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Abstract:- Gender equality is a fundamental human right. No society can make any meaningful progress when there is inequality. This is mainly because gender-based inequality promotes social injustices, discrimination as well as poverty among the discriminated sex; this phenomena directly contradicts the principles of sustainable development as well as good governance. Gender inequality also undermines inclusiveness, which is a significant growth accelerator. Gender issues are greatly influenced by culture, level of education, religion and the theory of the supremacy of one sex over the other; the very nature of the underlying causes of gender inequality makes the arrival at a lasting solution to global gender challenge a hard nut to crack. Women are important aspect of the society, whose contributions spans beyond building a sustainable family to building a sustainable society, the realization of women's potential is an essential driver not only for economic growth but for achieving full sustainable development, both for the current generation as well as future ones. Gender issues have a significant impact on social change and sustainable development. Because the inequitable distribution of power in gender relations, the exercise of rights, access and control of resources and participation in decision-making processes remain a significant setback to the holistic development of women, as well as to their chances of benefiting from the dividends of democracy. As a consequence, examining the nexus between development and gender inequality and how they interact with other factors affecting sustainable development, therefore, becomes imperative. This paper, therefore, is set to explore concepts, issues and relationship between gender issues, social change and sustainable development.

Keywords:- Gender Equality, Gender-Based Discrimination, Social Change, Sustainable Development.

I. INTRODUCTION

The attainment of sustainable development is mainly dependent on the availability of social structures which supports equal opportunities for both male and female members of the society. Gender issues are comprised of socially constructed barriers, which affects perception, and equitable access to economic, social and political opportunities in the society(Esquivel, & Sweetman, 2016).

Gender issues are typified in all forms of injustice perpetrated against women which are influenced by socially constructed differences; it includes such issues as unequal access to employment opportunities, lack of women's participation in decision-making process, inequitable representation, a near-total absence of women in the political arena especially in developing countries like Nigeria as well as the socially ascribed roles and duties of women in the society cum all forms of violence based on the notion of "maleness and femaleness".

Gender-based inequality is a global problem which has generated a broad spread concern among governments of developed and developing countries, world organizations as well as other important stakeholders in the fight for the creation of a society which harbours equal opportunities for both male and female members of the society(Edström, Hassink, Shahrokh, & Stern, 2015). Gender issues are greatly influenced by culture, level of education, religion and the theory of the supremacy of one sex over the other; the very nature of the underlying causes of gender inequality arrives at a lasting solution to global gender challenge a hard nut to crack. Though the fight for gender equality is not new, however; it has become intensified due to the need to attain an inclusive and futuristic development in the society. The relationship between gender inequality and sustainable development is intricate in the sense that the former determines the extent of attainment of the latter.

Equality in terms of access to economic, social and political resources in a country is a fundamental right of both sexes in the society. No society can make any meaningful progress when there is inequality. This is mainly because gender-based inequality promotes social injustices, discrimination as well as poverty among the discriminated sex; it is a phenomenon which directly contradicts the principles of sustainable development as well as good governance. Women are an essential aspect of the society, whose contributions spans beyond building a sustainable family to building a sustainable society. Engendering gender equality is an essential development goal because equality facilitates the attainment of success in other development objectives (Duflo 2012; World Bank, 2012). Taking full cognizance of the inherent developmental potential women possesses is crucial in the pursuance of not only the present growth of the economy but, also in paving the way for more of such development to be scored in the future.

Gender inequality also undermines inclusiveness, which is an important growth accelerator as revealed by Klasen, (1999); Woetzel, (2015). Societies with more inclusive institutions perform more efficiently in all areas, including peace and security. Pursuing equality of both genders has been described as a smart economic policy (World Bank, 2012), this is mainly due to the many roles women play in the society, both in the home and on the broader society. Firstly, women are saddled with the task of providing moral education to young people. Secondly, women are the main caregivers in all societies. Improving the status of women, therefore, may impact next-generation human capital, as evidenced by a correlation between women's controlled resources and investments in children (Bayeh, 2016).

Securing equality for both sexes, as well as promoting the empowerment of women are important success indicator as relating to the attainment of the international minimum standards expressed in the 17 sustainable development goals. The United Nations, in the formulation of the SDG goals, took cognizance of the fact that development in any form can only be said to be sustainable when it does not reduce the chances of future generations to attain same or even higher development. In the same vein, for development to be said to be sustainable, it must be built on the principle of fairness, justice, equality and equity. Therefore, gender equality is treated as a cross-cutting issue in the 17 goals. It is equally important that efforts to improve women's rights work in synergy with efforts to progress on other development issues in the three bottom lines of sustainable development (Cornwall and Rivas, 2015). It, therefore, becomes clear that progress towards attaining sustainable development depends on "the full and effective participation of women and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life" (UN, 2015). In the same vein, the opposite of the above could significantly impede sustainable development, as played out in many countries with severe social injustices and gender inequality. This paper, therefore, is set to explore concepts, issues and relationship between gender issues, social change and sustainable development.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

➤ *Gender Issues: A Conceptual Approach*

The term gender embodies all social features as well as opportunities attributed to women and men in society, based on their biological makeups. It also refers to the nature of interaction existing between men and women, boys and girls. These features, privileges and interaction are socially constructed and learned and disseminated in the process of socialization. They are contextual, time-bound, liable to change, and determine expectations, what is permissible, and what value should be possessed by a woman or man in a given context " (United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment,). Gender encompasses the socially constructed values, roles, and characteristics associated with different sexes in society (Blackstone & Amy, 2003). Gender is concerned with the

social interaction between men and women, boys and girls, and how this interaction is socially constructed (Guzura, 2017).

Gender issues, on the other hand, encompasses all forms of inequality, discrimination, exclusion and stereotypes which creates a disparity in perception, status, roles and opportunities available to women and men, boys and girls in the society. It encompasses such issues as gender inequality, gender-based exclusion, and gender-based discrimination, gender divide and engenders based violence. Violence perpetrated against a person/ persons based on their gender (GBV) is among the highly prevalent human right issues in many countries, especially in war and crisis-ridden countries. Data from WHO showed that globally, about 20% of women below the age of 50, have experienced one or more forms of GBV in the past 12 months, while an estimate of 15 million girls below the age of 18 have experienced violence in forms of forced/ child marriage as well as forceful separations from their families and in some case their children (World Health Organization, 2017).

Gender-based stereotypes are great influencers of social inequality, and the imbalance of roles and responsibilities among men and women, boys and girls within the home and on the broader society. For instance, within the home, a study by Wu, Guo, Huang, Liu and Xiang (2018), have reported that in the household, majority of the household chores are often performed by women/girls, with boys/men maintaining minimum involvement, a practice which cut-across developed and developing countries. Studies have shown that the greater proportion of unpaid jobs is performed by women, a development which leaves women at a disadvantaged position. Specifically, due to the enormous amount of time women devote to the performance of unpaid work in the home, women have less time to devote to free time and to invest in their careers, which, in addition to less representation, leads to a noticeable wage gap leading to high positions. Furthermore; gender-based discrimination within the household can be seen in the distribution of household resources such as food, which in some cases accounts for the high incidence of malnutrition as well as mortality indicators for women. In extreme cases, it translates to the preference of the male child/children to female, expressed in sex-selective abortion or female feticide (Reeves and Baden, 2000). Moreover, prioritizing the education of the male child to that of the female, this practices is predominant in a patriarchal society, as well as among illiterate and low-income families in most developing countries such as Nigeria, where some ethnic groups place premium on the development and education of the male child, with little or no regard for the future of the female child, thus accounting for the widespread illiteracy among women and girls.

Within the larger society, a 2010, report of the International Labor Organization, revealed that women with the same qualifications often earn less than men, and women in the world hold less than a third of a managerial

position. Discrimination between men and women in forms of job exclusion or seclusion into low skill and low paid work are the significant drivers of disparity in earnings between men and women of the same educational level and experiences. Also, the lack of representation and involvement of women in the decision making process in the home, and decision making institutions at community and state levels drives discrimination, as relating to the opportunities available to women in accessing such public services as schooling and health care, or discriminatory laws. It is on this grounds that the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1979 brought into global focus gender-related human right issues, such as rights to be free from discrimination. The CEDAW convention of 1979, has remained a veritable tool for women activist in the quest for creating a discrimination-free society, and the institutionalization of equality and equity in all spheres, as well as encouraging governments to implore sustainable measures towards the attainment of these globally acknowledged minimum standards (Reeves and Baden, 2000).

However; despite these efforts, the challenges of gender equality and women's rights continue to flourish in both developing and developed countries. Discrimination based on gender continues to exist to different degrees in all societies and is expressed in many ways. Inequitable distribution of power in gender relations, the exercise of rights, access and control of resources and participation in decision-making processes remain a major setback to the holistic development of women, as well as to their chances of benefiting from the dividends of democracy (Clarke, 2018).

➤ *Gender Issues and Social Change: An Implication*

The rapid changes occurring in the society, as well as the rapid globalization of the world, has introduced desirable changes in many areas which have constituted vital gender issues. Particularly, globalization harbours several advantages for women, such as the freedom to make women politically, economically and even globally independent. Advances in information technology also played a great role in creating access to knowledge balance. Today, men and women alike all over the world can access an equal amount of information and knowledge without any barricade (Keenan, Kemp & Ramsay, 2016).

Women now have more career opportunities, especially when they have access to opportunities that offer more education. The number of women taking up the roles of workers and professionals has also seen an increase, although there still exists a gap, especially in third world nations. In many developed countries like the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada, Women have significantly increased their presence in decision-making institutions. The political arena of these countries the increase in participation of women have been tremendous, with women occupying vital parliament positions and as well vying for vital electoral position, up to the position of

presidency, as seen in the 2015 elections in the United States.

Notably, despite the perceived progress made on gender issues globally, many have feared that the integration of countries into world society, may widen gender inequality gaps in all spheres of the society (Cobbinah, Erdiaw-Kwasie & Amoateng, 2015). Specifically, at the economic level, issues relating to occupational segregation expressed in forms of preference for the male workforce, the exploitation of women in low-paid clandestine environments and or the impoverishment of job losses may become intensified due to global pressure, loss of identity and autonomy towards a global hegemonic culture (Leach, 2016).

• *Gender roles and Social Change*

Gender roles are socially ascribed duties, responsibilities and functions based on the nation of maleness and femaleness. It is a broad term which encompasses all socially ascribed expectations for boys and girls. It includes such arrangements that portray men as the heads of household and occupants of the public, while women have to be housewives, to care for their husbands and children, and to respect privacy (Blackstone, 2017). Gender role theories are based on the premises that boys and girls imbibe suitable family behaviour and attitudes and the general culture in which they grow up, as well as non-physical gender differences as a product of socialization (Stuart & Woodroffe, 2016).

The theory also suggests that labour divisions determine behaviours and attitudes which boys and girls take up and exhibit in a society. The practice of labour division among each sex marked the origin of gender roles, which, as a consequence, translated into gender-specific social behaviours (Stuart & Woodroffe, 2016). The theory of gender roles is based on the assumption that people socially ascribed identities as men and women are inclined to take up different roles accorded to them within social structures and are evaluated based on the varying behavioural expectations ascribed to them within a given social structure. As a result, the gender role theories submits that both boys/girls and women/men will have a high tendency to develop different skills and attitudes and behaviours. Physical specialization of the sexes is seen as the distal cause of gender roles. The unique physical advantages of men in terms of height and upper body strength gave them an advantage over women in social activities that required physical characteristics such as hunting, animal husbandry and war. Conversely, the biological endowments on women, which makes them capable of reproduction as well as to bring in new life have been used as a measure to explain their limited participation in other social activities (Fukuda-Parr, 2016).

However, the contemporary society is witnessing constant and rapid changes in all of its fibres, these changes, in turn, are affecting perception, ideologies and way of thinking towards what is termed feminine and masculine. In the 21st century, gender roles have changed

due to several factors, such as new and merging family structures, education, the hype in information communication technology, and rapid globalization. The mutually exclusive division of male (instrumental) or female (expressive) roles is collapsing. Men expand their family roles beyond the heads of the family. Young people who travel to western countries and then return to their country become more flexible and resilient in exercising traditional gender roles (Benería, Berik and Floro, 2015). The international presence allows young people to bring new waves, new feelings and new experiences (George, Howard-Grenville, Joshi & Tihanyi, 2016).

- *Gender and job choices*

Occupation choice is one area in which gender representation and self-representation still plays a dominant role. As well as all the ambivalence which influences the general perception of what characterizes men and women. The constructionist theorist, in their view, may argue that the “natural” female characteristics are a product of a long and imperceptible process of socialization. Men and women see themselves differently and are also considered differently, especially as it relates to their suitability and versatility for taking up different jobs or task (Carrera, 2013). This phenomenon soon defines “the area of the possible and the *thinkable* and, as a sort of a self-fulfilling prophecy” (Carrera, 2011), which pushes both men and women closer to their *natural social destinies*.

The family is also a significant influencer of job choices. Specifically, the occupation of parents, as well as the interpretation attached to gender roles at the family level have been said to assert considerable amount of influence in the building process of children's mental patterns and their perception of the world. These events build-up, and assert influence on the present and future choices as well as attitudes of children unconsciously. It is therefore essential to note the roles individual households play in the dispersion of gender roles as well as in the creation of gender-based inequalities and differences (Goffman 1979; Fagiani, Luisa and Elena, 2011).

The home constitutes the centre of resistance to gender equality, which is weaved into the most basic home practices (Scisci, Vinci 2002). This form of “gender imprinting” is and will continue to impact the self-representations of individual starting from their gender belonging. These representations according to Carrera (2011), are bonded by a round interconnection with the broader social representations, which up to today, reflects how difficult it is to picture women involved in jobs societally classified as male jobs, on the other hand, some jobs have also been tagged a job for women alone. These women jobs are tightly knitted to housekeeping and caregiving, according to the Istat data, as at the year 2000, “jobs which are imagined as the ideal appendage to the female job par excellence: the housewife”.

- *Gender Issues: Implication for Sustainable Development*

Today, the world has made significant progress towards addressing global inequality challenges. Most nations have taken bold steps into integrating measures for curbing inequalities in their policy statements. Progress has been made worldwide in areas such as rights to education, health and access to employment. Gender equality is now a well-established principle in international law and public policy. It is firmly affirmed throughout the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which is the historic human rights document adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948.

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (1979) and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995) directly address gender discrimination at the multilateral level. Besides, it is recognized in the domestic legislative system of almost all countries. However, gender equality is not only a goal that must be achieved, but it is also a key factor in moving forward on various development issues, from poverty reduction to environmental sustainability. To quote Kofi Annan, former United Nations secretary-general on gender, “equality is more than an objective in itself. It is a prerequisite for meeting the challenge of reducing poverty, promoting sustainable development and building good governance”, therefore, the attainment of the SDGs requires the careful treatment of a range of issues ranging from poverty to education, from climate change to equality of the sexes. The SDGs cover a wide range of sustainable development issues. It recognizes that eradicating poverty must accompany strategies that develop economic growth and address a variety of social needs, including education, health, social protection and employment opportunities, all taking into account climate, change and environmental protection.

Nations that are desirous of attaining holistic, sustainable development, need to make provisions for the actualization of all the SDGs because the transition to a more sustainable and resilient society requires a coherent strategy, which takes cognizance of the current challenges, as well as the intertwined nature of the solutions to these challenges. Networking the SDGs is one of the main features of the 2030 Agenda, as described by Littig (2018). It is important to note that no significant progress under one goal can be made without taking coordinated action concerning other goals. This development implies that a country may be booming economically, and yet be found wanting in many other growth indicators. Examples include some Islamic countries such as Saudi Arabia, and Dubai, which is gradually becoming the economic hub of the Middle East, however, issues of women right and equality for both sexes has remained unprogressive. This is to emphasize that the achievement of the SDG 5 which is anchored on ensuring that women and girls all over the world have equal rights and opportunities, and must be able to live free from violence and discrimination alone without commiserate effort in achieving all other SDGs cannot

engender holistically, sustainable development in a country or society vis-a-vis.

Hence, efforts to improve women's rights must work in synergy with efforts to promote other development issues in the three bottom lines of sustainability (Cornwall and Rivas, 2015). The relationship between addressing gender issues and the attainment of sustainable development in all other aspects of a society is reflected on the fact that the attainment of each of the SDGs promotes the attainment of the other, vis-à-vis the neglect of one may impede the full realization of the others. For example, the attainment of zero poverty, reducing inequality, sustainable cities and community, peace justice and strong institution which are the SDGs, number 1, 10, 11, and 16, respectively, to a large extent requires the full and adequate involvement of women in the decision making processes and institutions, equal educational, and employment opportunities for both men and women, boys and girls as well as equal participation of women in the political, economic and public life, and the elimination of all forms of gender-based violence and discrimination which are the thrust of the SDG number 5 (UN, 2015).

Furthermore; an investment in the development of women, in terms of increasing women's access to knowledge, and ensuring their freedom of choice, are crucial in finding, demonstrating and developing methods of managing local landscapes that are more economically, socially and ecologically sustainable adaptation to climate change; Produce and access food; and provide sustainable water, sanitation and energy services. For example, the crucial participation of women in municipal forest management committees leads to positive results for both forest sustainability and gender equality (Clarke, 2018). Indeed, in many areas, women have been described as the "saviours of sustainability", the contributions of women within and outside the home cannot be overemphasized, and as such ensuring gender equality will go a long way in creating a sustainable and robust society in Nigeria and beyond.

III. CONCLUSION

It cannot be denied that the world has made progress in the pursuit of equality for both women and men, boys and girls. However; current efforts are not enough as power imbalances in gender relations, the exercise of rights, access and control of resources and participation in decision-making processes remain a major obstacle to the full and equal contribution of women and the opportunity to benefit from the dividends of democracy globally, though more visible in developing countries. In Nigeria, for instance, issues relating to the adequate representation of women in decision-making institutions as well as women involvement in circular politics has remained unprogressive. Issues relating to gender-based violence has continued to thrive, especially, such practices as child marriage, which is pure evil perpetrated against the female child are still in practice in the northern parts of Nigeria without any legislative effort towards ending this aberration

of future of the girl child. These practices and the severe absence of good governance in Nigeria to a large extent, has stood in the way of the countries effort towards attaining sustainable development. Hence, it, therefore, becomes imperative for government and other essential stakeholders to address the root causes of all forms of inequality and discrimination if any meaningful development is to be scored. All strategies and framework conditions for sustainable development at the global, regional, national and local levels must include an explicit commitment to gender equality and the realization of the human rights and skills of women and girls.

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